

The Vinewood Wand

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The Vinewood Wand

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Summary

When the Malfoy chandelier falls on Hermione, Harry and Ron are sure she's dead. They escape from Malfoy Manor without her and leave her body behind.

What happens when she's saved by an unlikely pair and forced into hiding to keep their secrets? And exactly how far will Draco Malfoy go when the witch he saves turns into somebody he can't live without?

****2024 Reddit Dramione Top Fics****

Best Magical Lore (Top 3)

Best Canon Rewrites (Top 10)

Best Wartime Fics (Sharing the Spotlight)

Notes

- ▶ Posting, Binding, and Anti-AI Policy
- Translation into 한국어 available: [포도나무 지팡이](#) by [B055](#)

Chapter 1: Malfoy Manor

Hermione

Hermione sucked in a breath as she heard Harry utter Voldemort's name. She felt like she was moving in slow motion as she heard the cracks of apparition all around her. Without thinking, without even knowing what she was doing, she went on autopilot.

First, disguise Harry.

Her hands obeyed this command before she even finished the thought, and she raised her wand and muttered the stinging hex that started to transform his face.

Second, hide the evidence.

She continued to hold her wand in her right hand as she grabbed her beaded bag with her left. She hesitated for a split second.

Sock or bra?

Then her brain produced the answer for her, as it so often did when she was under significant pressure.

Sock. In case they cop a feel and search me.

She shoved her beaded bag into her sock, grateful that it was so small and for once very happy that she had gotten so thin with malnourishment while they were on the run. Her jeans now bagged on her. Hermione had never bothered to learn any fashion spells. This had felt like an unexpected oversight as she, Harry, and even Ron had lost weight, but now she was happy she had ignored Lavender and Parvati's prattle about fashion all those years. Her pant leg hid the bulge of her bag perfectly.

Third...

But she never got to the third thing, because a figure grabbed her, and all of her attention narrowed onto the most dangerous of her captors.

Fenrir Greyback. Hermione didn't curse very often, but *shit. This is bad.*

Her stomach rolled as he grabbed her, and she tried not to panic as she felt his putrid breath on her face. Ron, predictably, started to go mental, and she tried to ignore him so she could think until she saw one of them deck Ron out of the corner of her eye.

"No! Leave him alone, leave him alone!" she gasped, her attention drawn back to Ron.

But Greyback distracted her again as he started to talk to her. “Your boyfriend’s going to have worse than that done to him if he’s on my list. Delicious girl... What a treat... I do enjoy the softness of the skin...”

Hermione tried not to vomit, as she heard Ron shouting again.

Please stop, she thought to herself. I need to think. I can’t think with all of this noise...

She heard voices, but she let them wash over her as she tried to think about what to do. *We have to escape.* But she knew it was no use. She no longer had her wand. Harry’s wand was broken of course, and she suspected Ron had lost his wand too. They were caught.

Her brain turned back on, as she listened to Harry and Ron give false names.

That won’t work, she thought, but she knew she had to go along with it.

Third thing then: lie.

“Penelope Clearwater! Half-blood!”

She really wished her third task had been to run, but there had been no time. Achieving the first two things on her list had taken priority, and now they were stuck.

She heard Harry and Ron try to spin a story to the Snatchers as she was tied up, and only then did she notice somebody else tied on her left.

“*Dean?*” came Harry’s voice.

Hermione didn’t know if this helped or hurt. Only now did she notice there was a goblin with them too.

She snapped to attention as they were being questioned, and as usual Harry was doing his best to talk his way out of it. A distant part of her brain registered surprise that the location of the Slytherin common room was so poorly known among the non-Slytherins at Hogwarts. Harry’s ability to give the Snatchers more than a few details made them nervous.

Honestly, doesn’t anybody read Hogwarts, A History?

Then she remembered she had just been captured by Fenrir Grayback. This was really not the time.

Her brain ground back into action as she tried to come up with a way to escape, until she felt something in her heart seize. One of the Snatchers had just emerged from their tent with the Sword of Gryffindor and a newspaper.

No, she thought desperately. We can’t lose the Sword. It’s just as important as the horcruxes.

She heard Harry tell the Snatchers that they borrowed the Sword to cut firewood. She barely resisted wincing as he said it. She knew Harry could lie rather well, but he had a tendency to

go off the rails if it went on too long. Based on this feeble explanation he had just provided, she knew they had just crossed that line.

Then Hermione snapped to attention as the Snatchers looked at the newspaper, which she knew contained a very large picture of her own face.

Damn, why did we keep it laying around?

She was kicking herself. They should never have kept articles about themselves in the tent. They should all have been destroyed the moment they were read.

“You know what, little girly? This picture looks a hell of a lot like you.”

“It isn’t! It isn’t me!” gasped Hermione. But she felt her voice break as she said it, and she knew they were done for.

Sure enough, moments later they had positively identified Harry, who suddenly looked like he was in pain.

Oh not now! Hermione thought desperately. He was in the middle of a vision, she could tell. *Of all the worst possible times!*

She forced her mind to focus on the task at hand. Of the three of them, Harry was the best at getting out of scrapes. They all knew that. But she was probably second, at least when compared to Ron. She had gotten more practice than she ever cared for over the previous year, and she had taken Tonks’ few lessons in defense and conditioning to heart. She tried to remind herself that she had saved them in Godric’s Hollow, and she had saved them again at Xenophilius’s house. Harry would be useless until the vision passed, so it would have to be her. She had to concentrate. She had to pay attention. She couldn’t allow herself to panic in case they caught a moment where they could escape.

She forced herself not to struggle. She had to focus. But before she knew it she was staring at the gates of a large, austere house that could only be described as an estate.

Malfoy Manor, she thought, staring at the house in unabashed amazement. It was massive. It looked palatial. *No wonder Malfoy has always been so bloody arrogant.*

She was still tied with the others, but she forced herself to stay calm as she stumbled up a drive, passing albino peacocks on the way. She had the wildest impulse to roll her eyes at the ostentatious display of wealth, but she managed to resist.

Again Hermione, this is really not the time to be annoyed by Malfoy.

She glanced sideways at Harry and could see he was still in the middle of his vision. *Damn.* This one was lasting longer than usual.

Soon, she was being hauled onto the portico of the house, and a tall, elegant woman with white blond hair stepped out of the house to survey them. Hermione recognized her as Narcissa Malfoy, Draco’s mother. She got closer and scrutinized them all, especially Harry.

When Narcissa approached her, Hermione's eyes looked up involuntarily and for a split second they made eye contact.

She knows it's us, she thought a little desperately.

In that moment their eyes met, however, Hermione got the impression that Narcissa was doing some very quick thinking, and hope unexpectedly bloomed in her chest. But then Narcissa told the Snatchers to bring them in and to fetch Draco to help identify them. Hermione's hope died in an instant.

I must have been imagining things, she thought, trying once again to keep her panic from erupting.

They were hauled into a large room with an enormous crystal chandelier and deep, plum-colored walls. She saw Lucius Malfoy, and her heart sank even further. Then Narcissa called over Draco to identify them. Hermione gulped. *Of course Malfoy would be able to identify them.*

"Well Draco?" asked Lucius Malfoy. "Is it? Is it Harry Potter?"

"I can't – I can't be sure," said Draco. Hermione's heart leapt again. *Surely not...*

She chanced a direct glance at his face for the first time and saw he looked drawn. He was trying not to make eye contact with any of them, as though he didn't want to see them there. She could tell he looked reluctant, maybe even afraid. Her mind flashed back to what Harry had told her about him just after they went on the run together.

"Malfoy is living in terror. He's being forced to torture people. He's watching Nagini eat people on his dining room table. He's petrified."

Hermione hoped with all of her heart that this would be enough to save them, somehow, because so far she hadn't found an opening.

Draco moved away from them, and then Greyback grabbed her and yanked her toward the Malfoys, who were all standing together now. She fell to her knees.

"What about the Mudblood, then?" he growled.

"Wait," said Narcissa. "Yes – yes, she was in Madam Malkin's with Potter! I saw her picture in the *Prophet*! Look, Draco, isn't it the Granger girl?"

Hermione was both terrified and enormously confused. She was *certain* Narcissa had recognized her on the portico. And yet, she was acting as though she was having some sort of revelation about them there in the drawing room.

"I... maybe... yeah," said Draco.

Hermione felt coldness wash over her. He had confirmed it. She barely noticed it when he confirmed Ron as well.

Her numbness turned to terror when Bellatrix Lestrange walked into the room.

“But surely,” said Bellatrix, “this is the Mudblood girl? This is Granger?”

“Yes, yes, it’s Granger!” cried Lucius. “And beside her, we think, Potter! Potter and his friends, caught at last!”

Hermione closed her eyes and tried to breathe. She looked sideways at Harry, and she could see he had finally come out of his vision. He glanced at her too, and though it was hard to tell with his swollen face, she could see he was also out of ideas as the Death Eaters squabbled over who got to call Voldemort.

This is it, she thought dully. We need a miracle or we’re all going to die.

The miracle came in the form of the Sword of Gryffindor, or so she thought, as Bellatrix noticed it and panicked.

Hermione’s brain reluctantly ground back into motion as she tried not to panic herself and consider *why* Bellatrix was so scared. But before she could work it out, Bellatrix had stunned all three Snatchers, leaving only Greyback remaining. He, she saw, was forced into a kneeling position to extend the Sword to Bellatrix.

“Where did you find this sword?” she demanded. “Snape sent it to my vault in Gringotts!”

What on earth? wondered Hermione. She was lost in thought for a moment until she saw Draco moving the three Snatchers out of the sitting room. He threw a look back at them and caught her eyes as he exited. She tore her eyes away from him when she saw how grim he looked, and she forced herself to breathe.

I can’t think about what’s about to happen. I have to stay present.

“Take these prisoners down to the cellar, Greyback,” said Bellatrix. “Wait. All except... except for the Mudblood.”

Hermione felt herself sway on the spot with fear, and she was almost grateful that she was already on her knees. She thought she heard Ron and Harry shouting and struggling against Greyback, but they were bound and wandless and no match for him. Suddenly Bellatrix approached her and cut her free from the others and grabbed her hair.

Hermione felt sharp pain in her head as Bellatrix used her hair to drag her to the middle of the room. She bit her lip as tears leaked out of her eyes until she stopped. Hermione was breathing hard and tried to push herself up when she heard Bellatrix’s voice shout “*Crucio!*”

Pain exploded in her body. She was being burned alive. Corrosive acid had flooded her veins. She was being stabbed with a thousand knives. She wasn’t sure *what* it was, but she knew it had to be one of those things. It was the only explanation.

In a distant part of her brain, Hermione thought she heard somebody screaming, but she couldn’t be sure. The pain was so overwhelming that it didn’t register.

And then as quickly as it started, it stopped, and she was left gasping on the floor. She had a few seconds of relief before she heard Bellatrix's voice say something, but she was in such shock she couldn't focus on the question.

She heard the incantation again, and the pain started all over. Hermione felt her vision swimming with it, her throat going raw with screaming, and she realized there was blood in her mouth. She had bitten her tongue badly as she screamed and screamed.

Again it stopped, and Hermione opened a bleary eye to see the white blonde head of Draco Malfoy returning to the room. He looked ashen as he realized she was the source of the screaming.

Please, she thought. Please help me.

But then Bellatrix was talking to her.

"I'm going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword? *Where?*"

This question managed to make it through Hermione's ravaged mind, as she shouted back, "We found it – we found it – PLEASE!"

But then Bellatrix cast the spell on her again, and the rest of Hermione's explanation was lost to the pain and screams.

Harry can't die yet, she thought desperately. He has to finish it first.

"You are lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, *tell the truth!*"

But Bellatrix didn't give Hermione a chance to respond before she cast the curse yet again, and Hermione felt every nerve ending in her body explode with pain. She closed her eyes and almost wished to die, as it suddenly stopped again. Bellatrix's voice said something else, but again Hermione didn't catch it, and there was no time to ask her to repeat it before Hermione was under the curse again.

She now thought of the Longbottoms. *This is what she did to them,* she thought as all the pain in her body threatened to overwhelm her. *I'm going to be insane just like they are.*

The pain stopped and Hermione forced her eyes open. She could only stare at Draco Malfoy's face. His entire attention was focused on her, and she was a bit pleased to see he looked sick as he watched.

Ha, she thought dully. You may hate me but you don't have the stomach for this, do you?

And then as she watched, Narcissa Malfoy slid over to stand near him, and Hermione turned a dull eye toward her as well.

"What else did you take, what else? ANSWER ME! *CRUCIO!*" shouted Bellatrix, and then Hermione was thrust back into the fire once again. She screamed and screamed, because it

was the only release she had, until Bellatrix decided she was done with her. But she wasn't done with her yet. This time it kept going and going and going and she felt her vision fading.

Then she heard a gentle voice in her head whisper, "You must answer her. Answer her."

"How did you get into my vault? Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?" screeched Bellatrix.

"Tell her something, anything, my dear," said the soft whisper.

"We only met him tonight!" Hermione gasped. "We've never been inside your vault... It isn't the real sword! It's a copy, just a copy!"

Then she collapsed and waited for the pain to come again, but it didn't. She slowly opened her eyes to find Narcissa staring at her intently for a moment before moving to the side, and then all she could see was Draco. He cast one last horrified look at her as he turned to leave the drawing room. They had both left her. Hermione thought her heart might be breaking.

No help. I'm not getting any help, she thought bitterly, as her vision was going in and out of focus. She decided to play dead as she heard Bellatrix muttering with Lucius and Narcissa. It was all she could do.

The pain began again, and Hermione felt her screams getting weaker. She was fading, she knew it. She couldn't last much longer. No miracle was coming for her. She would die here, and then Harry would die here. They had failed. They had lost. Her last thought was for her parents, and she was glad she had obliviated them. For the first time ever, she was really happy she had done it.

They're safe, she thought. I'm going to die, and they won't miss me. Good. That's good.

Her screams finally died in her throat as blackness washed over her. The last thing she heard before she passed out was the bang of the door and a shout. But she couldn't make heads or tails of it. All she could see as the darkness overwhelmed her was a flash of white blonde hair.

Draco

Draco Malfoy had been living a nightmare for nearly two years now. From the moment he was initiated into the Death Eaters, his situation had gotten steadily worse and had declined rather significantly ever since Snape killed Dumbledore for him at the top of the astronomy tower.

To be fair, the immediate aftermath of Dumbledore's death could have been much worse. To his shock, Snape had actually covered for him. The moment Snape and Draco got to their

rendezvous point in the Forbidden Forest, Snape had gone into action. In a rather astonishing display of quick thinking, he told Draco to follow his lead, and they crouched behind a tree in the dark and managed to stun all who made it into the clearing. It was Draco's luck that this included every Death Eater who had been at the top of the tower with them. Snape had then stepped out and obliquely mentioned them all, planting a false memory in them that Draco had been successful in his mission. Then Snape revived them and dragged Draco to Malfoy Manor himself, where he proceeded to lie to the Dark Lord's face.

Draco watched in shock as Snape strode forward and declared Draco Malfoy to be the Dark Lord's most valuable protégé. Snape had actually invited the Dark Lord to view Snape's own memories of the event, and that was how Draco learned that Snape was as advanced an occlumens as he was, if not more so. He had always suspected it, but he had never been certain until that moment. To Draco's knowledge, the only other person who could successfully show false memories to the Dark Lord was Draco himself. Draco, of course, had kept this talent quiet.

The Dark Lord had been thrilled with Draco's supposed performance, and Draco knew that Snape's actions saved Draco and his family that night. But as the summer wore on and Draco was forced to torture Death Eaters and other prisoners, the chinks in his armor started to show. He could barely hold a cruciatus curse long enough to satisfy his aunt or the Dark Lord. He had not had to kill, but he was terrified of the day he would be asked to do it. He hadn't managed to kill Dumbledore, and he wasn't sure he could kill anybody else either, at least not with an *Avada Kedavra*.

The only people who knew the truth about Draco were Snape and Narcissa. Draco couldn't bear for his mother to think that he was a murderer, and she herself was an exceptional occlumens, though she used a strategy that was different than Draco's. It was Narcissa's good luck that it had never occurred to the Dark Lord that a woman could be so adept at occlumency, and so he rarely bothered to search her mind.

His family's "victory" with Dumbledore's death had been cut short when Lucius, still not totally forgiven for the fiasco in the Department of Mysteries, had given the Dark Lord his wand to hunt Potter. When Potter destroyed his father's wand, the Dark Lord had blamed the entire Malfoy family for its malfunction. Their importance in the Dark Lord's ranks had started to slide once again.

One month, Draco thought bitterly. Snape's deception bought me and my parents life and one month of favor before it was gone again because of something that was nobody's fault.

It had come as a relief to escape to Hogwarts, until it soon became clear that he was going to be forced to torture other students as part of the Carrows' regime. After a few weeks of this, he did his best to spread this duty around, telling the Carrows that students other than him needed the practice. To his surprise, this excuse usually worked, and Draco was reserved for the biggest rulebreakers, though quite a few of them disappeared at Christmas, much to Draco's relief.

As the youngest Death Eater and the only Hogwarts student among the Death Eaters, Draco held a special place at the school that year and had even been named Head Boy. Draco, of course, delegated most of his work to the Head Girl, Tracy Davis, whom Draco had never

really cared for. Draco knew she didn't like it, but she didn't dare contradict him. Draco was sure she was terrified of him, as were others in Slytherin house. Even those friends who used to be close to him had become distant. Blaise, Theo, and Pansy had started walking on eggshells around him in sixth year, and he found himself withdrawing from them even further in seventh. He suspected Theo and maybe Pansy would be pulled into it without him after Hogwarts was done, but he didn't want to be the reason they were Marked. So they all kept their distance from each other by some unspoken, mutual agreement.

Hogwarts had become very lonely, and the only thing he enjoyed about it was his own room with a fireplace, which was provided to him as Head Boy. Snape had even connected the fireplace to the floo network so Draco could return home to the Manor on an as-needed basis without alerting any other students. The room itself became his sanctuary, and though it enhanced his solitude, it also gave him the privacy and security he needed to finally think about everything that was happening to his family.

Draco knew that the situation with the Dark Lord had become intolerable. The Dark Lord was ruthless and unforgiving. All the glory his father had always talked about had failed to materialize, leaving only terror in its place. It didn't take too many months of reflection in his new room at Hogwarts to realize he was banking on Harry Potter. Potter might be one of his least favorite people of all time - second only to Weasley of course - but Draco needed him to pull off the impossible and actually win. It was the only way to end the fear he and his family had been living with for the last two years.

His mother, he knew, felt the same way. She had never told him this directly, but they were very close. He could read it on her face whenever they were alone. And she had gone out of her way to protect him, using his return to Hogwarts and his position as Head Boy to excuse him from many Death Eater duties. Draco was just relieved that the Dark Lord accepted these explanations for Draco's absence at all but the most important meetings.

Yes, Potter needs to win, he thought. And because he now believed this more than he had ever believed anything, the horror he felt when Potter, Weasley, and Granger were dragged into Malfoy Manor was nearly indescribable. He was certain Potter was about to lose the war right there in the Malfoy drawing room.

His mother, in an odd show of bravado, insisted Draco identify them, but Draco dragged his feet about it. He stalled. He didn't know what else he could do with his father and Greyback standing there, and then his hands had become really tied as soon as Aunt Bella strode in and immediately recognized Granger.

Fuck it all, he thought, as he watched the scene play out. He was frozen, unable to move, until Aunt Bella panicked about some sword and stunned all the Snatchers. Draco was grateful for the excuse to escape the drawing room for a moment while he levitated them all out into the courtyard, but then he heard the screams start. High screams. Female screams. On and on it went, and for some reason Draco felt his heart seize at the sound. He dropped the Snatchers where they were and sprinted back into the drawing room to find Granger twitching on the floor as Aunt Bella questioned her, barely giving her time to respond before starting the curse all over again.

She has to stop! he thought in a near panic. Granger is the brains of everything! Bella needs to stop!

Draco was barely aware of what was happening around him, as Granger's screams echoed in his head, until she finally said something to make the torture stop, at least briefly. Aunt Bella sent Draco to the dungeons to get the goblin, and Draco was grateful again for the escape, pausing only long enough to cast a worried glance back at Granger as he left. She was in bad shape, but Draco didn't know how he could help her.

It wasn't long after Draco returned with the goblin that Aunt Bella called the Dark Lord and all hell broke loose. Potter and Weasley barged in and stunned his father and disarmed Bellatrix. Draco saw Granger had passed out as Bellatrix pulled her up and threatened her with a knife. Draco saw a deep cut beginning in her neck, and he felt himself start to truly panic now.

Of course Potter and Weasley dropped their wands when Bellatrix demanded it. *Of course they did.* Draco didn't even blame them. They didn't have a shot without Granger. Draco was sure that she was their secret weapon. Relieved that Bella had stopped what she was doing, Draco darted forward and grabbed the wands until a curious squeaking and crunching sound caused the entire room to go silent as they all looked up at the chandelier.

Slowly, ever so slowly, it was unscrewing itself from the ceiling, directly over Aunt Bella and Granger.

What the...? thought Draco, but before he could complete the thought he watched in horror as it fell, and Aunt Bella dropped Granger and darted out the way. The entire chandelier fell directly on top of an unconscious Granger. Instinctively Draco dove out of the way of the exploding glass.

She's dead, he thought, as he stood up again shakily, his mind going numb as he thought about this. *There's no way she survived that.*

He didn't have another moment to process it though because Potter was running forward and wrenching the wands from him. He grabbed the Sword before running toward a House Elf who had just appeared, as he cast a look of pure heartbreak toward Granger. He heard Weasley crying like a wounded animal as he stared at the blood slowly seeping out from under the chandelier.

She's dead. They know she's dead, Draco thought in an oddly detached sort of way. He was staring at her, and he barely registered it when the House Elf turned and apparated both Potter and Weasley away, with Aunt Bella's knife stuck into its chest.

For a split second it was like all the air was sucked out of the room. *Potter got away, but Granger is dead. That might as well be the end,* he thought. *Potter can't win without her.*

He suddenly snapped out of it when he heard his mother's voice shout "*Stupefy!*" twice in rapid succession, and he spun around to see Aunt Bella and Greyback both hit the floor.

“Quickly Draco!” she gasped as she threw him her wand. “Levitate it so I can check on her! We have very little time before the Dark Lord arrives!”

Draco forced himself to ignore the sudden surge of hope, and he did as his mother requested. His mother dropped to her knees as the chandelier rose off of Granger, and Draco felt bile in his throat at the sight. She had dozens of shallow cuts from the glass all over her body and was bleeding profusely. One arm was at an odd angle, clearly broken. Draco was sure there was nothing to be done, but then his mother yelled, “She has a pulse!” and Draco’s heart leapt.

“Tippy!” she shouted, and a little house elf that Draco knew his mother had brought with her from the House of Black immediately appeared. “Take her to the East Wing and tend to her. We will be there as soon as we can! Do not speak to anybody about this except for me or Draco, not even if you are directly questioned. Do you understand me?”

“Yes mistress!” squeaked the little elf, and Draco watched as she immediately grabbed Granger’s ankle and disappeared.

“Mother, what...” started Draco. He knew the East Wing was closed off. His father had sealed it off years ago after his grandparents died, in accordance with Malfoy family tradition. It was unused and would remain that way until Draco got married.

“Not now...” muttered his mother, snatching her wand back from Draco and striding over to Bellatrix and Greyback. “*Obliviate*,” she said over both of them, and Draco’s eyes widened.

Then she spun to look at him. “Now listen to me carefully. When the Dark Lord arrives, you must occlude Ms. Granger. The story you need to tell him is that Potter got the wands and stunned Bella, Grayback, and me and then Weasley dragged her out, and they were all about to escape before they stunned you at the last second. You need to make it look like she’s dead. I planted a memory in Bella and Grayback that will back this up in case they are searched. You must show him that regardless of what he does to you. Do you understand me?”

Draco nodded mutely. He wasn’t exactly sure what his mother’s plan was, but it would be catastrophic if he showed the Dark Lord the truth. And he could do it. He was a superb occlumens. He had occluded bigger things than this from the Dark Lord before.

“Good,” said his mother. “And whichever one of us is released first goes and tends to her immediately. The other follows as soon as possible. She’s in bad shape.”

Again he nodded.

“Very well. I’m going to stun you first and then stun myself. You can do this, Draco.”

Draco gulped, as he nodded and watched his mother’s lips move. He saw a flash of red light and then nothing.

Chapter 2: The Death of a Mudblood

Draco

Draco woke up to the sound of screaming. He tensed automatically, but he quickly realized the screaming wasn't coming from him.

In an instant the events of the last few minutes washed over him, and he remembered his mother's words.

Fuck, he thought. He didn't know how long he had been out, but he hoped not too long. Granger was surely bleeding out somewhere in the East Wing and might already be dead. While Tippy was an excellent nurse, she was no healer, and his mother was right. Granger needed medical attention right away.

He concentrated hard on the screams and decided it must be Bellatrix.

Good, he thought savagely. *That bitch deserves every moment of pain.*

He debated for a moment about what to do next, but then decided he couldn't waste any more time. As much as he enjoyed hearing Bellatrix being punished for potentially liquifying Granger's giant brain and condemning them all to an eternity with the Dark Lord, Granger really couldn't wait. He decided to get this over with.

He took one more moment to prepare his mind before he sat up.

He opened his eyes and looked around, seeing that his Father was awake, as was Bellatrix, who was being tortured. However, his mother and Greyback were still out.

He intentionally made a noise and soon found himself staring at the Dark Lord, who looked like he was nearly frothing at the mouth with rage.

"Draco," he snarled. "How nice of you to join us."

The Dark Lord lifted the curse on Bellatrix and turned his wand on Draco.

Draco felt the Dark Lord slam into head before a moment later he heard "*Crucio!*" and immediately the pain engulfed Draco, just as he knew it would.

In that split second it took for the cruciatus curse to hit him, Draco started to disassociate, watching his own torture as though from above. It was the only way to survive what he knew was coming next. The Dark Lord started to rip through his memories of Potter's appearance and escape. The part of Draco's brain that felt pain continued to scream, while the other part, the part that knew it was all just neurons firing, focused on the story he had to tell.

Lucius and Narcissa tried to call the Dark Lord while Potter was still in the room, but Bellatrix was the one who stopped them. She was trying to cover up for her own mistake and chose to separate them and send Potter to the cellar, which was not heavily guarded.

Then she was torturing Granger; each crucio coming faster than the next. She was asking Granger questions, but Granger didn't even have the opportunity to respond most of the time, and before long she started to fade. Draco wondered if her brain would be good for anything by the time this was over. He was sure she had information about Potter, and Bellatrix was making a mistake by torturing her so much. But he also knew he couldn't question it out loud. Bellatrix outranked everyone in his family.

Once the goblin confirmed Granger's story was true, Bellatrix called the Dark Lord. But just then the door burst open, and Potter and Weasley came in fighting. Granger had already passed out from Bellatrix's torture, and Bellatrix was using her as a hostage when they all stopped at an odd sound. It was the chandelier coming loose before Bellatrix dodged out of the way, and it fell and crushed Granger on her head and chest.

Draco saw blood seeping out from under the chandelier, but the lower half of her body was free. Weasley and Potter ran forward at the same time, and Potter grabbed the wands from Draco and stunned Bellatrix, Narcissa, and Greyback. As he was doing this Weasley bent down and pulled Granger out, giving Draco a clear view of her. She was clearly dead, he thought. Her skull was crushed in, and her neck looked broken. Draco froze as Potter and the elf ran forward to grab Weasley and Granger, and then Potter shot a stunner at Draco as they were turning away.

Draco gasped as the memory and torture stopped abruptly, before the Dark Lord turned his rage back toward Bellatrix.

“You stopped Lucius from calling me as soon as you had them! And then you killed her!” he screeched. “The Mudblood! Draco was sure she had information about Potter, and you killed her! Then Potter escaped!”

“No!” pleaded Bellatrix, “No, it was the elf! I....” but she was cut off as her screams continued.

After several tense moments the Dark Lord lifted his wand and turned his red eyes back to Lucius and Draco.

“Draco, get your mother and get out of my sight! Lucius, get Greyback and check the cellars. I want to know if Potter is the only one who escaped, and if he wasn't, then dear Bellatrix and I will be chatting further....”

Then he turned his wand back on Bellatrix as Draco hurried forward and used his mother's wand to revive her and Greyback. He exchanged a quick look with his father, and Draco nearly carried his mother out of the drawing room before the Dark Lord could change his mind. He didn't know if the other prisoners had escaped or not, but it seemed likely. Draco felt a twinge of fear that his father might be tortured for being the bearer of bad news, but Draco reassured himself that the Dark Lord's rage was focused well enough on Bellatrix that he would survive it. In any event, Draco knew that he and his father both agreed on one

thing: Narcissa came first, and if the Dark Lord gave her an out they needed to take it however it was given. Lucius and Draco would both rather take a crucio or two than subject Narcissa to any torture at all.

Draco could scarcely believe he had gotten his mother out of it unscathed, but he showed what he meant to show in that fabricated memory: it was all Bellatrix's fault, and she pulled rank on the Malfoys before killing Potter's Mudblood. He was incredibly relieved the Dark Lord had taken it the way Draco intended.

He swiftly briefed his mother as soon as they were out of earshot of the drawing room, and she gave him a tight smile and his shoulder a squeeze.

"You did well, my dear," she said. "Your occlumency is exceptional. Now then, let's go see if Miss Granger is still with us, shall we?"

He just nodded grimly, trying to prepare himself for what he was about to see. They stopped only long enough to search the Snatchers Draco had hauled into the courtyard earlier, where they found two extra wands.

"Take them," his mother said tersely. "We need one for you and your father. Pick the one that feels best to you."

Draco held them both. The longer wand, which he saw was made of willow and had a unicorn hair core like his own, immediately started to fight him when he tried casting a simple charm with it. He dropped it right away. He thought this wand was probably Weasley's, and he snorted. *Of course* it would fight him.

The other wand he knew he recognized, having watched its master with envy for six years. It was vinewood with elaborate carvings, and he was surprised to see Ollivander's signature stamp on the handle to denote a dragon heartstring core.

I always thought she would have a unicorn hair core too, he thought. Unicorn hair cores were good for charms work, and Granger was the best charms student in the year.

Then again, she's the best at everything except flying, he thought a little bitterly.

And it was true. Granger was particularly strong in charms and transfiguration. He realized the dragon heartstring might have given her a real edge in the latter subject. She had always been wildly advanced in that class.

When he touched her wand, he felt an odd warmth, slightly different from his own, but not unwelcoming. Draco had the oddest impression that the wand's reaction to him holding it was something akin to consternation. It was willing to work for him, but it wasn't particularly happy about it. It was almost as though the wand was saying, "Very well then, if you *must*." A flash of Granger's famous eye-roll appeared in his mind, and he had the strangest urge to smirk.

"That one," his mother said, and Draco nodded.

“It’s Granger’s,” he said.

His mother gave him an odd look, and he shrugged. “I shared a class with her for six years. The carvings are really distinctive. I think the other wand is Weasley’s.”

His mother nodded slowly. “Come on then, use hers. We can’t waste anymore time.”

They strode together toward the East Wing. As they walked his mother continued to talk. “It’s a bit odd that hers works so much better for you though....” she trailed off.

“Why?” asked Draco.

His mother shrugged. “I don’t know much about wandlore, but the acts between masters have some influence on a wand’s behavior. And you helped save her life. That may be why the wand will work for you even though you two...”

“Despise each other,” he finished for her.

His mother just rolled her eyes. “Honestly Draco, you will need to get over that. You will be seeing a lot of her.”

“What? I...”

But his words died in his throat. They had just gotten to the East Wing, which had been sealed off from the rest of the Manor for over a decade.

Draco hesitated, but his mother did not. She turned the handle on the door, and to Draco’s surprise it swung open. She led the way down a corridor Draco barely remembered, and he looked around, a bit curious despite himself. He had thought the furniture would be draped and the carpets dusty, but it looked no different than the rest of the Manor.

“Just because you and your father haven’t come in here in the last ten years doesn’t mean I never have. And the house elves continue to maintain it. We can’t allow it to fall into disrepair.”

Well that explains it.

The thoughts halted as his mother approached a bedroom that Draco knew had been part of his grandparents’ suite. He knew it was large and well-appointed. It was a room befitting the Lady of the Manor. His parents shared a similar suite in the West Wing.

He steeled himself as his mother pushed the door open and strode in. Draco didn’t even spare the room a glance because he was so distracted by the sight of Granger. They found her among a sea of bedding, turned crimson from her blood soaking through it, with a frantic Tippy trying to force-feed her blood replenishing potions.

“Miss is very hurt!” squeaked the elf. “Tippy cannot close all the wounds! And her arm is badly broken!”

Draco and Narcissa converged on Granger, and Draco saw Tippy was right. Granger practically reeked of the dittany that Tippy had spread on many of her shallower cuts from the chandelier. But the cut on her neck was still bleeding profusely, and Draco's stomach turned when he saw a small piece of bone poking through Granger's right forearm.

Badly broken is an understatement.

"Quickly, Draco," said Narcissa. "Work on the cut on her neck. I will work on her arm, though it may be best to just vanish the bones and regrow them in this state..." she hesitated for a moment as though making up her mind about something and then nodded to herself. "Yes, let's do that. She's unconscious anyway. I'm no healer. Tippy, please fetch some skele-gro."

The elf disappeared with a *CRACK!*

Draco knew his mother's statement about healing was not strictly true. His mother wasn't formally trained, but she had learned quite a bit about field healing over the last few years. She didn't go on missions herself, but she had decided to study up when it became clear that Lucius and then Draco would be sent out on missions now and then. Draco knew some basics as well, though not nearly as much as his mother did.

Draco got to work on the deep cut in her neck.

She's lucky Aunt Bella didn't nick an artery, he thought.

But try as he might, nothing he was doing to it made any difference. He was starting to get frustrated, when he had a brainwave.

Aunt Bella... I bet the knife was cursed.

Switching tactics, he recalled the lessons Snape had given him about this after Potter hit him with *sectumsempra* in sixth year. He started to chant. His mother gave him a startled look, but she didn't stop him, and he slowly ran the vinewood wand along Granger's neck. He was surprised to feel an unusual power pulse through the wand. It was astonishingly strong and felt familiar in a way, but still different than his own magic. He tried to channel it alongside his own power, and to his great relief the wand let him do it. Draco had the oddest feeling that the vinewood wand somehow knew that Draco was trying to heal its master. Slowly, very slowly, the cut along her neck closed, and the bleeding finally stopped.

His mother watched him a bit nervously as he did it, but then her look turned approving once she saw that it had worked.

"Good. She will have a scar there forever, but at least she's not dead."

Just then Tippy returned with the skele-gro, and some dreamless sleep potion. Narcissa cast a quick diagnostic spell before giving her any, and her brow furrowed as she studied it.

"She's very thin, isn't she?"

Draco glanced at the diagnostic spell and was a bit shocked at Granger's weight. He looked down and only now noticed that her normally full cheeks were sunken in, and the bones of her clavicle seemed to protrude.

"Her magical reserves though..." muttered Narcissa, still staring at the spell.

Draco cast a questioning look at his mother.

"It's just.... She's surprisingly powerful," Narcissa explained. "The dosing guidelines have to do with the patient's weight but also their magical reserves. Her magic will help metabolize the potion, and the higher her reserves are the faster she will metabolize it. I'm surprised she's that powerful."

"Because she's a mudblood?" asked Draco, sneering a little.

His mother gave him a sharp look. "You know I don't like that term. And I suggest you keep it to yourself around Miss Granger. She's powerful enough to do plenty of damage, even without a wand. I'm just surprised at her reserves because they look to be as full as yours or your father's when you are both in good health, even though she nearly died. In fact, her magic probably kept her alive. She will be off the charts when she's healed."

Draco rolled his eyes at this, but held his tongue as his mother debated with herself for a bit longer before measuring out the potions and forcing them down Granger's throat.

"Now then, we need to get her cleaned up."

Draco started to move away as his mother's sharp voice stopped him. "Where do you think you're going?"

"I thought you wanted to change her..." he trailed off awkwardly. He had no interest in seeing Granger naked, and he was certain she would find a way to hex him into oblivion if he did.

His mother, however, just raised her eyebrows at him.

"Levitate her for me. I'll transfigure her clothes and clean her up. Tippy, please change the bedding."

Draco hesitated for a moment but then did as he was told. As Tippy worked beneath them, his mother muttered "*Scourgify*" dozens of times as she ran her wand slowly down Granger's body to get rid of most of the blood. He averted his gaze as his mother lifted her shirt and tugged the waistband of her pants and did the same thing to her undergarments to remove the blood there too. Then she transfigured her clothes into some silky pajamas that made Draco roll his eyes, though he couldn't help but notice his mother's observations about her size were right. She looked skeletally thin under the pajamas.

Finally his mother removed Granger's shoes and socks, and to their shock a formal beaded handbag fell onto the floor with a clunk.

They both stared at it for a moment. It was white and a bit worn, with a drawstring top. His mother picked it up as Draco lowered Granger down onto the now-clean bed, and he watched as she tried to open the bag.

She gasped and pulled her hand away as though it had burned her.

Draco's eyes narrowed, and his mother now looked at it with more interest.

"Fascinating," she murmured. "Draco, you try. Her wand let you use it after all. Maybe you'll be able to open the bag too."

Draco looked at her askance. "There's no way. If she doesn't want anybody to get into it, she will have found a way to keep them out."

"Still though... try it," said his mother.

Sighing with resignation now, Draco picked up the bag gingerly and tried to open it. He felt a searing pain on the back of his hand and gasped as he immediately dropped it and clutched his hand. His mother looked startled.

"It didn't hurt that much for me..." she said. "I wonder why?" To Draco's consternation she was looking less concerned for his well-being and more interested in Granger's little handbag.

Draco turned the back of his injured hand over and looked at it in shock.

The words, "*Stay out, Death Eater,*" were sliced into his skin like they had been carved with a razor. It didn't bleed, and as he watched the words began to fade, but it was still incredibly painful.

"Fucking hell, she somehow warded it against Death Eaters," he muttered, ignoring his mother's admonishment at his language.

He glanced up at his mother, who had an amused smile on her face as she looked down at Granger. "Well I can see why she always got better marks than you."

Draco's jaw dropped.

His mother just chuckled. "Come along Draco. It seems there is no point in trying to break into her little bag. It's so small it's not likely to contain much anyway. And speaking of wards, we need to cast some around this room before she wakes up. Blood wards."

Draco nodded slowly.

"Tippy," his mother continued, "Please keep an eye on Miss Granger for me. When she's awake, come find me or Draco, but don't mention her in front of anybody else but us, not even Lucius."

Tippy nodded. "I is getting the room prepared for Miss while I wait."

Draco looked around in confusion. It looked perfectly prepared to him, but he just shrugged.

“Very good, Tippy,” said his mother. “Draco, come with me.”

Draco followed his mother out of the room, and she turned to the door and said, “Blood wards then. From both the House of Malfoy and the House of Black.”

“You mean...” he started, and his mother nodded grimly.

“You and I will be the only two who qualify. I don’t think anybody will find her here, but we can’t risk it. From what you’ve said, she’s very important to Potter and the Order.”

“She is...” said Draco slowly, wondering if his mother was finally about to be candid with him about her feelings toward the war. “Whatever Potter and the Order are planning, they won’t be able to do it without her. In fact, it was probably all her idea. She’s critical to their side.”

“Very well then,” she replied. “In that case, we must keep her safe. Now then, let’s get these wards set, and then I need to send an urgent owl.”

“To who?” Draco asked curiously.

“To Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley. Based on what I observed in our drawing room, they need to know she’s alive and safe or they will do something rash and lose the entire war for us.”

Draco inhaled. It was as close to his mother had ever come to admitting that she wanted Potter to win.

Just like I do now, he thought grimly.

“Alright then,” he said. “But use my owl. He won’t be stopped since he has the Death Eater band on his leg. Potter will probably recognize my owl, but...” he hesitated, wondering for a moment if he could really do this.

“But what?” she nudged him.

Draco sighed. “But if you want them to know for certain, just call me a ferret and tell them your my mother. They will know who you’re talking about, and you won’t have to identify us by name. Though they hate me so much they may try to storm the Manor anyway if they know I’m holding her.”

“I see,” said his mother, now smirking at him. “Someday you will need to tell me that story.”

Draco just grumbled as he turned to the door and sliced the palm of his hand open as he began to set the wards.

Hermione

Hermione woke up with a groan. She felt like every bone in her body ached. Her very skin felt rubbed raw, and her right arm was prickling painfully.

“Miss is awake!” squeaked a little voice that sounded like a house elf. “I is getting my mistress!”

Hermione turned her head toward the voice, but before she could find the creature she heard a *CRACK!* that told her the elf had disappeared.

She took a moment to take stock and only now realized she was staring up at a ceiling with rather astonishing coffering. She frowned to herself and tried to sit up, but winced as she did so, and she stopped and laid back down in the bed.

Wait a minute, a bed?

Hermione suddenly realized she was in a large bed, ensconced by pillows. She moved her hands across her stomach and felt fabric that was silky and soft. It felt luxurious to the point of indulgent.

Where the hell am I? And where are Harry and Ron?

Hermione tried to sit up again, and the adrenaline and panic she was starting to feel as she thought about her friends helped her this time. She was immediately distracted though, as she looked around the handsome room, taking stock of where she was.

I'm in a freaking palace, she thought. The collection of rooms she could see — or perhaps the better word for it would be a suite — appeared to be larger than the entire first floor of the Weasley's house. She saw a sitting area near a fireplace that was lined with bookshelves, about half of which were full. And on the other side, an antechamber of something that looked like it could be a dressing room. Through another door she caught a glimpse of a bathroom with marble and brass fixtures. She noticed a couple other doors in the room that were closed.

Am I still at Malfoy Manor? But that can't be right... and where are Harry and Ron?

The door to the room opened, and Hermione shrank back as Narcissa Malfoy walked in, her heels clicking on the wood and her robes billowing. As always, she was elegant, and not a hair was out of place.

“Miss Granger,” she said warmly. “Welcome. I am happy to see you are improving.”

“Where are Harry and Ron?” she asked, ignoring Narcissa's small talk.

“They managed to escape, along with all of our other prisoners. They got Miss Lovegood out, as well as Mr. Ollivander. And of course, they also rescued the goblin and the other boy who was with you three.”

Hermione sucked in a breath.

“They found Luna?”

“Indeed,” said Narcissa.

Hermione eyed her cautiously. “And why did they leave me? If they rescued everybody else...” she trailed off, now feeling rather hurt.

Narcissa must have read the expression on her face. “You must not blame them. They thought you were dead, and it was rather chaotic. They would not have been able to retrieve your body without putting themselves into further danger.”

“Oh...” she said quietly as she absorbed this. And then her eyes got huge. “They think I’m dead? Oh my God, I have to tell them. They’ll be going spare...”

“I have already communicated with them about you,” said Narcissa, and Hermione looked up at her swiftly. “I was discrete of course, but I let them know you are alive, though injured. I also informed them that this fact is known to a very small number of people, so I suggested they keep it to themselves for now.”

Hermione furrowed her brow. “What do you mean? Surely the others know I’m here. Is Bellatrix going to... or You-Know-Who...” Hermione felt her heart start to race.

“Nobody knows you are here except for me and Draco. And your two friends. As far as the rest of the world is concerned, you are dead.”

“But why?” asked Hermione.

“Because you appeared to be dead, Ms. Granger. When Dobby showed up to rescue your friends, he caused the chandelier in the drawing room to fall from the ceiling because it was suspended over my darling sister. She was holding you at the time. Of course, she jumped aside and left you there. I’m afraid you were crushed beneath it.”

“Oh my God...” muttered Hermione. But she realized that explained why she was in so much pain.

“Quite,” said Narcissa. “You nearly did die, but Draco and I got you out after the others were unconscious. We told the Dark Lord that you died and the others collected your body before they escaped. I can assure you, nobody is looking for you.”

“But... but...” she felt overwhelmed. “Did Harry and Ron tell you where they are? I need to go to them. They need me...” and she started to get up, but Narcissa pushed her back into the bed firmly.

“Miss Granger, I’m afraid you will be staying here until further notice.”

Hermione gave her an appalled look. “Pardon? I mean, OK maybe for a day or two until I’m healed, but you can’t possibly think I’m going to...”

"I do think so," said Narcissa. "Malfoy Manor is currently the Dark Lords' headquarters. It was a miracle we even got you into this room. Luckily, it's in the East Wing, which my husband closed off years ago, so nobody would ever think to come here. But we can't get you out without risk of being seen. And I will not put my family in that position."

Hermione stared at her now, her eyes narrowing.

"You just said Dobby rescued Harry..."

"And so he did," said Narcissa calmly.

"That means house elves must be able to apparate people through the wards here. You could send me away with an elf."

Narcissa stilled, and Hermione thought she looked reluctantly impressed that Hermione had worked this out so quickly. But to Hermione's dismay Narcissa just gave her a small smile.

"That may be true, but you see, they will only do that under my orders. And I will not order it. There is only one elf who knows you are here, and she is loyal to me and Draco. Besides, even if I were to send you away, you now know about my betrayal to the Dark Lord. More importantly, you know about my son's. I will not allow you out into the world with that knowledge."

"So I'm to be your prisoner then?" asked Hermione, her heart sinking.

"In a manner of speaking, Miss Granger," said Narcissa. "Though I would prefer to use the phrase, 'guest.' I trust you will find your accommodations far more welcoming than our cellar."

Hermione's mind was racing.

"But Harry and Ron know too! You said you communicated with them!"

"I did," said Narcissa, "though I did not identify myself or Draco for our safety."

Hermione looked at her skeptically. "So what... they're just taking it on faith that I'm alive then?"

Narcissa gave her a small smile at this. "For now, they have little choice in the matter. I explained you had been moved to a secure location and were safe. I told them it was pointless to try to find you, as they would never manage it, but to rest assured that you would be treated very well for however long you are here. The response I received back was rather colorful, but I'm satisfied that they will not attempt to find you just yet. In fact, I rather got the impression that they are both relieved you are safe and out of harm's way. They are awfully protective of you. And they did ask me to tell you that they are not living in a tent any longer."

Hermione closed her eyes at this and leaned back. Narcissa was right of course. If she had played on Harry's hero complex at all, he would probably work with her to keep Hermione captive just so she would be out of harm's way.

But they need me, she thought desperately. *They can't win this without me.*

Hermione bit her lip. "Can I at least communicate with them? To reassure them?"

Narcissa narrowed her eyes and studied Hermione for a moment.

"We may be able to arrange something like that eventually," she said at last. "Though I will have to think on it. We used an owl this time, but that method of communication is risky."

Hermione pursed her lips at this, but didn't say anything more as the door burst open again, and Draco Malfoy walked in. He came to an abrupt halt as he stared at Hermione. He just glared at her before turning to his mother. He opened his mouth to say something just as Hermione noticed the silver badge on his chest.

"They made you Head Boy?!" she nearly shrieked in disgust.

Malfoy turned back to her and smirked. "Why? Jealous, Granger? Everyone knows you were practically panting for the spot, but of course being Undesirable Number 2 would count against you."

Hermione just rolled her eyes at this. "With Snape as Headmaster, I think I'll pass, thanks. Though I'm still surprised he gave it to you. The whole Death Eater manifesto seems to be a bit lost on you."

Malfoy gave her an ugly sneer. "And what is that supposed to mean then?"

"Oh, just that you aren't exactly falling in line. It appears you helped me. That doesn't really jive with the Death Eaters' philosophy these days, does it? Though I'll admit that Snape probably doesn't know about this yet. But then there are other things like the fact that you failed to kill Dumbledore. I'm certain Snape knows about that little wobble, seeing as how he was the one who did it for you."

Hermione realized that Draco and Narcissa had become deathly still. And then Draco spoke in a dangerous voice.

"Make no mistake, Mudblood. I killed Dumbledore."

Hermione just snorted and rolled her eyes. "No you didn't. You lowered your wand. Snape did it for you. Although..." and now she cocked her head and studied him. "Based on your reaction just now it sounds like this is not the narrative that has been spread through the Death Eaters. Well that does explain quite a bit. I always wondered why You-Know-Who didn't kill you when you failed. And I suppose Snape had no choice but to make you Head Boy to maintain the lie."

Hermione glanced at Narcissa and saw her eyes were narrowed. Draco, however, looked incensed.

"How do you know this?" he hissed.

Hermione rolled her eyes again. “Please. Surely you don’t think Dumbledore was alone up there in the tower? There was a witness on our side who saw the whole thing. The entire Order of the Phoenix knows that Snape murdered him and not you.”

Draco swore as he paled and then looked at his mother. “I’m not staying for this. You’ll have to do it,” and then he turned on his heel and strode out.

Hermione just smiled broadly as he turned and left.

Granger — 1, Malfoy — 0, she thought, with a satisfied smirk as she turned back to look at Narcissa who was watching her cautiously.

Hermione just raised an eyebrow at her. She liked Narcissa more than Malfoy, but she had still made it clear that she planned to hold Hermione here indefinitely. She wasn’t an ally, and until Hermione knew *why* Narcissa wanted to keep her at the Manor, she wouldn’t trust her.

“It would be wise if you and Draco would set aside your differences Miss Granger. You will be seeing quite a lot of each other soon.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “Excuse me? I know he’s your son, but I have no interest whatsoever in spending even a moment with Malfoy. You may not be aware of this, but he’s a bully. He is rude, cruel, and unbelievably arrogant. So no, I do not plan to put my feelings about him aside, and whatever you have planned for us to do together… well for once, I agree with him. You’ll need to do it. Malfoy and I will kill each other.”

Narcissa sighed. “Unfortunately I can’t spare the time for it.”

“What is it then?” asked Hermione. “What do you want us to do?”

Narcissa just shook her head and said, “We won’t speak of it yet. You need time to heal first, and I need to talk to Draco again.”

“Don’t bother on my account, please,” said Hermione.

Narcissa just gave her a knowing look as she rose. “Now then, you may go anywhere in this suite. Our elf will attend you while you are a guest here. Please feel free to call her and ask her for anything you need. She’s been filling the shelves with books for you. Draco mentioned that you enjoy reading. Please feel free to request any titles you wish from the Malfoy library. I’m afraid I cannot permit you to enter the library yourself, but Tippy can enter it for you.”

Hermione felt her mouth drop open at this, but Narcissa ignored her. “Tippy!”

A tiny elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Yes Mistress?” she squeaked.

“Tippy, this is Miss Granger. Please answer her call while she is a guest in the Manor. You are permitted to bring her anything she requests, but she may not leave this room until Draco

or I order it.”

“Yes Mistress!” said Tippy excitedly, as she wiggled her ears at Hermione. Despite the situation, Hermione found herself smiling down at the little elf. She seemed kind.

“Very well, then I will bid you good afternoon. Miss Granger, please rest and recover. Tippy is an excellent nurse, and she will take care of you. I’ll be by to check on you when I am able, though I’m afraid with so many.... visitors... in the house, my availability is often sporadic.”

“I... yes, of course,” Hermione found herself saying.

“And finally, I should warn you not to try to leave the room. We have a double blood ward on it, and only somebody who is a member of both the House of Malfoy and the House of Black will be able to cross the threshold.”

“So you mean...” started Hermione.

“Just me and Draco, yes,” said Narcissa as she turned to leave.

Hermione exhaled. She was truly trapped then. But on the bright side, Bellatrix wouldn’t be able to get through, nor Lucius. She was a prisoner, but her captors seemed determined to make her comfortable. And if she had access to the entire Malfoy library through Tippy...

“Mrs. Malfoy,” said Hermione. Narcissa turned back to look at her curiously as she got to the door.

“Thank you for saving me. And you can call me Hermione.”

Narcissa gave her a small smile at this and swept out of the room.

Chapter 3: Narcissa's Plan

Hermione

Hermione was staring at her dinner with a combination of trepidation and amazement. Tippy had just waltzed in a few minutes earlier, snapped her fingers, and an entire cart of food appeared. Hermione had stood very slowly, and Tippy helped guide her to a chair, where the cart magically lowered itself to be exactly the right height.

There was shephard's pie, toad in the hole, a hot pot, and a rather remarkable trifle with several layers of decadent cream. To drink, Tippy brought flagons of both wine and pumpkin juice. Hermione was bemused to see that the entire thing was served on monogrammed china, with cut crystal glasses that looked ancient, and a small bouquet of flowers on the side. She noted several different forks and spoons, all with elaborate handles. She stared at them, having no clue what she was supposed to do with so many. Tucked under several forks was a cloth napkin with a lace edge. Hermione noticed a small 'M' embroidered into one corner.

Hermione just shook her head at the sight, which made Tippy look incredibly worried.

"Miss must tell Tippy what she likes to eat! Master Draco told Tippy that Miss used to eat these things at Hogwarts, but Tippy will serve Miss anything she wishes!"

Hermione gave Tippy a sharp look.

"Draco told you this is what I eat?" she asked.

Tippy was wringing her hands with worry now. "Yes, Miss, but if Miss is displeased, Tippy can bring Miss something else!"

Hermione was alarmed to see the elf's eyes begin to fill with tears.

"Tippy! No, please don't be upset — this is wonderful! I'm just surprised Draco ever noticed. We sit on the other side of the Great Hall from each other, that's all."

Tippy's lip was still quivering, so Hermione quickly took a big bite of the shepherd's pie. It was only after she swallowed that she remembered they might be lacing the food with something.

She cringed for a moment, thinking of what Mad Eye would say to her about her lack of constant vigilance, but she was absolutely starving. After months of wild mushrooms and the occasional trout, she was staring at a feast, and she couldn't help but tuck in.

Besides, if they really wanted to hurt me, they had their opportunity, she thought, as she closed her eyes to savor her first bite of real food in ages.

Tippy gave her a tentative smile as Hermione beamed at her. "Tippy, this is wonderful. Thank you so much. I really do enjoy all of these foods."

Tippy gave a sigh of relief, but Hermione had some questions now.

"Does Draco talk about me much then?" she asked in what she hoped was a casual voice.

Tippy nodded. "Yes Miss, Master Draco is always talking about Miss Granger. He is saying that she is Harry Potter's best friend and is critical his side of the war."

"Anything else?" she asked.

"He told Tippy that Miss likes to read. And he says Miss's hands are usually covered in ink. But Tippy doesn't see any ink!"

Hermione unconsciously wiped her hands at this comment and wrinkled her nose.

"Does he complain about me much?"

"Oh yes, Miss," said Tippy. "Tippy doesn't like to be saying so, but Master Draco... erm..."

"He doesn't like me very much, does he?" she asked the elf with a smile.

Tippy tugged on her ears, but then shook her head. "No, Miss. But Master Draco worked hard to save Miss's life. Master Draco does not mean Miss any harm."

Hermione was quiet for a moment as she thought about this.

"What exactly did Draco do? And Narcissa?"

Tippy looked relieved to be on safer footing. "Miss was bleeding very badly when Mistress called for Tippy. Tippy brought Miss here and tried to heal her cuts with dittany, but Tippy could not heal a cut on Miss's neck or Miss's arm. Miss's arm was very broken, and Mistress healed that while Master Draco healed the cut on Miss's neck. 'Twas bad magic, Miss. Very bad magic, but Master Draco fixed it."

Hermione unconsciously rubbed her neck. She had been in bed all day and hadn't gotten up to visit the rest of the room. She still hadn't been to the bathroom or seen herself in a mirror since they left Grimmauld Place. The tiny loo that she, Harry, and Ron shared in the tent had no mirror, and Hermione wasn't vain. She hadn't brought any makeup with her on the run or carried any compacts. But her neck was sore, and she could feel something that felt like a thin scar. She knew she would have to investigate.

"Tippy, is there a mirror I could borrow? Just a handheld one?"

Tippy looked delighted by the request, and she disappeared briefly before reappearing a moment later with a *CRACK!*

Hermione took the mirror with some trepidation and turned it over. Staring back at her she saw her face was pale, gaunt, and her eyes looked sunken in. Her hair was wild — Hermione

had given up on it months ago — and she saw a long, thin red line along the base of her neck, just above her clavicle.

Dark magic? I was cut by Dark magic and Malfoy healed me?

The whole thing was bizarre, but she decided to let it drop for the moment.

Hermione had already decided she would escape Malfoy Manor at some point. She didn't intend to be trapped in this gilded cage forever, even if the accommodations were lovely. Eventually Draco, Narcissa, or Tippy would become lax with security, and when that happened she would make her move. But in the meantime, Hermione had access to a library again — a large one, a famous one, a library that contained a different collection than Hogwarts — and she intended to use the time she was being held captive to study and research. That had always been her highest and best use.

But first, she knew, she had to figure out a way to communicate with Harry and Ron. And she needed Tippy's cooperation.

"Tippy, were they able to retrieve my wand from the Snatchers?" asked Hermione.

Tippy looked at Hermione nervously. "Miss's wand is not broken. But Mistress says Miss is not allowed a wand."

Hermione felt a surge of anger at this.

Not allowed a wand...

It wasn't that surprising, but it would make things much more difficult. Still, Hermione didn't press Tippy about this. It wasn't her fault, and she didn't want Tippy reporting that Hermione was desperate to get her wand back.

"Very well, Tippy. I had to ask though. After dinner do you mind giving me some privacy? I like to read, and I like to be alone while I do it."

Tippy bobbed her head but said, "Yes Miss, but Tippy wishes to help Miss bathe first. Mistress scourgified Miss, but a bath would be best. Tippy should help Miss with that and then Miss can rest in private."

Hermione hesitated. *A bath would be lovely*, she thought. She felt a bit guilty as she considered it. Harry and Ron said they were no longer in a tent. They were probably sleeping on a forest floor somewhere. But she hadn't had a proper bath in ages, and she was so very sore.

"Very well, Tippy. Let me finish supper, and then a bath would be lovely."

Tippy wiggled her ears with delight, and Hermione chatted with her for several more minutes until she ate her fill.

"I'm sorry Tippy, I'm not used to this much food. It was all wonderful though."

“Tis no matter Miss,” said Tippy. “Tippy will make sure Miss keeps eating. Mistress is very worried about Miss’s weight.”

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at this, but she didn’t say anything as she allowed the little elf to banish the tray and slowly lead her into the bathroom. Hermione came to an abrupt halt as she stared at it.

Everything was marble and gold — the floors, the shower, the tub, even...

Is that a marble commode? she wondered, with a mixture of awe and disgust.

The prefects’ bathroom at Hogwarts was the nicest bathroom Hermione had ever visited, at least until now. Though this bathroom was smaller than the prefects’ bathroom, the finishes here were even more opulent. There was even a glittering chandelier over the tub and a large gilt mirror.

Hermione stared at herself in the mirror as she undressed, and she realized Narcissa might have a point. She was very underweight. She had known this of course — she had watched it develop in Harry and Ron, and when her cycles stopped and her formerly fitted jeans and jumpers started to bag on her, she knew that she was experiencing the same thing. But she had never really *seen* it until now.

“Tippy, for breakfast tomorrow, can I please have some eggs, sausage, and maybe a muffin? I may not be able to eat all of it, but I need to try.”

Tippy beamed at her and assured Miss she would bring it the moment Miss called for it.

Tippy led Hermione over to the bath, and Hermione sank in, nearly groaning at the feeling of the heat permeating her sore muscles. She was *so* sore. Her bones ached. Her muscles screamed. Every nerve ending had been on fire when Bellatrix tortured her. The bath felt like bliss, especially as Tippy started adding some salts and potions to the water.

“This is Master Draco’s special bath potion,” said the elf. Hermione whipped her head around.

“His what?” she asked in confusion.

“His special bath potion. For when he is tortured,” said the elf, her ears drooping sadly. “It soothes the nerves.”

Hermione furrowed her brow at this. “And does it happen often?”

“Not when Master Draco is at Hogwarts,” said Tippy. “But when he is home... yes, it happens too often. Master Draco called for it today and said you may need it too.”

Hermione inhaled.

Draco had been tortured today also.

She supposed it wasn't really a surprise, but she realized that she hadn't had even a moment's thought for Narcissa or Draco. If they had told Voldemort that Hermione was dead and Harry Potter escaped, then *of course* they had been tortured for it. Hermione felt a surge of guilt now. Narcissa had appeared so composed, and Draco had been so prickly and rude, that she hadn't even considered it.

"Was Narcissa tortured too?" asked Hermione softly.

"No Miss," said Tippy. "Master Draco convinced the Dark Lord that you is not here, and Master Draco was tortured. But Master Draco is telling the Dark Lord that it is really Ms. Bellatrix's fault, and the Dark Lord dismissed Mistress before she was hurt too. The Dark Lord is very angry with Ms. Bellatrix."

Hermione felt another surge of guilt when she thought of Malfoy. He had lied for her and then been tortured for it. Then he had healed her cut. She had repaid him with rudeness.

He started it, said a small voice in her head, but she still bit her lip as she remembered their conversation. He may have started it, but she quickly escalated it. It was true she didn't like him, and she was incredibly resentful that he was keeping her here against her will — but he had also saved her. She resolved to do her best to attempt civility the next time she saw him.

Hermione thought of Bellatrix now and felt a dark sort of satisfaction that she was blamed for everything.

Good, she thought savagely. *She is truly evil.*

She knew that Malfoy wasn't evil. Evidently Narcissa wasn't evil either. They were both strategic, and as she sat in the tub allowing Malfoy's potion to work its magic, she suspected she knew why they were keeping her here.

Insurance. I'm their insurance in case Harry wins.

The Malfoys had always played both sides. Ron had been telling her that since their first year at Hogwarts. They did it in the first war, and they were doing it again now. What better insurance policy could they have than keeping one-third of the Golden Trio alive just on the off-chance that Harry pulled off the impossible and defeated Voldemort? That's why they had saved her, then given her this elaborate cage with her own miniature library and a carte blanche on food, wine, and books. She could spend weeks here, months, even years. And if Harry won, and she emerged pampered and unharmed, then the Malfoy family could take credit for saving the Golden Girl from Voldemort. It would be proof that they had turned for the light during the war.

And evidently they could do it right under Voldemort's nose.

Then again, if Voldemort killed Harry and the Order lost, then Hermione would die.

At least it will be quick for me.

Hermione grimaced as this all became clear to her. She didn't like being used, and she was more determined than ever to find a way to escape, but she knew it would take time.

If they want to use me, then I'll use them too, she thought. She would eat their food, use their special potions, and devour their library while she was here. She would work relentlessly toward finding the answers they still needed on the horcruxes, and she would figure out a way to communicate all of this to Harry and Ron. And while she was doing this, she would watch and wait. She would kill them with kindness and get them off their guard. And because she was Hermione Granger, she knew she could be patient. She knew she could watch them, and she would miss nothing. And she knew that the moment she saw her opening she would take it.

"Would Miss like Tippy to help with Miss's hair? Perhaps Miss would like it cut?"

Hermione smiled slowly to herself at this suggestion.

"Yes Tippy, that would be delightful. I haven't had a haircut in months."

I'm starting tonight.

Draco

Draco threw down his quill in disgust. It was no use. He couldn't concentrate on this ridiculous Charms homework Flitwick had set for them.

He had been back at school from Easter break for nearly a week, and his mother had called him home to the Manor that evening.

"I need your help with this, Draco. I must insist. My other duties prevent me from doing it myself."

Draco sighed. He knew he could never tell his mother no. She knew it too. She used that power sparingly, but when she did... well, she always won. So he was preparing to head to the Manor in a few minutes and face down Granger again.

"Our guest told me you used to bully her. If that's true then you can't blame her for having a temper. But she appears to be settling in nicely and even apologized for how she last spoke to you."

Draco grimaced at this. The notion that Granger was settling into his home was unbelievable. In fact, Draco didn't believe it, not even for a minute. The Granger he knew had a streak of ruthlessness inside of her. He was sure she was just biding her time, waiting for the moment to strike. He had observed this in her schoolwork for years of course. She would do just about anything to come out on top. But it emerged at other times too.

And oddly enough, he had been feeling it in her wand for the past week.

The wand worked well enough most of the time, but it had moments of true brilliance and then other moments when it refused to obey him.

When he had been called to torture one of the other students, it had failed completely. Draco couldn't do it, and he had felt the wand fighting him on it. He told the Carrows it was the wand's fault, but they insisted he was weak and needed a taste of it himself as a reminder of what it was supposed to feel like.

As soon as they suggested it, the wand had practically exploded with magic, and his arm moved almost involuntarily as he stunned both Amycus and also the student he was supposed to be torturing. He stood there and gaped at the scene until he decided to take a leaf out of his mother's book and obliviate them.

This, the wand did with a precision that was chilling. Draco felt an odd sense of foreboding come over him as he performed that magic. It was as though the wand had done this magic before, but it was cautioning him against its use.

"It's necessary for your protection," it seemed to whisper at him. "So it's justified this time. But be careful not to overdo it."

He had determined that Hermione Granger's wand was truly odd. His own wand had been such an extension of himself that he had never thought of it as more than a stick that channeled his magic. Of course he was very fond of it — all wizards loved their wands — but he had never thought about the wand learning from *him*.

Granger's wand, however, felt almost sentient. He kept telling himself it was all to do with magical compatibility between the wood species and cores, and that was why Weasley's wand didn't work well for him. But the longer he used Granger's wand, the more he felt her own magic in it. Her power was strong. It was relentless. And *fuck*, if it wasn't incredibly judgey.

He was getting the impression that if he asked the wand to perform magic Granger would approve of, it would cooperate. And sometimes, like when he stunned Amycus, it would even go out of its way to perform exceptionally well for him. But if he wanted it to do something Granger would never do herself — like torture another student — it would fight him so hard it would actually block his magic. Her wand, he realized, had imbibed her own Gryffindor sense of justice, though he could also feel her ruthlessness running through it now and then. It felt like it was just under the surface of all that righteous superiority.

He thought that her determined ruthlessness was the reason he was able to use the wand to cast the blood ward on her door. It was morally gray magic to be sure, but it had been for her protection as much as to keep her a prisoner. The wand had cooperated reluctantly. He was sure Granger was wrinkling her nose somewhere in distaste.

Draco wondered what the wand would do if he was ever in a position where the moral code her wand had evidently imbibed conflicted with that ruthlessness. Which instinct would prevail then? Then Draco groaned as he wondered why he was so preoccupied with this.

It's because I have nobody to talk to, and her bloody wand has been driving me mad all week. Not to mention the nightmares. Fuck you, Aunt Bella.

That was the real issue, of course. Between her wand and the torture he had been reliving every night in his dreams he couldn't seem to get away from her. And it was about to get much worse if his mother got her way. Draco didn't know if he wanted Granger to cooperate so they could get it over with or put her foot down and refuse so he wouldn't have to see her at all.

He checked his watch and groaned. It was time. He stood up and walked over to the fireplace, as he threw some floo powder into it.

“Malfoy Manor!” he shouted, and he felt the familiar spinning begin as he was whooshed away.

He stepped out onto the threshold of the fireplace in his father’s study. His mother was already there.

“Darling,” she said, as she beamed at him. “Ready then?”

He just grunted as he followed her out of the study and toward the East Wing.

“I don’t suppose you’ve mentioned this to her yet, have you?” he asked.

“Not yet, dear. Power in numbers and all that. In any event, I wanted her to be healed and settled before we broached the subject.”

Draco sighed. This was going to be a disaster.

They entered the East Wing and made their way down the hall to the familiar door. His mother knocked.

“Come in,” said Granger’s voice.

His mother turned the handle and opened the door. She stepped through first, with Draco following just behind. When she stepped aside, he found himself staring at a very different Granger than he had seen the week before. The blood was gone, her cheeks had color again, and she was ensconced in an armchair, curled up like that bloody cat of hers with an enormous book on her lap. She closed the book and stood up, and Draco saw she was wearing an oversized jumper and some black pants that were so tight they appeared to be painted on. She was still very thin, but she looked far more alive than when he had seen her a week ago. Even her hair was tamed.

Draco had no idea how to react to this new version of Granger. He decided to blink.

“Hermione dear, I hope we aren’t interrupting,” said his mother.

“Not at all,” said Granger in a cheerful voice that immediately made Draco suspicious. He could not recall a single time she had ever acted cheerful around him. Not once.

Draco and his mother walked over to the sitting area, and they all lowered themselves into a chair.

“Now then,” said his mother, “I would like to discuss the terms of your stay with us.”

Granger assumed a look of polite curiosity. Draco narrowed his eyes at her.

“There is something we wish for you to learn while you are here,” started Narcissa. “Something that will be a valuable skill for you to have and something that we will require you to master before you can be released from our home.”

Not a bad setup, Draco thought, now reluctantly impressed by his mother. Dangling knowledge in front of Granger was probably the surest way to get her to go along with it.

Granger furrowed her brow, clearly thrown off by this. Draco tried not to smirk.

“And what’s that?” she asked, now looking cautious.

“Occlumency,” said his mother.

Granger just stared at them.

“I assume you know what occlumency is...?” his mother asked delicately.

“Yes, of course,” said Granger quickly. “I’m familiar with it.”

“You’ve had training then?” asked Narcissa hopefully.

“Erm...” said Granger, now looking uncomfortable. “No. I’m afraid not.”

Narcissa pursed her lips at this, and Draco snorted. It was unbelievable, really. Potter’s best friend was surely the brains of their entire operation. And yet, here she was, sitting in front of them with her mind unguarded. Whether it was oversight or just arrogance, Draco didn’t know. But he realized his mother was right about this. Granger couldn’t be released until she had mastered occlumency. It wasn’t just important for their secret. It was important for the war.

“May I ask then... have any of you trained in occlumency?” asked Narcissa.

Granger was still looking uncomfortable. “Harry trained in it for a bit. But it didn’t go very well. And Ron and I... well, Harry’s always been the center of everything. We never learned.”

“And yet, you are the one who was captured,” point out Narcissa.

“Yes,” said Granger, a bit reluctantly.

Narcissa tilted her head and studied her for a moment. “Very well. That is an oversight that we will correct, beginning tonight. Draco is an exceptional occlumens. He will be your teacher.”

Granger got an appalled look on her face at this suggestion.

That's more like it, thought Draco, as he smirked at her.

"I'm sorry, but no. That won't work," said Granger. "The training, it's... invasive. I'm afraid I can't allow it."

"You must allow it," said Narcissa. "Because that is the price of your freedom. If you wish to leave us, you must be able to guard your mind and our secrets. And I daresay there is other information that would be wise for you to guard as well."

Granger narrowed her eyes. "Are you switching sides then?"

Narcissa thought about this for a moment. "Draco and I have been... disturbed by the Dark Lord's position for some time. Given who we are and what our home has become, we haven't been able to act on our feelings until now. When you arrived, however.... Well, it presented an opportunity. We don't want anything bad to happen to you, my dear. Draco has assured me you are central to the war effort. So that is why we have guarded your person thus far. But more than that, we want to guard your mind, and conveniently, we all find ourselves in the position to be able to do just that. Frankly, I find it astounding that you haven't already learned how to do it."

Granger's lips thinned at this, but Draco could see she was thinking about it.

"The thing is..." she said slowly, "Draco is right that I'm central to the war effort. There are things he cannot see in my mind. Nobody can see them. I know things that the rest of the Order doesn't even know. It's highly classified. I can't let him into my head."

"But that's just it, my dear," said Narcissa. "Right now, you couldn't stop him if you wanted to. Draco is an excellent legilimens. So am I. So is Snape. And Bellatrix and others. You are lucky Bellatrix was so distracted by that Sword that she forgot to use legilimency against you. And of course the Dark Lord is arguably the best legilimens in the world. My point is, the Death Eaters are filled with individuals who have at least a passing knowledge of legilimency, and several of them are highly skilled. If you are ever captured again, your mind is an open book."

Granger was pale now, and Draco could practically see her giant brain racing for some other solution before she cast him an almost panicked look. "But if Malfoy sees those things..." she started.

"Then you will be showing them to somebody whose interests align with yours. I won't sugarcoat the fact that occlumency training is uncomfortable. And I understand that you two have a... history... that could make that worse. But when it comes to the question of keeping the secrets that are in your head, Draco is one of the best."

Granger was biting her lip, as she frowned. Then she looked at Draco.

"How did you learn then? If you're really that good?" Draco sensed a note of jealousy in her voice. He caught the ghost of a smile on his mother's lips, and he was sure she heard it too.

"I had good teachers," he drawled. "Many, in fact. And I have had a lot of practical experience with it."

Granger's brow furrowed. "What kind of experience?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "I occlude from both Bellatrix and the Dark Lord on a regular basis. And I've occluded against Snape before. And Dumbledore too."

Her eyes got wide now. "You've occluded against Dumbledore?"

Predictable, he thought. Of course she's most impressed by her hero Dumbledore. She probably wouldn't believe that Dumbledore was nowhere near as good at it as the Dark Lord.

"Obviously," he said, rolling his eyes again. "Surely you don't think he would have let me work on that vanishing cabinet all year if he knew what I was doing with it. And you must know that he cornered me many times to chat about the weather or quidditch or other mundane rubbish. He searched my mind whenever he did it. He was fairly subtle, but I could tell."

Granger slumped now, and Draco knew they had her. He wasn't thrilled at the prospect of training her, but he knew his mother was right about this. It was appalling that she and the others were carrying around information in their heads that was critical to the war effort with little or no occlumency training.

"Fine," she said. "I guess I don't really have a choice."

"I'm afraid not, my dear," said Narcissa gently. "But this is important."

Granger just nodded. "How do we start then?"

"With this," said Draco, pulling out a thick journal and handing it to her.

"What is it?" asked Granger curiously.

"The best book on occlumency that's ever been written," said Draco. "It's been in the Black family for generations. The Blacks are predisposed to occlumency, and many of our family members have contributed to it. Like I said, I had many teachers."

He watched as she flipped through it, her eyes widening.

"Read this dear, and when you are finished with it, let Tippy know. I'll call Draco back, and then he will begin regular training with you," said Narcissa.

"Could I just learn from the book?" asked Granger hesitantly.

"No," said Draco firmly. "Because there are so many methods. You won't know what works for you until you try a few against an accomplished legilimens. And like anything else, it takes practical training. The theory alone won't get you there."

Granger sighed and nodded. "Fine. I'll read this, and then we can begin."

"Excellent," said Narcissa, now rising. Draco rose too. "And Hermione, dear," added Narcissa. Granger cast her a questioning look. "As you train, we would be much obliged if you would contribute your own entries to the journal for posterity's sake. Your situation is rather unique."

Draco struggled not to roll his eyes at his mother's suggestion, while Granger assumed a stunned look. But mercifully, she didn't make any objections. Instead, she nodded at them both, and Draco just raised an eyebrow as he turned and walked toward the door. As he was leaving, he glanced back and saw a pensive look on Granger's face.

Time for an education, Granger, he thought.

Chapter 4: The Black Family Journal

Hermione

Hermione read the final entry in the journal with wide eyes.

Dear Journal,

Once again, I occluded under torture today. The storytelling method is still the best for this type of situation because it gives up a compelling story to make the torture stop as quickly as possible. The Dark Lord performed the cruciatus curse on me and then performed legilimency to search my memories for Pothead and Weasel's escape from Malfoy Manor while it was occurring. I was able to show him a false memory and cast blame upon my dearest Aunt Bella while I did it, that bitch. It was so successful that he released Mother without any torture at all, and of course it protected Granger. I convinced the Dark Lord that she's dead so he won't go looking for her. I may not know what the Gryffindorks have planned to bring him down, but I'm certain those idiots won't be able to win the war without her.

The key to storytelling while under torture is to dissociate from the pain as quickly as possible, preferably in that split second between the legilimency beginning and the cruciatus taking hold. This technique allows me to maintain my mind through the pain and focus on the story I want to tell, as opposed to the story I have to tell.

I'll note again that while blocking is a very effective method when not under torture, I find significant blocking to be challenging when I'm being tortured. Storytelling contains elements of blocking of course, but in a more minor way than when attempting a full block. And today, the Dark Lord knew enough already that I couldn't pretend as though that entire shitshow didn't happen. In any event, the cruciatus curse practically compels the mind to turn over at least some information. With storytelling, I am able to do just that — but of course the information I am providing is false.

As I flip back through my previous entries, I am now realizing that today marks the twentieth time I have performed occlumency while being tortured. Twenty is a nice round number, is it not? And I'm pleased to report that Voldy still doesn't know I'm an occlumens. I like to think it's my secret weapon. And seeing as how I can't tell others about this, I must plan a personal celebration to mark this milestone. I shall toast my achievement by drowning in firewhiskey and my bath potions tonight. I can tell Mother is concocting some plan that involves Granger, and I suspect I'll need all the firewhiskey I can get once she tells me about it. I'll have to raid Father's stash before going back to school. He was always shit at security charms.

Fuck you, Lord Snakeface.

Hermione slowly closed the journal and just stared at it. She had put off reading it for a couple days, knowing that it would buy her some time to think about the thing the Malfoys had asked of her. But eventually, her curiosity got the better of her, and she began to read and then couldn't put it down.

The journal was truly remarkable. It was comprised of generations of notes, entries, and ramblings of those who had trained in the art of occlumency, going back hundreds of years. Some contributors were clinical and consistent with their entries. Others were more sporadic, and they wrote all over the margins, making notes and corrections to earlier entries as they trained. Still others included personal information and major life events. But all were focused on whittling down the various techniques that worked to successfully perform occlumency, which Hermione now knew were much more diverse than just "clear your mind."

When she got to the later entries, she was astounded to see contributions from Bellatrix, Andromeda, Regulus, and even Sirius from years prior. And of course Narcissa and Draco had contributed most recently, recording their occlumency attempts against Voldemort.

Bellatrix and Sirius, ironically, used the same strategy – an emotional outpouring. They flooded their minds with feelings that distracted the legilimens from whatever he came to find. Bellatrix used anger and rage, which pleased Voldemort the one or two times he had sensed it and convinced him she was one of his most loyal servants. Sirius used boisterous happiness, at least at the time when he was writing in the journal. His entries were all from before the death of Harry's parents and his imprisonment. Hermione remembered catching a glimmer of that side of Sirius when they spent Christmas with him during fifth year. It fit, she realized, especially before his life really took a turn.

Most of Sirius's entries reported using the technique against his mother, whom he despised. His mother regularly searched his memories to try to find out what he was up to so she could thwart him. After he learned occlumency, he simply thought of James and the other Marauders, and he overwhelmed her with the happiness he felt at betraying the Black family name by associating with blood traitors. Hermione learned that Sirius's stint with occlumency had hastened the split with his family. And she was stunned to learn that Andromeda had been the one to train him, before the split occurred. The journal had been passed down through Narcissa's side of the family, as opposed to Sirius's, and Walburga Black had never learned that either of her children were trained.

Regulus, she discovered, had been trained by Bellatrix after he proved his loyalty by joining the Death Eaters as a teenager. He used a version of blocking. He visualized hiding the information he wanted to conceal in the cellars of Grimmauld Place. Hermione was a bit startled to learn that there *were* cellars in Grimmauld Place - she had never been down there to see them herself. But evidently Regulus knew about them, and he simply locked the sensitive information away. Hermione was now sure that this was how he managed to conceal his knowledge of the horcrux he had found. Hermione learned that during the first war, Voldemort got into the habit of searching the minds of his followers. After Regulus

turned and discovered the existence of the horcrux, she deduced that he must have used this technique to hide his knowledge of it before he died.

Andromeda also used blocking, though she locked her secrets away in books in the Grimmauld Place library, where she had spent many hours as a child when visiting her younger cousins Sirius and Regulus. She concluded that finding information there was like finding a needle in a haystack. Her final entry had been hastily written, recording her father's attempt to search her mind about a certain muggleborn boy named Ted Tonks. She wrote her final entry knowing she would be eloping with Ted that evening and leaving her family forever.

Narcissa, she learned, used meditation to clear her mind. Anybody who looked in her head would see something empty and boring, almost as though she had no thoughts at all. Narcissa's notes indicated that Voldemort used to search her mind early on, but he was so bored by what he found that he had given up. He now considered her feather-brained and beneath his notice, so he rarely bothered to look in her head anymore. This was the technique Hermione realized Snape had been trying to teach Harry, but he had never given him any real instruction in the methods of meditation. Narcissa, evidently, made a point to meditate twice a day, every day, to maintain her composure and clear her mind. She had studied meditation from wizarding and even muggle sources, and she had landed on several techniques that worked for her.

Up until Draco, most of the entries recorded occluding sensitive information like business secrets, skeletons in the closet — Hermione learned there were at least two squibs in the Black family tree — and other information that one branch of Blacks would try to pry from another. Hermione thought that most of it was mundane or socially scandalous, but not terribly dangerous. Even the later entries that touched on Voldemort were relatively tame. Voldemort had never suspected Regulus or Bellatrix of betrayal, so they had not been searched thoroughly. And Narcissa had been largely ignored because Voldemort thought she was simple.

And then she reached Draco Malfoy.

Malfoy, she read, was made a Death Eater to punish his father for his failure in the Department of Mysteries. He had been hesitant to take the Mark, but he had tried to make the best of it, thinking early on in his mission to kill Dumbledore that he would be able to use it to restore his family's favor.

But because he had taken the Mark while the Malfoys were out of favor, Draco Malfoy had soon discovered that Voldemort was suspicious of him. Voldemort didn't trust him. Voldemort didn't like him. And Voldemort had set him up to fail. So unlike Bellatrix and Regulus whose loyalties were never really questioned — or even Narcissa whom Voldemort thought was too stupid to be worth noticing — Draco Malfoy became a target.

She was horrified to read that Malfoy's mind had been routinely searched while Voldemort performed the cruciatus curse on him. Thanks to the fact that he was regularly tortured, he didn't just hide information, but he attempted to offer something else up to make the torture stop. That was how he had landed on the technique of storytelling and creating false

memories that he could offer up in exchange for his safety. It was appalling and made Hermione sick to think about it, but he had done it. And evidently, he was really good at it.

She read that he began training the summer before fifth year, after the Dark Lord rose again. When he was tasked to kill Dumbledore the following summer, he had doubled down on his training, and by the time he went home for Christmas break during sixth year, he could hold his story while being tortured.

Malfoy's entries were prolific and detailed. His were the only ones that described torture as an extraction technique, and he wrote as though he was committed to recording everything about it in case some future Black heir ever needed the information. His contributions to the journal were nothing short of horrifying, but Hermione realized they were exceptionally valuable, especially in light of the situation she now found herself in.

And he didn't just record the torture with Voldemort. He also recorded legilimency attempts by Snape and Dumbledore and even the occasional attempt by Bellatrix, though he noted that she wasn't very good at it, and she was the easiest to occlude from out of all of them. He tended to use blocking against the others, visualizing the Quidditch locker room at Hogwarts, as the place where he could keep his secrets safe. According to Malfoy, none of the people he occluded from had been on a Quidditch team at Hogwarts. They would never think to look inside his locker for secrets.

When reading Malfoy's entries Hermione had briefly considered that he might be lying about everything. Maybe he had written all of this in that week between her torture and him giving her the journal. But eventually Hermione determined he was probably being honest. Something about his entries had the ring of truth about them, and he was prone to divulging personal details here and there.

She read as his feelings toward Voldemort morphed from awed reverence to confusion to distrust and finally to loathing. Malfoy despised what Voldemort was doing to his family, and he had a strong protective streak toward the few people he loved, especially his mother. That same protective streak caused him to push away the friends he actually cared about — which Hermione discovered were Blaise Zabini, Theo Nott, and Pansy Parkinson. He had never cared about Crabbe and Goyle and felt they were expendable. But he cared about the others and really wanted them to stay out of it. So he isolated himself from them.

She wondered what he would say if he knew that Harry had tried to do a similar thing with her and Ron before hunting horcruxes.

He was lonely, she realized, and the entries in the journal had gotten longer and more detailed as he was made Head Boy and broke away from his friends. He had nobody at Hogwarts he could talk to about his feelings. His friends weren't trained in occlumency, and he was in two minds about Snape's loyalties. Malfoy seemed to think that Snape might *still* be a spy for Dumbledore even though he had killed the headmaster, but he couldn't be sure.

He even kept his feelings from his mother. He didn't want her to know how miserable he was. And as for his father, Draco suspected he had lost his love for Voldemort, but he couldn't talk to Lucius about it. Lucius, according to Draco, was only moderately accomplished at occlumency, and he was also regularly tortured. Draco didn't think Lucius

could hold his occlumency under torture, so he had to assume that everything Lucius heard or saw would be found by Voldemort.

So the journal had become his outlet, his confidante. He wrote entry after entry in his private room at Hogwarts, where he obsessed about the best occlumency strategies to use against Voldemort. But not only that, he wrote things that allowed Hermione to watch his evolution from Death Eater to skeptic.

His entries also alluded to a strong sense of family duty, which wasn't terribly surprising. She knew he was an only child and would inherit this absolutely ridiculous estate when his father died. He had never been shy about broadcasting the fact that he was the heir to the Malfoy fortune. But she had never really thought about the duty he felt toward his mother's side of the family — the Blacks.

The information Malfoy had dropped in the journal taught Hermione that the Blacks were an even older family than the Malfoys. Draco Malfoy was very proud of his mother's lineage, and he felt just as much of a duty toward that side of the family as his father's, even though he bore his father's name, and the Black name had officially died out with the death of Sirius. Malfoy, she learned, considered himself to be the heir to *both* the House of Malfoy and the House of Black, and Hermione had studied the family tree at Grimmauld Place long enough to know that he was probably right about this.

After Andromeda was blasted off the tree and Sirius and Regulus had both died childless, Draco Malfoy was the only Black left in his generation who would be acknowledged as the heir to that House. Tonks didn't count, nor her baby when it was born because Andromeda's line ended the moment she married a muggleborn. Bellatrix had never had children, and Malfoy speculated that she never would. Her marriage was a cold one, a marriage of blood and convenience. She evidently considered Draco to be her heir, which was the only reason she looked the other way whenever he failed in front of her. It didn't stop her from searching his mind, however, and Malfoy despised her for it.

Hermione realized that while Harry may have inherited Grimmauld Place and a chunk of the Black family fortune from Sirius, Harry wasn't *really* the heir to the House of Black. Sirius's line ended with his death, but the line of his cousins — the Black sisters — continued through Draco. And for that reason, Draco would inherit a sizable share of the Black fortune himself from both his mother and his aunt. He would be the keeper of their secrets. He would continue their traditions. He was their sole heir, and he contributed to the journal for the benefit of future heirs.

He's writing to his children, Hermione realized with a jolt.

Granted, his entries were irreverent, very rude, and riddled with curse words. But whenever he wrote about occlumency, he was clear and precise. He was detailed. He was thorough. And the realization that he was recording all of this for the benefit of his future children was the thing, more than anything, that made Hermione decide she could trust what he had written. He truly hated Voldemort. He didn't like Harry, Ron, or Hermione either, but he considered their winning to be a necessity. He wanted them to deliver his family and friends from Voldemort's evil. To use his words from an earlier entry, he really wished they would "get the fuck on with it and find a way to murder that snake-faced bastard."

I'm not just insurance, she realized. That's only part of the story. He really wants us to win. Narcissa does too. And if he can occlude while being tortured, he can keep our secrets when he sees them in my head.

Hermione sighed and rubbed her temples. Her list of things to do at Malfoy Manor had now expanded. First, she had to set up a method of communication with Harry and Ron. She had already decided what to do about this, and she was working on it — though it was going to take some time. Second, she needed to use the Malfoy library to solve as much of the horcrux problem as she could while she was here. The opportunity to be so close to so many forbidden books was one she couldn't miss. Third, she needed to learn occlumency from Draco Malfoy, and she needed to be able to do it as well as he could. Fourth, she had to convince them to release her or find a way to escape.

She still wasn't sure if Narcissa and Draco *would* release her like they implied. But now that she had a chance to learn occlumency from somebody who could hold it under torture from Voldemort, she knew that she had to learn to do it too, even if she did despise him. She concluded that she would have to stay until her lessons with Malfoy were complete. She would map out her escape plan just in case Harry or Ron had an emergency that required her to leave at a moment's notice, but she wouldn't voluntarily leave before then.

And if I can do it... if I can learn this... then I can teach Harry and Ron too once I find them.

Yes, she hated Draco Malfoy. But there was a strong possibility that the skills she would learn from him would help them win the war.

“Tippy!” she called, and the little elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Yes Miss?” she asked.

“Tippy, please let Narcissa know that I'm done with the journal. I'll occupy myself with other studies until Malfoy is ready for training.”

“Yes, Miss!” said Tippy, who immediately disappeared with another *CRACK!*

Sighing to herself, Hermione rummaged through her bag for a quill and then turned to the journal.

Dear Malfoy's Future Progeny,

My name is Hermione Jean Granger. I am a muggleborn witch, currently being held captive at Malfoy Manor by your father. Allow me to state for the record that the opulence of the bedroom I am being kept in is truly appalling.

It has been decided that I must learn occlumency. And it has also been decided that your father must teach me. This is unfortunate for many reasons, but off the top of my head:

- *He's insufferable, arrogant, and a bully.*

- *He's the first person who ever called me a mudblood.*
- *He's tried to get me and my friends expelled on multiple occasions.*
- *I slapped him once in third year.*
- *I have beaten him on every school exam except for the ones when I was in the hospital wing and indisposed. And fine, there might have been one time in potions when he got a higher mark than me on a piece of homework, but otherwise I always win. Of course, he resents me for my brilliance.*
- *I am a key member of the Order of the Phoenix, and he's a Death Eater.*

This is a match made in Hell. When we bring down the “East Wing” in a fiery blaze of mutual destruction, please don't say that you weren't forewarned.

Draco

Professor McGonagall finally noticed he was using Hermione Granger's wand. Draco was a bit surprised he didn't drop dead on the spot from the look of pure rage she sent his way the moment she recognized the distinctive vinewood carvings.

Draco knew that McGonagall was part of the Order of the Phoenix. Snape had disclosed a list of known members, and she was a part of it, though Snape had always maintained that she was not in Dumbledore's inner circle. The inner circle, he told them, was very small and comprised primarily of aurors: Mad Eye Moody, Kingsley Shacklebolt, and Nymphadora Tonks, plus Snape himself. All others, he said, were simply errand boys for the inner circle. They went on missions and did Dumbledore's bidding, but they were not trusted with the Order's strategy. As for Potter and his friends, Snape had just scoffed. Dumbledore protected Potter because the Dark Lord wanted him so badly and the prophecy involved him. But he was certain Dumbledore had never entrusted Potter with any truly valuable information. And as for Potter's two best friends... well, they were barely worth mentioning.

McGonagall, Snape told them, was simply Dumbledore's second-in-command whenever Dumbledore was away from the school. He was forced to include her on the fringes of the Order by virtue of her position as Deputy Headmistress, but he didn't trust her with missions. She wasn't any good in a duel. She was never seen at the Order's Headquarters. Her one and only job was to evacuate the students if Hogwarts was ever attacked. The Dark Lord, naturally, concluded that she was no threat, and it was not worth capturing and killing her. She was, after all, a beloved teacher, and killing her could inspire rebellion. So she was safe teaching at Hogwarts, even though she was surrounded by Death Eaters on all sides.

As Draco felt his knees quake beneath McGonagall's shockingly violent stare, he suddenly wondered — not for the first time — if Snape had been lying to the Dark Lord and other

Death Eaters about her. He had already learned that Snape was at least ignorant and potentially untruthful when it came to Granger and the Pothead-With-a-Death-Wish. Draco had always been sure there was more to it and Granger was involved somehow. She had confirmed his theory when she resisted occlumency.

And now, as Draco gulped at the look on McGonagall's face, Draco was sure Snape was wrong about her too. McGonagall may not have heard the story of Hermione Granger dying yet, but she recognized the wand and now knew that her favorite student was wandless somewhere at best and dead at worst. And she was *pissed*.

It was all the vinewood wand's fault, too. McGonagall had studiously ignored Draco for the entire year, and he had done the same. He did the bare minimum possible in her class to avoid comment or criticism, and McGonagall treated him as though he was invisible to her. It was perfect.

But today they were supposed to be conjuring large mammals. Draco had been trying to conjure an antelope — something docile and boring that would keep McGonagall away from him. But the wand, in a fit of apparent inspiration, had decided to conjure a lion instead. It was female of course, and its eyes were precisely the same shade of hazel as the wand's master. Draco had no idea how the wand had done it, but the lioness had opened her mouth and roared, causing the entire class, including McGonagall, to stare at Draco in shock.

It was not lost on Draco that the wand had conjured the animal version of its master, and Draco felt a thrill of excitement from the wand as it did so. Apex predators were more advanced than other large mammals, so of *course* that would be the sort of thing Granger would choose to conjure. McGonagall had noticed it too and then seen the wand he was holding.

Fuck, thought Draco, as he quickly vanished the lion while McGonagall marched toward him.

"Mr. Malfoy," she spat, "what is the meaning of this?"

Draco decided to play dumb and immediately started occluding.

"Of what professor?"

"Don't act stupid. That wand is not yours. It belongs to Hermione Granger!"

"Does it?" asked Draco, now falling back on his evil Death Eater cover. "I don't think so, Professor. You see, she was captured and killed over Easter break. She left her wand behind during the encounter. So when mine broke during a recent skirmish, there were a few I could choose from. Hers fit me the best."

McGonagall went pale at these words and stumbled back.

"No..." she said, a look of devastation on her face. "No.... that's impossible... she's... Hermione..."

Draco sneered at her. “I know she was your favorite, Professor. But she played a dangerous game and lost.”

“And Harry?” she asked suddenly. “Ron?”

Draco shrugged. “They escaped and left her for dead. It’s only a matter of time before they join her though,” he added with a sneer.

Draco glanced around and saw the entire class was listening in. Several students were giving Draco murderous looks.

He shrugged. “If you’re done interrogating me, Professor, I think class is nearly over.”

McGonagall gave him such a devastated look that Draco’s expression nearly cracked. But he held it together as she turned toward the others.

“Class dismissed!” she choked out. He heard a sob in her voice.

Draco gathered his things, gripping the wand tightly. The wand had betrayed him today, though he knew it was only a matter of time before the teachers and other students noticed.

Maybe it was better this way, he thought. The story of Granger dying would be common knowledge before dinner. Nobody would look for her. Nobody would contradict the narrative he and his mother constructed. Being dead could be useful, and Hermione Granger would remain that way until it was convenient for her to come back to life.

He slowly made his way out of the classroom when he heard shouts and a barrage of hexes made their way toward him from several different points. The wand acted on its own accord, and Draco felt his arm being dragged in a large arc as some form of advanced shield he didn’t recognize sprang from it, the hexes rebounding directly toward their casters.

He heard a voice cry out, and glanced to the side to see Amycus waddling down the hall.

“What is the meaning of this!” he demanded.

Draco just raised his eyebrow and Amycus looked murderous.

“They attacked you?” he snarled.

“Yes,” said Draco, with a lazy shrug. “Though they were obviously unsuccessful.”

“I’ll cruciate the lot of them I will!” spat Amycus. “No respect for the Death Eaters!”

Draco felt his stomach lurch at this.

“Don’t bother,” said Draco in his best drawl. “None of them tried very hard, and I’m afraid I may have provoked them.”

“And how’s that then, eh?” asked Amycus, still glaring at the students.

Draco smirked. “I may have let slip in my last class that Hermione Granger’s dead, and I’m using her wand.”

Amycus gave an evil smile at this and then guffawed as he clapped Draco on the shoulder. “Right you are then. You can handle it. But if you change your mind and want me to give them special detentions, let me know.”

Draco just nodded once, as he waved the wand, banishing the shield. Then he stunned the students as he walked past them. He was a bit surprised the wand let him do that since they were already incapacitated, but he felt a sense of righteous anger come from it as he tried.

Granger always did have a temper, he thought. Being attacked four on one would probably be a situation in which she would extract at least a little revenge.

Satisfied that they were no longer a threat to him, Draco strode toward the dungeons toward his room.

I need to write, he thought. Granger had the occlumency journal, but he had decided to start a new one as soon as he turned it over to her. He relied on it, and it had become a habit for him when he needed to sort his thoughts.

Dear Journal,

Welcome. That bloody Gryffindor I helped save has my old journal so I am turning to you instead. As long as you don’t mind my liberal use of “fucks” I’m sure you’ll do nicely.

Speaking of fucks, she’s fucking obnoxious. We can’t stand each other. And mother is forcing us together for an undisclosed amount of time until she learns what she needs to learn.

For the first time in my life I hope she’s better at something than I am, because this is sure to end in bloodshed.

Also, her wand. Tell me, I beg you, what the fuck is going on with her wand?

Chapter 5: On Cats and Coins

Draco

Draco stepped out of the fireplace at Malfoy Manor, where he was greeted by his mother.

“Ready dear?” she asked, as she walked forward to give him a peck on the cheek.

“What do you think?” muttered Draco. She just gave him a knowing smile in response.

Narcissa had called him back to the Manor earlier that day to begin lessons with Granger. He wasn’t entirely surprised she finished the journal so quickly, but he wished he had had a bit more time to be Granger-free before her training began. Her damn wand still perplexed him, and the dreams about her torture were a nightly occurrence. He thought about her plenty without also having to see her.

But she had read the journal in just a few days and now was ready to train. So here he was.

“I won’t be able to stay,” said Narcissa. “There are several guests here tonight. But I’ve asked Tippy to watch and come fetch me if there are any issues.”

Draco came to a halt at these words, as he glared at his mother.

“I don’t need a babysitter,” he scoffed.

His mother just gave him a knowing look. “You two are about to try something that requires a great deal of trust. Trust, I might add, is something that you currently do not have. I think it’s best to have Tippy there. Besides, you have to do it in her bedroom. There are proprieties that must be observed.”

Draco gave his mother an appalled look. “You think I want to *sleep* with her? Are you mad?”

Narcissa just pursed her lips. “She’s a lovely young woman, and you are quite handsome yourself. If you two can actually do this without killing each other, it wouldn’t surprise me if that *does* become the goal of at least one of you at some point in the future. Like I said, we have no choice but to do it in her bedroom, and I won’t have her feeling uncomfortable.”

“Salazar save me,” muttered Draco, as he rolled his eyes. Granger was about the last witch on earth he would consider having sex with, and he was sure she felt the same way about him. But trust Narcissa to cock block him anyway.

Narcissa split off as they approached the East Wing, assuring him that Tippy was already in Granger’s room. Draco just sighed as he approached Granger’s door and knocked.

“Come in,” she said, and Draco opened it slowly. He saw her standing there, with her arms crossed as she looked at him, Tippy nearby. Again, she was in those exceptionally tight pants that looked like they were painted on her, and today she had a flowy top that fell off one shoulder, exposing something that looked like a bra strap.

What the fuck is she wearing? Draco wondered.

It had to be muggle. No pureblood witch alive would ever dress that way. The Slytherin girls typically wore robes, and on occasions when they didn’t, they stuck to conservative dresses and skirts, rather than the jeans that girls from other houses seemed to favor. Draco had gotten used to seeing muggle jeans, despite his dislike for them. Granger had been wearing a pair when they rescued her. But ever since that day, she seemed to favor pants that were so tight he was sure they would rip the moment she sat down. He noted the bra she was wearing must be black, which gave him a jolt. She had never struck him as the black underwear type.

She motioned for him to sit, as she sat herself and crossed her legs underneath her. Draco’s jaw nearly dropped as he realized those pants were very stretchy.

She just raised an eyebrow at him, and he realized he was staring. He shook himself out of it and pointedly ignored those odd black pants and her black bra.

“Right,” he said. “So I take it you read the whole journal then?”

“Yes,” said Granger, taking a deep breath. “It was fascinating, really. And I can see there is a lot to learn.”

Draco nodded curtly. “Did any methods speak to you then? More than the others I mean?”

At this, Granger assumed a thoughtful look, and she bit her lip as her brow furrowed. Almost unconsciously Draco’s eyes dropped to her lips to watch, and then he suddenly he realized what he was doing and wrenched them away.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, he thought. *This is ridiculous. It’s only because Mother said something just now. Concentrate on what we are doing.*

“I thought blocking was interesting,” she said. “And I liked what Andromeda did, where she used books in a library to hide her information. I would do the same thing I think, though I would use...”

“Hogwarts,” Draco supplied, smirking at her.

Granger shot him an annoyed look, but finally nodded. “Yes. It’s larger than the library at Grimmauld Place, and I would put the information I need to hide somewhere in the middle of the stacks. Probably in the muggle nonfiction section.”

Draco’s eyebrows shot up.

“What muggle nonfiction section?” he asked.

She gave him a sarcastic smile. “You just proved my point that it would be an excellent place to hide information from a Death Eater, didn’t you?”

Draco snorted, but he had to give her credit for that. It was creative, and there was virtually no chance any Death Eaters knew that such a place even existed.

“Fine,” he ground out. “OK, so blocking using the Hogwarts library.”

“Yes, and I suppose I need to work on storytelling too. In case...”

“Right,” said Draco uncomfortably.

At this Granger suddenly straightened up and gave him an expectant look.

“What?” asked Draco, totally thrown off now. “You look like you’re about to perform for McGonagall.”

“I’m waiting for you to teach me,” said Granger, now rolling her eyes.

“Oh of course,” snorted Draco. “You want me to *teach* you.”

“Well isn’t that what we are here for?” she demanded.

“We’re here for practice,” said Draco. “So you can learn what it feels like to have somebody else in your head. And so you can learn how to use the techniques in the journal.”

“Very well then, let’s practice,” said Granger. “I have more things I need to do tonight.”

At this Draco quirked his eyebrow. “And what, pray tell, is more important than learning occlumency?”

“Any number of things,” retorted Granger.

“Like what, then?” asked Draco, now getting annoyed with her. If occlumency wasn’t important, then what the fuck was he even doing here?

“Defeating You-Know-Who is rather high up on my list,” she said.

Draco’s eyes narrowed.

“And a bath. I’m quite partial to the salts Tippy uses, you know,” she added.

Now Draco just glared at her.

“Fine,” he spat. “Then get ready and block me.”

Her eyes widened, but before she had a chance to prepare, he looked at her, thought, “*Legilimens!*” and he was in. He immediately searched for an early memory that he sensed she didn’t want to share, and he found one.

Granger was sitting next to a hedge of bushes in front of a townhome. She was cradling a kitten in her lap, stroking its fur and feeding it a treat. She looked to be seven or eight years old.

"Hermione, dear, we aren't keeping him."

"But mum! Please! He likes me! You know I don't have any friends because you never let me go anywhere! Can't I keep him, please?"

Draco felt Granger trying to push him out, but he pushed harder and kept watching.

"No, Hermione," said the woman that Draco saw looked much like Granger. She had Granger's hair, though hers was pulled back into a low bun, and Draco recognized the same hazel eyes that were so often narrowed at him in dislike. Granger's mother, he saw, was also rather petite, just like Granger herself.

"Mum, please..." said Granger, and Draco watched as she started to cry. "I want a friend..."

Draco could see that Granger's mother was quickly losing her patience.

"Honestly, Hermione, you know why we can't let you play with other children. The incidents..."

"I can control them, Mum! I promise! It's not fair that you keep me away from other kids! And if you won't let me play with them, then let me keep him!"

"Your father is allergic," said Granger's mum curtly. "It's not happening, Hermione, now let him go."

"No!" she shouted, clutching the kitten tighter to her.

Granger was pushing very hard now, but Draco held on.

"Hermione, if you don't listen to me right now, I'll..." started Granger's mother, but then there was a loud crack, and her mother flew back and hit the side of the townhome.

Granger gasped and dropped the kitten who darted under the bush, before running to her mother and shaking her. "Mum! Mum!"

Granger's mother just groaned and then seemed to pass out as Granger began to sob.

Draco released her and found himself staring at a horrified Granger.

"What the hell was that?" she demanded.

Draco just raised an eyebrow at her. "Legilimency."

"Why would you go after my childhood memories? What could they *possibly* teach you? That was an invasion of privacy!"

Draco felt a surge of anger, and he stood up and strode over to her. He placed a hand on each arm of her chair and leaned over her. To his consternation, she didn't cower like he expected, but she stared back at him, anger flashing in her eyes.

"Listen, Granger. This entire experience is going to be an invasion of privacy. It has to be, it's the only way to really learn. So you had best accept that I'm going to see everything — all your hopes, your fears, your secrets, all of it. As for what I learned from that memory? Let's see. Imagine you're caught, and the people who find you aren't sure who you are. From that single memory I learned that your name is Hermione, which also happens to be the name of Potter's best friend. I learned you're a muggleborn witch who was kept separate from other children thanks to accidental magic. From that I might conclude that any friends you *do* have — for instance, Harry Potter or any of the Weasleys or Lovegood — might be very important to you, and that gives me leverage. I've learned you have a temper, and you're powerful, so I need to be careful how much I push you before I make good on my threats to you. And finally, I've learned you like cats. Maybe I can speculate that you have a pet now that you're older. And if I can't torture and kill your friends, maybe I can at least track down that fucking orange cat that used to follow you around at Hogwarts."

He stepped away from her and threw himself onto the sofa opposite her, breathing hard as he glowered at her. Tippy was watching him nervously, but he just glared at her too, and she cowered in the corner without saying anything.

Granger, he saw, had gone pale as he recited all of this to her. They stared at each other for a long moment before she finally took a deep breath and said, "Fine. How do I fix it then?"

Draco closed his eyes for a moment, praying for patience. "If you can't block it, then you change it. The fewer details you change the better."

"My name?"

Draco shook his head. "Not unless the person who caught you truly can't identify you. Many of the Death Eaters know what you look like. And they all know you're friends with Potter."

"But you said..." started Granger.

"I said all that because it's true. But odds are also good that anybody searching your mind already knows your name and your connection to Potter or at least suspects it. Otherwise, why bother?"

"So what don't they know?"

"The fact that you have a cat. And they don't know how powerful you are. That can be useful to conceal. You want them to underestimate you, and they are likely to do it because you're muggleborn. You don't want to show them a memory that puts them on their guard."

"They think muggleborns don't have as much magic as purebloods..." she said slowly.

She didn't appear to be offended by this. She seemed more interested in his thought processes than anything else.

"Correct," he said.

She took a deep breath and thought for a moment. "OK. Try again."

He didn't respond, he just immediately entered her mind and quickly found the same memory.

This time, however, he found a Granger petting a puppy instead of a kitten. And when she argued with her mother, she eventually gave the puppy up instead of blasting her mother against the wall.

He released her.

"Better," he said. "Much better."

She nodded, looking a bit mollified at this.

"There's one thing I still don't understand..." she said slowly.

He just raised his eyebrows in question.

"Why search for childhood memories at all? Surely Death Eaters don't do that," she said.

Draco hesitated, but he decided he could tell her the truth. It might move things along if he did.

"No, they don't. I did that to ease you into it. Like I said, this is all really invasive. I thought that starting with some stupid memory from when you're a kid could give you some practice before we get to the really uncomfortable stuff. You have to trust me for that, and I know you don't yet, so—"

"I do trust you," she interrupted.

Draco promptly shut his mouth as something in his brain misfired.

"Pardon?" he finally said.

"I said I do trust you," said Granger slowly. "Well... maybe I don't trust you, but I believe you. I know you want Harry to win. I don't think you'll sell me out when you see my memories, at least not while Harry's still alive."

Draco realized he was gaping at her now. "Seriously?" he finally asked.

She just nodded. Then she bit her lip again and looked uncomfortable. Draco didn't know what to say, so he waited.

Finally she took a deep breath as she said, “I’m sorry for getting angry about that memory. It was actually really nice of you to try to ease me into it. You’re right, it’s a stupid memory. It’s just embarrassing that I didn’t really...”

“Have friends?” asked Draco.

She nodded and looked at him cautiously. Draco was sure she was waiting for him to make fun of her for it, but he just sighed.

“It’s actually not that surprising.”

She looked deeply offended for a moment, and he held up a hand to stop her. “Not like that, that’s not what I meant. I meant it’s not surprising because you’re really powerful. And you’re muggleborn. You were probably having accidental magic all over the place weren’t you?”

She nodded tentatively.

“Then of course your parents kept you away from other kids. There wasn’t anything else they could do to keep it a secret. They probably didn’t even know what it was.”

“They didn’t,” she said softly. “They were... well, they loved me, you know...”

Draco noted the past tense, but he didn’t interrupt to ask as she continued.

“...but they had no idea what to do with me. That’s why I’m such a bookworm. If I was reading, I was busy, and I wasn’t doing magic. I love books, I always have, but my parents really encouraged it because it kept me out of trouble. Every time they took me to a playground or let me interact with other kids something would happen, and they would have to cover for me. So they isolated me and kept me busy with books. Of course, that meant I didn’t really know how to interact with other kids when I got to Hogwarts. I didn’t have any friends there either until Halloween of our first year.”

Draco quirked an eyebrow at her, and to his surprise, she smiled.

“You can watch if you want.”

He narrowed his eyes, but decided this was about as good an opening as he would ever get. He had to build trust with her if this was going to work.

“Alright then,” he said. “Let’s take a look,” and suddenly he was in her mind. He sensed her guiding him to the right memory, and then he was in a classroom and listening as Weasley and Potter were talking.

“It’s no wonder no one can stand her,” Weasley said. “She’s a nightmare, honestly.” He felt Granger’s heart nearly break, and she shoved past him as she started to cry. He watched her make her way to a girls’ bathroom and lock herself in one of the stalls as she sobbed.

He watched for a long while until Parvati Patil and Lavender Brown came to check on her, but Granger brushed them off and continued to cry. The memory continued for a little longer

until it was interrupted by a crash. Granger looked up quickly and unlocked the stall. Draco watched in disbelief as she gasped at the mountain troll that had just made its way into the bathroom with her. She screamed and tried to run, but the troll turned toward her, and she backed against the wall until she sank down, still screaming, as the troll started to smash the bathroom apart with its club.

Suddenly the door burst open and Potter and Weasley came running in.

“Confuse it!” shouted Potter, and he grabbed a smashed sink and threw it against the wall to draw its attention away from Granger.

“Oy, pea-brain!” shouted Weasley, and he threw a pipe at it.

“Come on, run, *run!*” shouted Potter, but Draco could see that Granger was petrified in place and hadn’t heard him. Then Potter did something that Draco could only describe as remarkably idiotic, as he jumped on the troll’s back and shoved his wand up its nose.

Weasley shouted, “*Wingardium Leviosa!*” and the troll’s club raised in the air and came down on its head with a sickening crack, as it swayed on the spot and collapsed.

Granger slowly got up and approached it. “Is it – dead?” she asked

“I don’t think so,” said Potter. “I think it’s just been knocked out.” He pulled his wand out of its nose, and Draco was disgusted to see large gray chunks on it. “Urgh – troll boogers,” added Potter.

The door opened again, and Snape, McGonagall, and Quirrell came running inside. They looked around, and Draco was pleased to see McGonagall rounding on Potter and Weasley. “What on earth were you thinking of?” she demanded. “You’re lucky you weren’t killed. Why aren’t you in your dormitory?”

Granger’s hesitant voice came from behind. “Please, Professor McGonagall – they were looking for me.” Draco watched as McGonagall turned to Granger. “I went looking for the troll because I – I thought I could deal with it on my own – you know, because I’ve read all about them.” Draco watched as Potter’s jaw dropped and Weasley dropped his wand in surprise that she was covering for them.

Granger continued to talk for a few more minutes, and McGonagall took points from her. Eventually, she was dismissed, and she walked back to Gryffindor Tower to wait for the boys. Soon Potter and Weasley came through the portrait hole, and they stood in a circle looking at each other. “Thanks,” they all said, and then they split. But Draco could hear Granger’s thoughts.

They saved my life. They must want to be friends with me.

He released her and just stared at her. He was a little surprised to see she had a playful smile on her face now.

“Well?” she asked.

He just shook his head. “What the fuck was that, Granger?”

To his consternation, she just laughed. “It was a mountain troll. Honestly, Malfoy, I thought you were more observant than that.”

He just rolled his eyes. “That was crazy. And ridiculously stupid. What were they thinking?”

“Well they locked it in with me, you see.”

“Fucking hell,” muttered Draco.

“So naturally they thought they had to save me after they did that.”

He just shook his head. “Why do I think that half of your memories with them are going to be like that? Completely spontaneous displays of Gryffindor stupidity?”

“They saved my life!” said Granger indignantly, as she frowned at him now.

“Sure, but they were still really stupid. And lucky. That was unbelievably lucky,” said Draco.

“Well yes, but Harry has nine lives, you know.”

She got an odd look on her face and added, “Actually, nevermind. I don’t think I’ll be using that phrase anymore.”

“Why not?” asked Draco, diverted by this apparent non sequitur.

She just shook her head. “I’m sure you’ll see for yourself eventually.”

They were quiet for a long while and finally she asked, “So was there anything in that memory I should have occluded?”

This question pulled Draco out of his musing about Potter and Weasley’s idiocy, and he thought about it critically now.

He slowly shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. It doesn’t tell the Death Eaters anything we don’t already know. Potter has a hero complex. The Dark Lord already knows that, it’s obvious. Weasley is his loyal sidekick. Neither of them are much for planning in advance. And you...” he studied her for a minute, and he was surprised to see a slight blush color her cheeks, though she didn’t look away from him. “Well, it shows you screaming and trying to hide. That’s exactly what they would expect of a muggleborn witch.”

She wrinkled her nose at this, but nodded. “Alright then, that’s a memory I could show.”

“Yes. And on that note, I need to go back to Hogwarts. But I’ll give you some homework.”

She raised her eyebrows at him, and he continued, “You need to think about your memories and identify those that require occluding and those that could be shown. I’ll help you if you

are on the fence about any of them. But while you are here and safe, it's worth taking the time to really think through it. Eventually you'll learn how to occlude on the fly, but if you have a chance to prepare..."

"Then I should take it. Yes, I agree," she said, nodding at him. "I admit, that will make a nice change."

He smirked at this and rose. She rose too and gave him a reluctant smile. "Thanks, Malfoy. This... well it could have been worse."

He just raised his eyebrows in amusement. "I'll see you in two days then."

She nodded and turned to walk toward the bathroom as he started to head toward the door. Tippy, Draco saw, was hurrying ahead of Granger, presumably to start her bath.

As he got to the door he glanced back at her and his eyes dipped down to those tight black pants.

Fuck, she has an amazing arse, he thought.

Then he winced and shook himself, as he left her room.

Dear Journal,

We didn't actually kill each other like I thought we would. But she's fucking stubborn, and it's only a matter of time before something explodes.

Her mind is odd. It's organized and precise, which doesn't surprise me. But I also felt something strange floating around in her head that I can't really pinpoint. I'm sure I'll figure it out eventually.

By the way, what is with her obsession with cats? Why doesn't she have an owl like literally every other Hogwarts student?

Hermione

Dear Malfoy's Future Heirs, Etc.,

Your father broke into my head for the first time this evening. It was... odd and different than I expected. Severus Snape sort of trained Harry Potter in occlumency in fifth year, and that

was a disaster. Harry always said the sensation was like having your brain bulldozed.

(Bulldozed: verb. An act referencing the motion of a bulldozer, which is a muggle vehicular contraption used to move large quantities of earth and dirt in order to build things like skyscrapers — you would know what a skyscraper was if you ever went into GASP Muggle London.)

Malfoy's attempts, however, were more subtle than that. I could feel him there in my head, but it was more like a suggestion than a force. It was definitely stronger than a whisper, but it was weaker than a bludgeoning, at least until I tried to push him out.

He tried to start off easy, which I suppose I appreciate. It threw me off, though. I was expecting him to go straight to my deepest secrets. Instead, he chose some random childhood memory involving a cat, and then he watched Ron Weasley beat a mountain troll with 'Wingardium Leviosa' at age eleven (let this be a lesson to you that the basics are important).

I storytold through it. It was odd, changing facts and features from the real memory, but it worked rather well. We'll keep on with it I suppose, though it's only a matter of time before one of us slips and curses the other.

It was four o'clock in the morning the following day, and Hermione gasped as she sat straight up in bed. Her heart was pounding as she remembered the nightmare. She had been reliving Bellatrix's torture of course, but she had also had a revelation. Night after night she dreamed the same thing. And as horrifying as it was, the thing that really bothered her was the fact that there was something about it she couldn't put her finger on — some clue she had been missing.

But it had just come to her.

Bellatrix asked me what else we stole from her vault.

She was almost sure of it. Granted, she was reliving it through a nightmare, and she had been tortured through it. But she could have sworn that was one of the questions.

What if there's a horcrux in there?

She knew it. Voldemort had left a horcrux with Lucius. So why not leave one with Bellatrix too?

Wide awake now, she slipped out of bed and grabbed her beaded bag, pulling out the two galleons and her copy of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 4*.

As she had been doing for days now, she stared at the old D.A. galleons and wondered if it was safe to send one to Harry and Ron. She had a pair, both hers and Harry's. Ron had lost his ages ago. She could send hers to the boys if Narcissa would send an owl for her, and she could send them messages with Harry's.

There were just two problems with this. First, the galleons were only one way. Harry's galleon worked to change the others because he had been the leader of the D.A., but she couldn't use her galleon to change his. That meant she could talk to them, but they couldn't talk back to her.

The other problem was the fact that Harry's was linked to over a dozen others. Most of the D.A. had probably lost theirs, she knew, but the galleons burned when they changed. Neville had kept his for at least a year, Ginny and Luna too. It was possible they still had them or Luna's might be with the Death Eaters by now. In any event, she couldn't risk talking about horcruxes with Harry's galleon. It would broadcast the information to all the others, and it might fall into the wrong hands.

If she had had her wand, solving this problem would have been simple. She still had a pile of Harry's gold in her bag, and she could have created a two-way pair by casting the protean charm twice. But she didn't have a wand. So she had been working on her wandless magic, practicing all the spells in charms to work her way up to the protean charm in Grade 7.

She was making good progress with it. She had experimented with wandless magic now and then the previous year. She had confounded Cormac McLaggen once, and of course she had sent those birds to peck Ron when he showed up snogging Lavender Brown. But it had just been a curiosity for her, something she had tried because she saw Dumbledore do it a handful of times. She had never made a point to study it systematically, spell by spell, until now.

It was very different from wanded magic, she learned. She had to locate her magical core, and it took a great deal of experimentation to find the right hand gestures to force her magic to do the things she wanted it to do. But she was getting the hang of it, and she was getting better. She could do most of the basic spells in the lower years and had spent a great deal of time trying to open the windows and a door that was always locked with *Alohomora* to see if she could escape after she mastered that one. They were evidently warded though, because her simple unlocking charms wouldn't work.

She was halfway through Grade 4 now, and she was starting to slow down. Each spell took a little longer than the last, and she wasn't sure she could skip ahead to the protean charm. But the temptation was strong to try it, especially now that she might have had a breakthrough. She wanted to share it with the boys. And she missed them both desperately.

She glanced at the clock and saw it was very early. Tippy wouldn't be in with breakfast for hours yet. Making up her mind, she reached into her bag and pulled out her copy of *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 7* which she had bought ahead in fifth year, and she flipped to the very back with the protean charm.

She reached into her bag for two fresh galleons, mentally thanking Harry for his generosity, and she placed them side by side on the small table in the sitting room. She read the instructions for the protean charm and thought about the gestures she should try to force her magic. She tried pointing, and that didn't work. She tried a flick with her hand, and that didn't work. She tried twisting her wrist to throw her palm toward it, and that didn't work.

On and on she tried — working for over an hour — until she began to grow frustrated. Eventually she stood up, glared at the stubborn galleon and strode forward and *pushed* her

magic down toward it. “*Protea!*” she shouted, as she focused on the serial numbers of the galleon sitting next to it. To her utter astonishment, the first galleon glowed blue while the second galleon glowed red.

Hermione blinked, all frustration evaporating immediately.

Had it worked?

Tentatively now, she picked up the first galleon and pressed her forefinger into the middle, as though tapping it with a wand.

Test, she thought, and to her delight she watched the serial number change into letters, while the second galleon glowed red and burned. A moment later the word “Test” appeared on that galleon too.

Hermione stood up and whooped. She couldn’t believe it. It had worked, and now she had a one-way secure pair. The next step was to make it two-way.

She placed the two galleons next to each other and stood back as she took a deep breath. Again, she focused hard on her magic and pushed her hand down toward the opposite galleon, as though forcing her magic into it. She focused on the serial numbers of the other galleon as she did it, and once again the first galleon glowed blue and the second red.

Nearly quivering with excitement now, Hermione picked them up and held the other galleon, pointing into the center as she thought *Hermione*.

Once again, the original message rearranged itself and turned into the letters of her name. A moment later, the other galleon glowed red and burned, as it copied the first.

Hermione dropped them both on the table, her heart pounding. She had done it. She had created a secure, two-way loop with the galleons. And she had done it without a wand.

Despite her excitement Hermione felt exhaustion hit her. It was still early, but she had really pushed her magic to create these. And now she wanted nothing more than to sleep. But she was determined to finish this first. There was one more thing to do.

“Tippy!” she called, as she put the galleons in her pocket.

Tippy appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Yes Miss? Would Miss like breakfast? Miss is awake early!”

“No thank you, Tippy, I had trouble sleeping, but I’m going to try a little longer. I just wanted to ask you something.”

“Of course, Miss, what does Miss need?”

“I was hoping you could tell Narcissa that I would like to send a letter to my friends? Just one. I just want them to hear from me to know that I’m recovered now, and I need to send

them some money. I was carrying most of it when we were captured, and they can't get into Gringotts."

"Of course, Miss, Tippy will ask."

"Thank you, Tippy. Please tell Narcissa she's welcome to read the letter first, if that would make her feel better."

Tippy nodded, looking a bit relieved. "I will tell her, Miss. Please rest and call Tippy when you are ready for breakfast."

Hermione gave her a smile as she disappeared, and then she walked over to her beaded bag and pulled out a piece of parchment and a pen.

Dear Boys,

I wanted to send you a short note letting you know that I am safe and well. I can't tell you where I am or who I'm with in case this falls into the wrong hands, but please do not worry about me.

I have enclosed some muggle money in case you need it. I was carrying most of it when we were separated. Please be careful where you spend it, but use it if you need it. We all know I was better at identifying edible mushrooms than either of you.

Finally, I've enclosed my last galleon. Use it wisely. We won't be getting more any time soon.

Please don't write back, as it's too risky. I just wanted to make sure you heard from me directly.

All my love, H

She read it one last time and nodded to herself. She thought Harry would understand. They had quite a bit of wizarding gold that he had given to her for safe keeping, and they hadn't spent very much of it. She was sure he would know this wasn't really the last galleon in her bag. But just to be sure, she grabbed the galleon she was going to keep, pressed her finger into the center and thought, 31-7-80 19-9-79 1-3-80.

The numbers appeared on Harry and Ron's galleon, and Hermione studied them for a moment. They looked convincing, like they were supposed to be real serial numbers. She thought it would be camouflaged enough in case Narcissa examined it or the galleon fell into the wrong hands. But if the boys looked at it closely, they would recognize the birthdays of all three of them, and they would know.

Satisfied that she had done all she could, Hermione placed her galleon in her pocket and the other on top of the letter with some muggle pounds on her nightstand.

She crawled back into bed. She was asleep before her head hit the pillow.

Chapter 6: The Vinewood Wand

Hermione

Hermione was jiggling her foot, waiting for Malfoy to finally arrive. After her revelation and success with the galleons early that morning, Hermione had fallen back asleep, only waking up when Narcissa entered her room to talk to her about sending the letter to Harry and Ron. Hermione could see Narcissa was reluctant, but she read the note and concluded there was no identifying information. She also seemed sympathetic when Hermione explained that the boys had no money because Hermione was carrying all of it. She didn't need it while she was staying with the Malfoys, and the boys might be sleeping on the ground and starving for all she knew.

It took some convincing, but eventually Narcissa nodded and said she would send the letter with Lucius's owl, who evidently wore a band that identified him as the owl of a Death Eater. Narcissa explained it protected him from being searched, but there were still some risks he would be caught by the Order.

Hermione knew it was the best she could do, and she hoped that the boys would get the galleon soon. She had been waiting all day to feel it burn, but so far nothing had happened, and now she was waiting for Malfoy.

She was determined to ask Malfoy to help her with something before their lesson. As the day passed, she grew less and less convinced that her dream had been real. She needed to see the memory to be sure she was right. She needed him to pull it out of her mind.

Finally, at long last, she heard a knock on her door.

"Come in!" she said, and Malfoy opened the door and walked in with Tippy following.

"Malfoy," said Hermione, jumping up. "I need your help with something."

He came to a halt and looked at her cautiously.

"What?" he asked.

"I need you to watch the memory of my torture at the Manor. The whole thing."

Malfoy furrowed his brow. "What? Why?"

Hermione just shook her head. "It doesn't matter. I think I remembered something about it, but I was dreaming so I can't be sure... I need to see it. I need to know."

He hesitated.

“Please, Malfoy,” said Hermione. “I’m sure we’ll watch it at some point anyway. I swear, it’s important.”

He shrugged and said, “Alright then, suit yourself,” and he moved to the sofa he usually sat in.

Hermione was practically bouncing as she sat down across from him.

“Merlin, Granger, if you need to take a piss, the loo is right over there.”

“Honestly,” she said. “Just go! Come on, I’ve been waiting all day for this!”

“If I had known you were so eager to see me –” he started, but she just gave him her fiercest glare.

“Alright! Fine,” said Malfoy. He looked at her, and then she felt him enter her mind.

She focused on the memory of her torture, and she sensed him locate it and pull it forward. It began.

It was jarring to watch her torture, but she was so focused on Bellatrix’s words that she was less bothered by it than she thought she would be. She had realized during her first session with Malfoy that legilimency functioned a lot like a pensieve, or at least the way Harry had always described it. It pulled her into the memory, and she could see everything and hear all the words that had been spoken, even if it was something she couldn’t clearly remember on her own.

And sure enough, after several long minutes of Hermione’s screaming, Bellatrix asked her what else she took from the vault. Hermione felt a sense of elation at the words and was surprised when Malfoy released her unexpectedly.

“You’re happy,” he said. It wasn’t a statement. He must have felt it in her head.

“Ecstatic!” said Hermione, jumping up and whooping.

Malfoy just looked at her like she had lost her mind.

“You’re mad,” he said.

“No!” insisted Hermione, laughing now. “I’m not! I just had a breakthrough! I had a dream about it last night, and I realized something when I woke up, but I couldn’t be sure I was remembering it right... but this... Malfoy, we haven’t had a breakthrough this big in *months*. Seriously, this is huge!”

He was still giving her a confused look.

“What’s the breakthrough then?” he asked.

“Nothing, I can’t tell you,” she said.

“Granger, I’m going to see it eventually.”

“Maybe,” said Hermione, shrugging now. “But not if I occlude you.”

He just rolled his eyes at her. “You won’t. You’ll slip with the storytelling. Or it will erupt if you try to block it. You’ve only had one lesson.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at this, but she was calming down now. She plopped down on the chair and tucked her feet under her.

“Perhaps, but I still don’t think I should tell you,” she said.

“And why’s that?” asked Malfoy, clearly disgruntled. “Trust again?”

“No, not at all,” said Hermione. “I just think it’s helpful if you see the memories cold the first time. Then you can give me your first impressions. You can tell me what jumps out at you. Then we can tweak them on that basis.”

Malfoy cocked his head at her, considering this. She could tell he was annoyed with her, but he couldn’t deny her suggestion had merit. “Alright, fair enough. That’s not a bad idea.”

Suddenly Hermione felt her galleon burn, and she jumped up as though she had been electrocuted.

“Gotta go! Loo!” she gasped, and she practically sprinted to the bathroom, leaving a baffled Malfoy behind her.

She slammed the door to the bathroom, and she yanked her galleon out. She read a message.

H, is this you? This is a H&R

Hermione’s heart practically burst, and tears of relief filled her eyes.

Yes! It’s me! I’m so glad you got the galleon!

Where are you? Who is holding you?

I can’t tell you. It’s not safe for them, and you won’t get me out.

Are you hurt? Are they taking care of you?

I’m safe and healed. They’re being kind. I’m OK. Are you OK?

We went to Shell Cottage and moved back to Grimmauld after a few days.

Is Grimmauld secure?

Yes, the Death Eaters gave up waiting for us here. We’re being careful.

How is Kreacher?

Alive. We think he stayed loyal to us.

Any new deaths?

Dobby.

Oh my God.

We know. We buried him at Shell Cottage.

Hermione was pulled away from the galleon as she heard a pounding on the door.

“Granger, for fuck’s sake, what is going on in there?”

“Mind your own business!” she shouted back.

I have to go for a bit. They’re here.

Be safe. Message us when you can.

I will. Love you both.

We love you too.

Hermione shoved the galleon back in her pocket, feeling lighter than she had since they were captured by the Snatchers.

She strode over to the door and opened it with a flourish, just as a scowling Malfoy was raising his hand to knock again.

“What is going on?” he demanded.

“Nothing, Malfoy. Just a lot going on today. Honestly, would you mind if we postpone? Maybe until tomorrow or the day after?”

“Postpone?” he asked, in a disgruntled voice.

“Postpone,” said Hermione, nodding firmly.

“I...” he started, but Hermione had already grabbed his hand and was dragging him toward the door.

He looked utterly bewildered, as she led him to the entry and then spun him around and firmly shoved him out of her room.

“Thanks Malfoy,” she said. “We’ll reconvene later, yes?”

He just gaped at her, and she shut the door in his face.

“Tippy!” she called, “would you draw a bath please?”

“Yes Miss,” said Tippy, now hurrying to the bathroom and starting the bath for Hermione, while adding her special salts.

“Thank you so much Tippy. I can take it from here.”

“Of course Miss!” said Tippy, and she disappeared with a *CRACK!*

Hermione quickly grabbed the galleon from her pocket and then undressed. She slid into the water and then held it back up.

All good now, they left.

Are you positive you are OK?

I'm taking a bath in a marble tub at this very moment. I promise, I'm fine.

Ron just choked.

Hermione laughed at this and then tapped her galleon again.

I even have my own House Elf.

How times change.

Yes, but the point is, I'm perfectly fine.

OK then we won't try to rescue you. But if anything changes, tell us.

I will. And I have news.

What?

I think I know where a horcrux is.

Where? How?

Bellatrix's vault. When she tortured me she asked me what else we took from her vault other than the Sword.

That fits.

I know. I realized it this morning.

Is that why you sent the galleon today?

Partially. I've been working up to it. But this gave me the motivation to finish. I don't have a wand.

But these galleons are secure?

Yes, it's just a pair. I made new ones for us.

How?

Wandless. It was hard.

Bloody hell.

Ronald, language.

How did you know it was me?

Because Harry rarely curses. And when he does it's much stronger than that.

Damn. Gringotts is going to be difficult.

I know. I need to think about how to do it. But I really think one is in there.

You're probably right.

I also have access to a massive library here. I'm going to research ideas to get in.

That's perfect. As long as you are safe, stay there then. We could use a good library. Sirius stripped Grimmauld's library when we decontaminated it.

I know, that was my thought too.

We also have news.

What?

Two things. First, Tonks had her baby. Harry is the godfather.

Hermione beamed at this.

Congrats! Boy or girl?

Boy. Teddy Remus Lupin. Metamorphmagus.

No werewolf?

No, he doesn't have the gene.

That's fantastic. What else?

Everybody but us thinks you're dead.

You told the others then?

Yes, the ones at Shell Cottage. And McGonagall told Lupin. News spread.

How did she know?

She saw Malfoy using your wand in class.

Hermione just stared now, a whole host of feelings washing over her. She was desperate to have her wand back. But Malfoy was using it instead? The more she thought about it the angrier she got. But she forced herself to shake it off for a moment — she needed details.

What happened to his wand?

Harry took it at the Manor. Harry's been using it.

Does it work for you?

Perfectly, actually. Better than yours did.

Well that's something. So he took mine?

Apparently. We assumed you knew.

No, that's news to me.

Well McGonagall saw the wand and was very upset. Malfoy told her you died.

Hermione bit her lip at this. She hated to think that people were mourning her unnecessarily. But then again, there was something freeing about being declared dead. Nobody was looking for her. Nobody was watching her. She thought of Peter Pettigrew and how much he was able to learn while the world thought he was dead. And since Harry and Ron knew the truth, she wasn't inclined to tell anybody else. The three of them had a mission together. It could be strategic to let the lie perpetuate for now.

I don't think you should tell her the truth.

We talked about it, and we don't either.

I don't love it, let me be clear.

We know that. But it might help the mission.

That's what I think too. It's for my safety and my captors' safety too.

You seem awfully concerned about them.

They saved my life. I would have died. And they are risking theirs by keeping me hidden here.

Fair enough.

I'm going to go now. It's late.

Talk tomorrow then. And thanks for getting the galleon to us.

Of course. I feel so much better now that we can communicate.

We do too. Be safe.

And with that, Hermione clutched the galleon in her palm as she rose from the bath to towel off. She slipped into a silky robe Tippy had laid out for her and dropped the galleon in her pocket. She would keep it on her person or in her beaded bag at all times she thought.

Grinning broadly at the success of her galleons, she slowly made her way into her room. She was beat, and it was time for bed.

Draco

Draco was sitting in his room at Malfoy Manor drinking some firewhiskey and scribbling furiously into his journal, which he had just pulled out from his school bag.

Dear Journal,

What the actual fuck? Granger must be mad, that's the only explanation. She nearly attacked me in her enthusiasm to watch her own torture. And she was so thrilled by whatever she saw that she was practically giddy when I released her. And the whole time she kept thinking about how Potter couldn't die yet, when she was the one being tortured. She's barmy!

Oh and then she locked herself in the bathroom for twenty minutes doing Salazar-knows-what and dismissed me as soon as she came out.

She dismissed me, like some servant! Like she's not in my home! Like I'm not taking time from my studies to train her! Like she's not living in the middle of the Dark Lord's headquarters, alive only by the grace of me and Mother!

If this is how she repays my efforts to play nice, then fuck her. I'm here to train her, and by Salazar, she will be trained. I don't really give a fuck if it inconveniences her.

He nearly snarled as he stood up and drained his glass.

Fuck this, he thought. He had come to teach her occlumency tonight, and he was going to do it.

He spun around and headed out of his room and into the hall, which was mercifully empty. The trip to the East Wing from his room was quite short and utilized a servant's staircase, which no self-respecting pureblood would ever use. It occurred to Draco that he should start

flooding to his own bedroom instead of his father's study if they were really going to keep doing this every other day. He was less likely to run into any other Death Eaters that way.

He approached the East Wing and quietly let himself through the door, trying to decide what he was going to say to her. Before he had made up his mind he was standing in front of her door and raised a hand to knock, but then stopped.

She probably won't let me in, he thought.

Scowling at this thought he grabbed the handle and opened the door quickly, striding in a few paces before he came to a complete halt.

He had expected her to be wearing the same muggle T-shirt and jeans she had been wearing earlier that evening. He had made note of them just long enough to breathe a sigh of relief that she was wearing jeans and not those tight black pants she favored. Granted, her jeans had been tight as well — Draco realized Tippy must have altered them for her — but at least he was used to seeing her in jeans. They didn't frame her arse in quite the same way as those fucking black pants did.

But this... Salazar help him, this was infinitely worse. She had clearly just emerged from a bath. Her curls were in a knot high on her head, frizzed from steam, with the exception of the ones at the nape of her neck, which were damp. Her skin was flushed and rosy from heat, and the thing she was wearing... well Draco would have described it as a dressing gown, except it was short, small, and made of thin silk. Involuntarily, his eyes dipped down, roving over her.

Her nipples were peaking against the silky fabric, and Draco realized she wasn't wearing a bra. With a jolt he realized she probably wasn't wearing knickers either, and the silky robe was so short it would barely cover her bum. He felt his cock twitch, and he gritted his teeth. He forced himself to wrench his eyes back up to her face, and only now did he notice that she was *pissed*.

Before he could say anything she strode forward, pulled her hand back, and let it fly against his left cheek with a giant *SMACK!*

This effectively made him snap out of it, and he grabbed her wrist to stop her from doing it again. She twisted and tried to slap him with the other hand, so he grabbed that wrist too and then shoved her against the nearest wall with her hands above her head.

It was only now that Draco truly appreciated just how petite she was.

Draco knew that Granger was the oldest student in their year. It was one of those tidbits about her that had circulated among the Slytherins early on when they tried to rationalize why she was so much better at magic than they were.

Oh she's older. She's practically a second-year, they all said when the frizzy-haired muggleborn had smoked them all the first few weeks of class right after they arrived at Hogwarts.

Draco knew her birthday was sometime in September, just after the age cut off. Draco's birthday, however, was in June and always fell right before end-of-year exams. The last time she had slapped him they had been in third year — she was fourteen and he was thirteen — and they had been nearly the same height. But at some point in fourth year she had simply stopped growing *up* and had instead started filling *out*. By the time the Yule Ball arrived, she was developing curves and a shape that made many of the wizards in their year take note, especially because she was doing it before most other girls.

Of course he had looked. He had eyes, didn't he? And sure, there had been a brief period of time in fourth year when it was impossible not to fantasize about her a little bit because he was a randy fourteen-year-old, and she was starting to look like a woman, whereas the others still looked like little girls. But eventually the other girls in their year caught up to her, and Draco had never thought of her in that way again. There were other girls, more worthy girls, to date and fantasize about.

The first few years of Hogwarts, Granger had always seemed to be roughly equal in size to the other two members of the Golden Trio. Weasley was always taller than the other two, but Granger was actually taller than Potter for a while. So she had been more physically intimidating when she slapped him in third year when she was about the same size as Draco. But then she simply stopped growing, and the others eventually surpassed her. To see the three of them in the halls last year she looked tiny in comparison to her two best friends, and they usually wandered the halls with Granger in front, flanked behind by the two, much larger wizards. Draco had often thought they looked like her bodyguards.

As Draco pressed her against the wall, he discovered that she was now a full head shorter than him. If he had wanted to, he could have placed his chin on the top of her head. He looked down at her, expecting to see fear in her eyes as she grasped this new size discrepancy between them, but to his surprise she looked up at him, and her eyes flashed in anger. She didn't appear to be the least bit intimidated by him.

"You giant *PRAT!*" she screeched. "You've been using my wand, and I want it BACK!"

Draco flinched in surprise, very thrown off. He had been sure she slapped him because he hadn't knocked and caught her half undressed. But no. Somehow she had discovered the fact that he was using her wand. And *that* was the reason she was screaming like a banshee and trying to deck him using muggle fighting methods. Her state of undress had absolutely nothing to do with it.

At that realization, Draco's eyes dipped down again, and he saw he was right. She wasn't wearing a bra. Her breasts were pressed into him, and the neckline of her robe was open just enough for him to see some of those curves he had pointedly ignored for the last three years, once the other girls caught up to her.

He wrenched his eyes back up to her face. She looked ready to kill him, and he couldn't help but smirk.

"Pothead took my wand, and I found I needed one. You do not. And yours works well enough most of the time, so I have decided to borrow it indefinitely."

Her jaw dropped open at this, and she tried to wrench her arms from his grasp, presumably to slap him again, but he just pushed himself closer to her to pin her in place.

As he did this, he inhaled and took in the scent of her bath. It was something he didn't recognize, but it smelled like there was lavender and maybe even rosemary and a hint of mint. She must be having Tippy mix a special blend of salts for her. This revelation was a bit concerning because it implied that she had thoroughly won over the little elf. Tippy *never* bothered to blend special salts for him. She simply used the same ones his father used, with the occasional pain potion when he had been tortured. Draco wondered if he should warn his mother about this development, but then he dismissed it. He would have to explain *how* he knew that her bath smelled different than any of the other members of their household.

His cock twitched again, and he watched in fascination as a blush appeared on her cheeks.

She felt it, he realized. But he decided not to be mortified by this. *She* was the one wearing a skimpy robe, not him. He stared her down, and to his surprise, she didn't look nearly as uncomfortable as he thought she would. She still looked angry.

"I want it BACK! It's MINE!"

"No can do, Granger, you know that. But I am curious – how did you know I have it? I haven't told you. I haven't shown you. And mother instructed Tippy not to mention it to you either because she was sure you'd fly off the handle like this. So tell me – how did you work it out?"

Her eyes narrowed, and for the first time she looked a little nervous, but she didn't say anything.

Got her, he thought with some relish. She had yet another secret, but this one would be easy to discover. She hadn't behaved like this when he saw her before the bath. Something must have happened in the last hour that made her realize he had her wand.

"I came back because you didn't let me finish your occlumency lesson. No time like the present, right?" he said, and then before she could prepare herself he thought, *Legilimens!* and he was inside her head, searching for recent memories of the past hour.

It didn't take long before he had it. She was in the marble bathtub, and Draco could almost see her body under the water.

Fuck, he thought, growing hard as he watched her. But he forced himself to ignore it and concentrate on the thing she was holding in her hand. It was a gold galleon that kept flashing red and blue as words appeared on it.

That's fantastic. What else?

Everybody but us thinks you're dead.

You told the others then?

Yes, the ones at Shell Cottage. And McGonagall told Lupin. News spread.

How did she know?

She saw Malfoy using your wand in class.

Draco felt Granger's rage begin at exactly this moment, and she was fighting him, but he kept pressing her.

What happened to his wand?

Harry took it at the Manor. Harry's been using it.

Does it work for you?

Perfectly, actually. Better than yours.

Well that's something. So he took mine?

Apparently. We assumed you knew.

No, that's news to me.

Well McGonagall saw the wand and was very upset. Malfoy told her you died.

He felt her pushing, and she nearly got him out, but then a different memory erupted as she tried to block him, a very recent one.

It was dark outside, and Granger was wearing a pair of small, silky pajamas that drew Draco's eye. But again, he forced himself to ignore what she was wearing and instead focus on what she was doing.

She was trying very hard to block him, but he zeroed in on the scene and grabbed hold as he watched her staring at two galleons side by side on the small coffee table. He could tell she was frustrated, and then she stood up and nearly screamed before turning around and shoving her hands down toward one of the galleons as she shouted, "*Protea!*" The galleon glowed blue and the other glowed red. She stared at it in amazement and then whooped.

Draco was so taken aback by this that he slipped, and she pushed him out.

He stared down at her.

"Well..." he said in a dangerously soft voice. "It looks to me like you don't need a wand after all, do you?"

She bit her lip, but stared back up at him with determination.

"You won't find my galleon. I won't stop communicating with them."

He cocked his head and studied her. "Do you think that's the thing that bothers me?"

"I could tell them about you," she said.

"But you won't," he said. "It's not safe. It's not *honorable*. And besides, they already know it's me."

She was so surprised by this that she suddenly relaxed as she forgot to be angry at him. He considered releasing her, but thought better of it. He needed to be sure. Still, he loosened his grip on her just a fraction.

"What do you mean they know? They asked me who was holding me!"

"I mean they know, or they at least suspect for a couple of reasons. First, when they managed to disappear from the drawing room there were only four people left standing — me, my mother, Bellatrix, and Greyback. That fact alone would have given them a clue about who saved you. And second, as idiotic as those two are, Potter, at least, is moderately observant. Mother sent the first letter to them using my owl."

Granger inhaled. "Your eagle owl?"

Draco just nodded.

"Harry will know then."

Draco raised his eyebrows in amusement. "He will suspect. But what he doesn't know is that Bellatrix uses my owl and my father's owl regularly. Mother used a handwriting charm to make the letter appear to be from Bellatrix. So if Potter's memory is searched by another Death Eater...."

"He might suspect it's you, but a Death Eater would think it's Bellatrix...." she breathed, staring up at him now. Draco could practically see her mind finding all the holes, as he nodded.

"But Bellatrix *hates* me," said Granger.

Draco nodded again. "True. But she's also very keen on self-preservation. I've been planting memories with the Dark Lord for well over a year showing him that side of her. And quite a few Death Eaters would like to see her gone. Mother's letter wasn't exactly sunshine and rainbows. She told them you're safe and would be well cared for, but if they tried to rescue you she would kill you. It was enough like Bella to be convincing."

Granger furrowed her brow. "So you don't care if I communicate with them?"

Draco shrugged. "If the galleons are secure and you don't confirm their suspicions about me and Mother, then no I don't care. Salazar knows they'll be hopeless without you. No, the thing that pisses me off isn't the galleon. It's the occlumency."

She narrowed her eyes.

"Why?"

"Because you showed me a memory where you're performing very advanced wandless magic. You're supposed to occlude memories that show how powerful you are. You're a

tiny, muggleborn witch. Most Death Eaters will assume you are terrified and vulnerable compared to them, especially if you are caught without a wand. That will make them lazy and off their guard. It's an enormous advantage. If a Death Eater holds you like this..." and now he tightened his grip on her so much she gasped, "you're supposed to lull them into a false sense of security before you let it fucking rip and blast them to smithereens. Do you understand me?"

They were so close now that he could feel her breath on his face, but he didn't pull back. He saw a look of determination in her eyes now as she nodded.

"Again then," he said, and then he thought, *Legilimens!*

Soon he was back in her mind, watching her try to charm the galleons. She stood up and screamed in frustration before turning around and pressing her magic down as she said, "*Protea!*" But this time nothing happened, and she picked up the galleons and threw them against the wall in rage.

Draco mentally nodded to himself and then started to search for more examples of her wandless magic. If she could do the protean charm wandlessly, he was certain she could do more than that.

He found a memory of her walking around the room muttering "*Alohamora*" to the windows. They didn't budge. He didn't think she was occluding this because that wouldn't have worked on them anyway. He kept searching. Now he found a memory where she was in the dark, holding her palm open, and she muttered, "*Lumos*," but nothing happened. She groaned in frustration.

Good, he thought.

He kept looking and found another memory where she was pointing at a teacup and said, "*Wingardium Leviosa!*" Again, nothing happened, and she dropped her hand in disappointment. He kept searching for wandless magic, and to his surprise he felt a pull from an earlier memory, and he grabbed onto it.

He was now back at Hogwarts, in the Quidditch stands, watching the Gryffindor Quidditch team tryouts. He knew this must be sixth year because Potter was captain, and Cormac McLaggen was playing keeper. Draco watched as he blocked four goals and Potter started to look nervous. But as McLaggen flew to block his fifth, he saw Granger raise her wand and mutter, "*Confundus*," and he flew in the wrong direction.

Draco released her, and he was staring down at her again. She was breathing hard. "Better," he said. "I assume you confounded McLaggen wandlessly in the real memory?"

She nodded, and Draco just smirked. "That checks out. Your wand doesn't like cheaters does it?"

Her jaw dropped and Draco felt her magic crackle, and then he was flying backwards. He hit the door hard and slumped down to the floor. Draco felt the back of his head throbbing. They

just stared at each other. She was flushed from anger, and Draco took the opportunity to survey her from head to toe again before he finally smirked.

"There she is," he said softly. "The little lioness found her claws. That was better, Granger. And I expect you to practice."

He stood gingerly and gave her one last, long look before turning toward the door to leave.
"Two days."

That night he laid in bed, questions circling in his mind about everything he had seen. He grabbed his journal to write and then paused.

Dear Journal,

Even ugly witches look better without a bra or knickers on OK? And she's not exactly ugly.

Goddammit.

Chapter 7: Detente

Hermione

Dear Future Children of the Giant Blonde Prat,

Your father stole my wand. My WAND. And then he had the audacity to do legilimency on me while I was in an unfortunate state of undress. He actually pinned me to the wall! And he smelled like firewhiskey while he did it.

It was entirely unfair, I tell you.

Also, he's obsessed with making me look weak to the Death Eaters. I mean, fine. Yes, I'm a muggleborn. Yes, I'm vertically challenged. So maybe he has a point that it's an advantage for them to underestimate me. But does he really have to be such a git about the whole thing? I'm bloody powerful! Acting like a shrinking violet is really not in character for me.

Exhibit A: I slapped him again. It was bloody satisfying too. That is not the behavior of a witch in distress.

This whole let-my-childhood-enemy-into-my-head thing is not working for me at the moment. Because he's getting into my head in more ways than one. I need him to get the hell OUT.

Two days later, Hermione was curled up on an armchair reading about Rowena Ravenclaw. She was mysterious, Hermione learned. She had a daughter, but her husband died soon after she became pregnant. The girl was raised by her mother who brought her to Hogwarts, but she was as closely guarded as the secret to Rowena's bountiful knowledge. Not much else was known about Rowena Ravenclaw or the girl that some books called "Helen" and others called "Helena." Even her name was up for debate.

The only artifact that anybody had ever associated with Ravenclaw was her lost diadem. But, as every book Hermione read made abundantly clear, it was *lost*. And it had been for centuries.

Hermione sighed and rubbed her eyes as she closed her book. She needed some time to sort her thoughts before Malfoy appeared again for their next occlumency lesson.

Malfoy.

He was turning into as big of a puzzle for her as the horcruxes. She was still outraged about her wand, and she had completely lost her temper when she slapped him. Of course it had immediately made him suspicious, and then he searched her memories for the source of her information.

She had been slightly terrified he would try to take her galleon away, but to her surprise he didn't seem to care that she was communicating with Harry and Ron. It had been an enormous relief because she wouldn't have to hide it from the person who was searching her memories. No, his anger at her had been entirely based on the fact that she had shown him a memory of her doing wandless magic. She hadn't even thought to occlude it, other than from the fear that he would try to take her galleon away. She wasn't weak. She didn't like appearing vulnerable. But his point that the Death Eaters would naturally underestimate her was a very good one. She had to admit he was right that it could give her a real advantage in a fight. Still, she didn't have to *like* it.

Her instincts tended to lean Gryffindor, but she realized he wanted her to fight like a Slytherin. He wanted her to wait until her enemy was literally breathing down her neck before striking.

She reddened as she remembered him pinning her to the wall. It hadn't scared her – she knew she had enough control over her wandless magic now that she could have forced him to release her at any moment. When he made that jab about her cheating, she had proven that. No, something about the way he had pinned her made her blood heat. It had both outraged her and, she was very reluctant to admit, turned her on. She had been in that thin robe, which would have been mortifying if he had commented on it, but he didn't. Instead, his eyes had wandered over her, and she got the impression that he liked what he saw. Then when he pinned her, she thought she felt *something* press against her navel...

Hermione groaned and put her face in her hands.

It's all Ron's fault.

These bloody thoughts that were starting to betray her were entirely due to Ron's inability to act on his own, very obvious feelings for her. They had been dancing around each other for years, and both of them had strayed to other people on their journey to settle with each other. She had turned to Viktor Krum for a time, and then she had gone on dates with a few boys she knew would drive Ron mental like Cormac McLaggen. And he, of course, had taken up with Lavender Brown and had become the king of public displays of affection overnight.

Hermione was tired of it. She was tired of waiting for him. She was tired of watching him sort out his own feelings and hurt her in the process of doing it. They had spent months together, first at Grimmauld Place and again in a very small tent, and he *still* hadn't gathered the courage to start something with her. Then when he had left her and Harry, her heart had truly broken. She had mourned him and what they could have become if he had only gotten his head out of his own arse.

She and Harry had grown closer during those weeks without Ron. They didn't always say much to each other. In fact, they went days without speaking to each other at all. Ron's absence had been a dark cloud that hovered over them in a way because it had always been the three of them against the world, except for the rare times they fought with each other. But in all of their previous fights, it had never been like that – Ron alone, Harry and Hermione together and united – and that had changed things between her and Harry. Harry had comforted her. Harry knew what Ron's disappearance had done to her, and he tried to help in his own way. And Hermione had comforted Harry in return. She had always thought of

Harry like a brother, but camping with him in the snow, alone, without Ron, had given Hermione and Harry enough time together that they had truly bonded with each other in a way they never really had before.

When Ron returned, they slipped back into their normal rolls with one another. But that new closeness between her and Harry persisted. Sometimes she saw Harry watching her with Ron, and she could tell that Harry knew Ron had truly blown his chance to be anything but friends with Hermione. Harry confided in her that Ron's greatest fear was that Hermione wanted Harry instead of Ron. Hermione had nearly screamed with frustration when he told her this. It was so *obvious* to anybody with eyes that she and Harry had never been interested in each other in that way. But Ron was too insecure, too nervous, too immature to simply *ask* them about it before he left. Hermione would always love Ron as a friend, but her romantic interest in him truly died the moment he left them in the woods that day.

So yes, she blamed Ron for the sudden heat she felt when Malfoy pinned her against the wall. If Ron had just acted on his feelings – hell, if he had just bothered to *talk* to her about his own insecurities – Hermione might still be wrapped up in him emotionally. But he hadn't, and her patience had finally expired. And so when she found herself beneath Malfoy whose own self-confidence nearly overwhelmed her and who smelled like a blend of cologne and firewhiskey to boot, she had felt those telltale signs of lust. Of course her cheeks had flushed and her center had become damp. How could they not?

She still didn't *like* him. He was caustic and rude and had bullied her for *years*. But he was also brilliant. He was an unbelievable occlumens who had managed to conceal his skills from the most evil wizard of all times. He would never run headfirst into a fight like Harry and Ron would. Instead, he would do what he was training *her* to do and keep his secrets and bide his time until the perfect moment to strike presented itself. He was all Slytherin, playing a very delicate game suspended between light and dark, and something about that called to her. It was dangerous. It was edgy. It piqued her interest.

But damn, she had to get him out of her head. Because in a few minutes, she would *literally* have to get him out of her head.

She heard a knock, and she sat up quickly, realizing her time was up and thinking fast.

"Come in," she said, and Malfoy opened the door and strode in, with Tippy following behind.

To Hermione's consternation he drew her wand and pointed it at the fireplace, where a fire erupted.

"So lovely to use magic, isn't it?" he asked in a mocking voice.

She just glared at him, reminded once again why she disliked him, even if he did smell amazing.

"Come sit," he said, and she wandered over cautiously. She studied him as she did so, and she thought she caught him eyeing her leggings. To see if she was right she pulled up the hem of her very oversized T-shirt — which was really one of Harry's T-shirts — and tied it into a knot just above her waist.

His eyes narrowed a bit as she did this, finally settling on her waist and bum. Hermione couldn't help but smirk.

If he wants me to play Slytherin games, then I will, she thought. *Starting with him.*

"Have you done your homework?" he finally asked.

Hermione nodded slowly. "Yes, and I've been thinking about it a lot, but I'm going to need your help sorting out what the Death Eaters do and don't already know. I think most of the information I need to occlude is from the summer after fourth year onward. That's when You-Know-Who rose again and the Order formed."

She saw his eyebrows go up at this, and she frowned.

"Surely you know about the Order," she said.

Malfoy nodded. "Yes, of course. But Snape has always led us to believe that you were barely involved."

Now Hermione gave him a skeptical look. "Seriously? That's odd. Because I've been in the middle of it since he came back. The Order didn't officially induct me until I was of age, but I lived at Headquarters for a couple of summers."

Now it was Malfoy's turn to look shocked.

"OK..." he said slowly. "You're right. I'll need to see those memories."

Hermione nodded. "I'm obviously better at storytelling than blocking, but the last few years... well the war has been half my life, especially since Dumbledore died. I'm not sure how to storytell my way around all of it."

Malfoy nodded thoughtfully. "That's fair, but I can help you with that. The Death Eaters know quite a bit, and if you show them the things they already know then it will help you hide the things that they don't. Giving them some information they already have will confirm your version of events for them."

Hermione nodded, but then waited. He looked like he was debating something with himself.

"Tell you what," he finally said. "I know we're supposed to be working on occlumency, and we will. But I think I need to see the unaltered memories first. The fewer changes you make, the better, and I can help sort out the things that really need to be protected."

"Alright," she said slowly. "Let's start with the summer before fifth year then. That's where it really picks up."

Malfoy nodded and looked at her and suddenly she felt him in her mind. She could tell he was searching for the right time frame, and she tried to focus on the summer before fifth year when it all began for her. After a bit of searching he found the memory, and it started to play as though she was watching a movie.

She was sitting at the kitchen table with her parents, worried about Harry. He had just seen Voldemort come back to life and another student die, and he had barely responded to the letters she had been sending him. It had been two weeks, and she was about ready to go over to Privet Drive herself to check on him.

The doorbell rang, and her mother rose to answer it. Hermione had a sudden wave of fear, and she grabbed her wand and followed. To her surprise, Professor McGonagall was standing on her doorstep.

“Good evening,” she said to Hermione’s mother. “I’m Professor Minerva McGonagall from Hermione’s school.”

“Yes of course!” said her mother, but Hermione stepped in front of her and raised her wand.

“Where did Mad-Eye Moody live last year?” she asked.

McGonagall’s lips thinned, but she smiled in approval. “In his trunk.”

Hermione lowered her wand and stepped back, allowing McGonagall to cross the threshold. Hermione’s mother just stared at her in shock.

“Hermione, what on earth...?” she asked.

“Never you mind,” said McGonagall. “Hermione did exactly as she should.”

Hermione’s mother looked skeptical at this, but let it drop and led Professor McGonagall into the sitting room for some tea.

“Hermione,” said Professor McGonagall, “I’ve come to collect you for the rest of the summer, if your parents will allow it.”

“Collect her?” asked Hermione’s mother. “Collect her for where? School?”

McGonagall hesitated. “In a manner of speaking. There’s a bit of a gathering with some of her friends and old professors, and we thought she might like to attend. The Weasleys have offered to let her stay with them for the rest of break.”

“We’ve only had her for a couple weeks...” said her mother sadly, but Hermione turned to her.

“Mum, please!” she said. “I’m dying to see Harry and Ron.”

Hermione’s mother sighed. “Very well then dear, though I do wish you would actually *date* one of them.”

“Mum!” squealed Hermione, and Professor McGonagall looked amused.

“I have been head of Gryffindor House for decades, Mrs. Granger,” said McGonagall. “I have observed that most Gryffindor boys are late to the game when it comes to sorting out their own feelings. But once they do, you can expect many grand gestures and plenty of

chivalric behavior. If I had to guess, I would say it will be Mr. Weasley, though I'd wager he's going to be even slower than most Gryffindor boys to get around to it."

"Professor!" Hermione practically shrieked, but both older women were smiling at each other now in amusement.

"Alright then," said Hermione's mum. "In that case, please feel free to take her with you. Maybe a few weeks with the Weasleys will get Ron's head out of the clouds and looking her way."

"Oh my God," groaned Hermione.

"Come along then," said McGonagall, "get packed, and we'll head to our meeting point."

Hermione felt the memory blur and then she was staring up at Grimmauld Place, walking up the stairs before entering the dark house.

"This is very... Dark, isn't it Professor?" she asked hesitantly.

"I'm afraid so," said McGonagall. "It belongs to Sirius Black. Most of his family members were Dark. The Weasleys are already here, and Ron, Ginny, and the twins have been helping us decontaminate the house."

The memories blurred again, and Hermione watched herself fight off some doxies and help banish a ghoul in the kitchen cabinets. She saw several conversations with Ginny and Ron where they debated telling Harry about the Order.

"He's so angry," she said, reading one of his letters. "He *hates* being left in the dark like this."

"But it's not safe for us to write about it in a letter," said Ginny. "He has to understand that."

Another blur and she was in the sitting room with Ginny, pretending to read while really making a mental note of Order members as they arrived at Headquarters: Sirius, Remus, Arthur, Molly, Moody, Tonks, Kingsley, Snape, McGonagall, Dedalus Diggle, Hestia Jones, Sturgis Podmore, and even Arabella Figg were in attendance before Dumbledore himself walked in.

"A full Order meeting," whispered Ginny. "What do you reckon?"

As if on cue, the twins appeared with Ron in tow.

"Extendable ears," said Fred, passing around several pieces of flesh colored string. "George tested it just now, and they haven't put an imperturbable charm on the door."

Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and the twins all crept forward and placed the strings in their ears as they listened.

"We'll need to get Harry soon," said Dumbledore. "He's been at Privet Drive long enough for the protection to hold for another year."

"He needs out as soon as possible," said a female voice. "He fought those Dementors in Little Whinging, and the Ministry is out for blood."

"Yes," said Dumbledore's voice coldly. "I had to remind Fudge that there are actual *laws* that must be followed."

"I can testify, Dumbledore," said the same woman's voice. "I was there."

"Thank you Arabella, that would be most helpful."

"I say we get him tonight," said a voice Hermione recognized as Sirius's.

"Padfoot, I know you want to see him, but we can't put this together in a few hours..."

"He's been all alone for *weeks*, Moony. It's time."

"Remus is right," said Dumbledore. "We need a little preparation. Now who would like to volunteer to collect him?"

Hermione heard Dumbledore start to chuckle. "Very well, I suppose that's not unexpected. But Sirius, I'm afraid you need to stay behind. Remus, Tonks, Alastair, Kingsley, Hestia, Sturgis, and Dedalus. That's surely sufficient."

"Harry's aunt and uncle will not like to see that many wizards in their house, Albus," said Molly Weasley's voice.

"We'll draw them away then!" said Tonks.

"James used to tell me that the Dursleys were very proud of their car and home. Maybe we can wreck their car to get them out of the house?" asked Sirius, and Hermione heard some excitement that made her snort.

"We aren't wrecking the muggles' car, Sirius," said Dumbledore a little sternly.

"I've got it," said Tonks. "I'll send them a letter telling them they've won an all suburban lawn contest, and they have to go to an awards ceremony."

Hermione heard laughter at this.

"Very well," said Dumbledore. "That should work. Let's plan on moving him as soon as Tonks plants the letter then."

Hermione, Ron, Ginny, and the twins quickly pulled the extendable ears out and they flung themselves into the sitting room just as the meeting was breaking up and the Order started to leave.

Suddenly she felt Malfoy release her. He had an odd look on his face.

"What?" she said.

He frowned, and she could tell he was thinking. “It’s just... it’s not at all what Snape has always described.”

“What do you mean?” she asked.

He shrugged. “Snape has always said Dumbledore’s inner circle was small. Just him and the aurors. Everybody else was on the fringe. He said McGonagall’s never even been to headquarters, and I’m certain that’s why the Dark Lord hasn’t attacked her yet. She’s surrounded by Death Eaters at Hogwarts. But you lot... you all were *living* there. And that meeting you overhead... well it sounds like the inner circle is fairly big. It’s about the same size as the Dark Lord’s.”

Hermione frowned at this. “I don’t think there is an inner circle, not really. It was Dumbledore at the head and everybody else was pretty equal. Now that he’s gone I don’t think there’s even a de facto leader. I don’t know why Snape would lie about that to You-Know-Who. He’s been to plenty of meetings with the others. And McGonagall has been to headquarters many times. She’s the key Order member who is supposed to secure Hogwarts if it’s ever attacked.”

Malfoy frowned again. “And what does that mean, exactly? Snape has told us that her only job is to evacuate the students.”

Hermione felt her mind racing now, as she shook her head slowly.

“No...” she said. “She’s supposed to do that, yes. But that’s not her only job. She’s tied into the very wards there. She can activate the castle’s defenses. Hogwarts has quite a few of them, you know. They are usually tied to the Headmaster, but technically they don’t have to be. Dumbledore passed the power to her before he died. It was almost like he knew he wouldn’t be around to do it himself.”

Malfoy’s gaze was boring into her now.

“And would Snape know this?” he asked quietly.

Hermione shrugged. “I can’t be certain – I learned about it last summer before we collected Harry for the last time. But I would assume Snape knows or has at least figured it out, because he doesn’t have that power himself. Like I said, he doesn’t automatically get it by virtue of the fact that he’s Headmaster. The holder has to pass on his or her power willingly, or else it will travel through a predesigned chain of succession. McGonagall would never give the castle’s defenses to Snape willingly. She knows he killed Dumbledore.”

“So who gets it if McGonagall is gone?” Malfoy asked.

Hermione hesitated. “Me,” she said.

Malfoy looked almost alarmed now, but she shrugged.

“And if you’re gone?” he asked, cringing as he said it.

"Harry," said Hermione. "Though he's not aware of it. I've never told him. He has enough to be worrying about, and he's still third in line."

"And if Potter's gone..."

"Then it reverts to the Headmaster because we've lost the entire war, and it doesn't matter anymore," said Hermione.

"Fuck," said Malfoy.

"Right," said Hermione.

She watched him now. She could tell he was thinking hard about something. Finally he said, "McGonagall is absolutely critical, then. And like I said, she's surrounded. Snape's there. I'm there. The Carrows are both there. Obviously I'm not going to harm her, and I have a lot of questions about Snape now too, but the Carrows are definitely evil. If she's the key to Hogwarts' defenses then she has to be protected."

"I agree," said Hermione. "I'd really prefer we not get to me."

Malfoy nodded. "Then Snape's story about her has to hold. McGonagall is not the one who collected you. She's never been to headquarters. Her only job is to evacuate the students. You need to picture somebody else in all of those memories... some other Order member you have a relationship with."

"Sirius or Remus..." said Hermione slowly. "And then Tonks after I met her."

Malfoy nodded. "That will work. Sirius is preferable though, since he's already dead."

"True," said Hermione, impressed with Malfoy's reasoning despite herself. "Alright then, let's try again."

And so she did. They practiced late into the night until she could picture both memories without McGonagall making an appearance at all. By the time she was done with it she was half-convinced that Sirius *had* been the one to collect her. Sirius had made the jokes about Gryffindor boys taking time to sort their own feelings. Sirius had introduced her to Grimmauld Place and warned her about the portrait of his mum. And when Hermione was watching the Order members come into the meeting that night, Minerva McGonagall was notably absent.

"Good," said Malfoy, as it was closing in on midnight. "That's enough for today. I'll be back in a couple days, and we'll keep going."

Hermione rose with him and walked him to the door. When they got there she said, "Malfoy."

He turned to look at her. "I... thanks," she said.

He didn't say anything to that. But she did notice his eyes drop to her leggings one last time as he gave her a little smirk before turning to leave.

Dear Future Malfoy Child(ren),

Alright, I'll admit, I'm not that pissed at your dad anymore.

We are going to take my memories of the war bit by bit and figure out how to storytell around the things that need to be kept secret. That's good. He won't be hunting for anything to start, and it will give me time to build some trust with him before we get to the really heavy stuff later on.

Somehow we got through it all without snapping at each other a single time. Alert the press. Scour the Hall of Prophecy to see if this miraculous event was foretold. The world just spun on its axis in the opposite direction.

Draco

Dear Journal,

She's driving me mad. Why the fuck is she always wearing those pants? Why did she have to play with that sodding galleon in the tub? There's no way I'm actually desperate enough to consider shagging a mudblood muggleborn. I mean, I have standards!

And why isn't she scared of me? Obviously she knows I'm working with her now, but she's never been afraid of me. Half the girls at Hogwarts avoid me completely, and the other half barely look me in the eye. The only ones who can still stand to be around me are Slytherins, and even some of them are afraid.

I've got to find a girlfriend or at least some girl to shag, because if I don't... fuck.

Alright then, options:

Pansy: off limits for obvious reasons. That ship sailed long ago, and I'm not dragging her into this mess.

Tracy Davis: terrified of me and has an obnoxious voice.

Daphne Greengrass: not bad looking, but she will expect a marriage proposal as soon as we're out of Hogwarts.

Millicent Bulstrode: part-troll. There's no way I'll be able to maintain an erection around her.

Fuck my life.

Draco stared at the list of Slytherin girls he had written in his journal, every single one of them having been struck for various reasons.

But he knew he had to find *somebody*. Granger's tight pants and silky robe and warm body and stint in the bathtub were getting into his head. He'd been daydreaming about it for the last week, and their last training session hadn't helped. They had worked together for a few hours and hadn't been rude to each other, so he didn't even have some recent memory of how fucking annoying she was that he could use to help contain his thoughts.

He had to put an end to these ruminations, as quickly as possible. His solution was a good one: find a willing witch to end his dry spell so he *wouldn't* be tempted to wank to thoughts of Granger. The problem, of course, was who to choose?

None of the witches on his list would work, though out of the four Daphne was probably the best. He looked up from his journal to survey the Slytherin common room for inspiration, and he saw Daphne talking to a witch that looked a lot like her. She had the same straight, dirty blond hair, green eyes, and sharp features in her face.

Astoria, he thought, trying to remember the Greengrass family tree. He had never paid attention to Astoria because she was in the class behind him, but she was attractive enough and surely wouldn't be expecting him to make any firm commitments at the end of the year like Daphne would. She still had a year to go at Hogwarts. That would be plenty of time to snog her, shag her, and then end things with her once Granger was out of his life. Besides, there was that thing he knew about her — a deep family secret Daphne had once confessed to him when they were drunk together. He had never repeated it, and he was sure Daphne didn't remember telling him about it, but it would serve to keep him safe from anything serious developing.

Decision made, he stood up and walked over.

"Ladies," he said.

The Greengrass sisters looked up at him in surprise.

"Draco," said Daphne, in a voice that was practically purring.

"Daphne," said Draco, giving her his most charming smile. "And Astoria. Why haven't we spent any time together?"

He directed this last question at Astoria. Draco caught an annoyed look on Daphne's face, but Astoria practically snapped to attention and started to simper.

"Oh older boys always take a while to come around," she tittered. "But we're here now, aren't we?"

So fucking easy, thought Draco with some relief.

“Absolutely,” he said. “In fact, is there anywhere you need to go this evening? I’d love to escort you.”

Astoria smiled widely at this and dismissed her sister with a single glance. Daphne huffed off.

“Of course,” said Astoria in a smooth voice. “There’s a book I need to get out of the stacks. Would you care to join me?”

“Lead the way,” said Draco, and he gestured for Astoria walk ahead of him. She moved toward the portrait hole, tossing her hair and giving him a suggestive look as she did it. He glanced at his watch and saw he had an hour before he needed to meet Granger.

Plenty of time for a snog, he thought, as she grabbed his hand and walked toward the library, eventually making her way through the stacks until she found a quiet corner.

She turned to look at him and raised her eyebrow.

“Have you found what you needed then?” he asked with a smirk.

She smiled flirtatiously. “I can’t say just yet. It’s probably right in front of me though.”

Well that’s an invitation if I’ve ever heard one, thought Draco, and he stepped toward her, slipped his arm around her waist and bent his head down to kiss her.

It was... fine. Her arms moved around his shoulder, and she kissed him back willingly, pressing herself toward him. Draco inhaled and smelled something cloyingly sweet, but he didn’t stop kissing her as he opened his mouth and slipped his tongue around hers.

They continued this way for some time until Draco heard a clock strike, and he pulled back. Astoria was looking at him with hooded eyes.

“Unfortunately I have to get back,” he said. “I have an... appointment tonight.”

Her eyes got wide, and she looked at him with awe. For some reason, this made him grimace.

“With... him?” she whispered.

Draco just raised an eyebrow and didn’t answer.

“Of course,” she said, her arms dropping. “I certainly wouldn’t want to keep you from something so important.”

“I’ll be free tomorrow night,” he said. “Same time, same place?”

Astoria gave him a sly smile. “It’s a date then.”

Draco smiled back and cast one look back at her as he turned to leave.

This could work, he thought. She's not that bad.

Satisfied that he had a workable plan with a very willing witch, he quickly made his way back to his room and floo'd to his bedroom in the Manor. He stepped out and made his way toward the East Wing. To his surprise, Tippy wasn't following him tonight.

She's probably already in there, he thought.

He got to the door and knocked.

"Come in," said a strained voice.

He opened the door to find Granger in the middle of the floor, bent over with her hands on the rug, her arse in the air. He just gaped as she lowered herself to the floor and then pushed her upper body up and leaned back. He saw she was wearing those same pants and a very short, very tight top that showed her midriff. His cock twinged hard.

"What the fuck are you doing?" he demanded.

She turned to look at him in confusion.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" he said. "We have occlumency tonight."

"No we don't. We had it last night," she said.

"No, we..." Draco trailed off, realizing she was absolutely right. He had gotten the wrong day. He glanced around and saw Tippy was nowhere to be found.

She stood now and looked at him, with her hands on her hips, smiling in amusement.

"Long day, Malfoy?" she asked.

He just grunted, as he continued to stare at her. "Whatever," he finally said. "What were you doing?"

To his consternation she just rolled her eyes at him. "It's called yoga."

"And what are you wearing?" he finally asked.

She raised her eyebrows. "Yoga pants and a sports bra."

His gaze drifted over her stomach and he saw a long, thin purple scar there. But otherwise, she was ripped.

"Do you... do this yoga thing often then?" he finally asked.

She cocked her head at him. "I usually do it in the evenings when we aren't meeting. It's good exercise. Tonks got me into it. She says it helps with her training."

“Her training,” he said. It wasn’t a question.

“Sure,” said Granger, now shrugging. “Yoga is all about balance, strength, endurance, and flexibility. All good things to have when you’re fighting Death Eaters.”

She walked over to a sideboard and poured herself some water. “Want a drink then? Since you’ve interrupted my training.”

Draco slowly walked forward and surveyed the choices. He noted the bottle of firewhiskey and poured himself some. Salazar knew he was going to need it tonight.

He turned back to her and saw she was watching him with an amused expression.

“Please don’t tell me you don’t drink,” he said.

She smiled. “I drink. But I’m hot right now, so it’s water for me.”

“I don’t suppose you’ll put a shirt on then, if you’re hot?” he asked a bit hopefully. This was too bloody distracting.

To his dismay a delighted look crossed her face and she walked toward him slowly.

“Oh Malfoy. Don’t tell me you’re a prude? Is it a pureblood thing? Ron hates my yoga clothes too. He says they make me look like a scarlet woman. Harry doesn’t care though. Muggles wear this sort of thing all the time.”

Draco looked down at her, trying to ignore the heat he was feeling himself as he surveyed her. “So you wear this around those two gits on a regular basis then?”

She shrugged. “We were on the run together, living in a very small tent, and sharing a single loo for months. Yes, I would say they’ve both seen their fair share of me. Though Ron never did get used to it.”

For some reason Draco felt searing jealousy at these words. He wrenched his eyes from her and downed his firewhiskey in one gulp before turning back to her.

“Which one was it then? Or was it both?”

He suspected he knew the answer to this already. It was Weasley of course. *Weasley*, his least favorite person outside of the Dark Lord and the other Death Eaters. But he wanted to hear her confirm it for him.

She just rolled her eyes. “Neither. With Harry, there was never any interest. With Ron... well, he missed his chance.”

Draco’s eyebrows shot up involuntarily.

“Are you telling me you and Weasley have never...”

"Not once," said Granger, giving him that amused smile again. "It was not for lack of trying on my part. I suppose I could have made the first move, but call me a bit traditional in that respect. I wanted him to woo me a little. I wanted him to kiss me first. He never did figure that out."

"But he's so obviously into you," said Draco.

"I know," she replied, shrugging. "But he never got off his arse to do anything about it. I got tired of waiting and moved on."

Draco was reluctantly fascinated. He knew he shouldn't ask, but he couldn't help himself.

"Moved on to who then?"

She furrowed her brow at this. "I'm not sure, actually. Nobody in particular. But I'm truly over Ron. It's not going to happen. And Harry's my brother. That would never happen, not in a million years."

At this Draco pulled the firewhiskey toward him and poured a drink in a new glass and handed it to her. "Drink," he said.

Her lips quirked. "Trying to get me drunk then Malfoy? Why? Think you can beat me in a duel that way?"

He grinned, despite himself.

"Drink up, and maybe we'll see."

She just laughed, and to his surprise she downed it in a single gulp like he did. She didn't even grimace. Then she turned to look at him and raised one eyebrow.

Without even thinking about what a terrible idea this was, Draco whipped out the vinewood wand and sent ropes toward her. To his shock, the wand didn't resist, and he watched as her eyes widened, and she was bound tight. He started to raise his wand again, but he felt a crackle of magic, and the ropes disappeared. She had vanished them, wandlessly.

He sent a stunning spell toward her, and she dodged it, dropping flat on the ground, and then instinctively rolling away from his jelly-legs jinx. She jumped lightly to her feet, and he started to aim again, but she shouted "*Expelliarmus!*" and he was forced to throw up a shield instead, as she turned to run. He took just a moment to admire her arse before he lunged forward and grabbed her, pulling her down to the ground putting his arm against her throat.

He was sure he had won, but she just smirked. Suddenly he felt his stomach turn and his vision swim as she kneed him in the crotch, and she pushed him off of her, then grabbed her wand from him and aimed it toward him.

Stomach still rolling from pain, he looked up at her and saw her hair was wild, her body was tight, and her eyes were dancing with glee that she had won.

"Give up?" she asked, her eyes sparkling.

Draco slowly stood.

“Did you really have to go after my ability to have children someday?” he gasped.

She just laughed, and Draco was appalled to see her aim her wand at his crotch and mutter something. Blessed relief washed over him.

“What the fuck was that?” he asked with alarm, staring at her again. She just shrugged and smiled.

“Like I said, I’ve lived with boys for the last year. It’s a useful healing spell. I’m sure the Malfoy line is well intact.”

“Salazar save me,” he muttered.

She just laughed, and to his surprise she sauntered toward him and held out her wand.

“Here,” she said carelessly. “I suppose you can use it for now. Obviously I can get it from you once I need it.” She gave him a self-satisfied look at this.

He quirked his eyebrow at her and said, “Granger. You’re mad.”

“Not mad, just confident,” she said airily.

They studied each other for one long moment until he suddenly remembered there was something he needed to ask her.

“Granger. Is there ever a time when it’s morally acceptable to cast the cruciatus curse on somebody?”

She gave him a puzzled look.

“Why?”

“Just answer the question,” he said.

She hesitated and said, “I suppose... if under great duress.... Then yes. Like if You-Know-Who says you have to do it or he will kill you or somebody else. *Crucio* is less evil than *Avada Kedavra*.”

“Thank Merlin,” he said.

She looked very confused now, but he just shook his head. “Don’t worry about it. I just needed to know what my parameters are for this wand of yours.”

He turned to walk toward the door. “I’ll be back tomorrow for our regularly scheduled meeting.”

“Alright,” she said easily. “And Malfoy...”

He turned to look at her.

“You have lipstick on your neck. Just there. It’s a rather unfortunate shade of pink.”

She just smirked and turned around to walk away.

Fuck it all, he thought.

Dear Journal,

Astoria will work. Astoria will work. Astoria will work.

All I have to do is buy her some yoga pants. Surely her arse is as nice as Granger’s.

Chapter 8: Breakups and Makeups

Chapter Notes

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

Future Malfoys,

Your father is making me relive every damn day I spent at Grimmauld Place.

He is driving me mad. Send help.

Journal,

Astoria wants to shag me. I think I'm going to let her. That will help me put Granger into perspective, don't you think?

Fuck, it had better.

Malfoy Heirs,

Alright, I'll admit it. Your father is surprisingly smart. His suggestions for the manipulation of my memories are very good. We've been working to change only the things necessary to keep the secrets that the Death Eaters don't already know. He says the less we have to change the better, and I can see his point. When we land on a memory that requires a lot of change the practice to secure the new story takes more time.

I also think his suggestion to work through my memories in chronological order makes a lot of sense. I'm here, and I'm safe, so there's no reason we shouldn't prepare. I doubt I'll ever occlude on the fly as well as he can, but hopefully by doing it this way I won't need to.

He's less annoying than he used to be.

Journal,

I don't know what's wrong with me. I shagged Astoria last night, and it was fine. But then this morning I had a moment of weakness with Granger. I got an owl from the nursery that they would sell me those flowers so I jumped on it.

She'll never know though. It's fine. Right?

Dear Malfoy Children,

Are you blonde? Are your eyes gray? Do you play quidditch? How's your occlumency coming along?

Nothing new to report here, but I admit I'm curious about you.

Draco

For the last three weeks Draco Malfoy had been dating Astoria Greengrass, if you could call it that. Their “dates” were mostly comprised of snogging in the stacks, though a few times he had taken her back to his room and gotten her naked.

She was attractive enough, he thought. He usually managed to get himself off when he was with her. But he had to admit it took some time and some work. And once in a while he was forced to think of somebody else while he did it. Somebody he should *not* be thinking about that way.

Fuck.

The real problem with Astoria was that she was clingy, and she was oddly turned on by the fact that he was a Death Eater. She had looked at his Dark Mark with something like reverence. But the biggest problem and the thing he wasn’t sure he would be able to get past, was her constant need to talk about Hermione Granger.

“Draco,” she said, as she curled up with him in the Slytherin common room.

“Hmm?” he asked, trying to sort through the most recent memories he had viewed with Granger the night before. They had gotten to the memory where Potter somehow attacked Arthur Weasley in the Department of Mysteries through Nagini. It was bizarre, and he had been momentarily stumped about what to do with it. He told Granger he would think about it and get back to her at their next meeting.

“You’ve been using Granger’s wand...” she said.

Draco turned to look at her quickly. The vinewood wand had been on better behavior recently, especially after Granger handed it to him voluntarily when he lost their last fight. But it still had its moments. He had had to stun and then obliviate Alecto twice now when he couldn’t perform the cruciatus curse on another student. And when he tried to hex Seamus Finnigan just for the fun of it one day, Draco sent daisies at him instead of the toenail growing hex he was attempting. With that last spell he had sensed a strong feeling of disapproval coming from the wand.

Fucking fine, then, Finnegan is off-limits. No need to get your knickers in a twist.

“So?” he said to Astoria.

“So I was wondering...” she said in a breathless voice.

He just raised his eyebrows at her, and she leaned in close so he could barely hear.

“Did you kill her?”

Draco drew back quickly and stared down at her.

“No,” he said shortly.

Her eyes got wide. “But then who did? It’s been all over the school, you know.”

“It was an accident,” he said shortly. “It wasn’t anybody in particular. The chandelier in my family’s drawing room fell on her and crushed her to death.”

Thankfully Astoria had been shocked by this and had dropped it. But his reprieve was temporary. She kept raising the topic, asking for details about how Granger died and what she was doing there and was the Dark Lord very angry?

Draco was getting sick of it.

She was also very nosy about his meetings with the Dark Lord every other night.

“Draco...” she purred.

“What?” he asked shortly.

“Why does he meet with you so often? Are all the Death Eaters there? Or is it just you? I imagine you’re one of his favorites,” and she leaned into him and kissed him as she said this.

“I can’t tell you that, Astoria, you know that,” he said.

“You can trust me...”

“It’s not about trust. It’s about following my orders.”

“Oh yes, of course,” she said with disappointment.

But Draco was on his guard. And sure enough, one night when he was about to floo to the Manor for his meeting with Granger, he caught something shift out of the corner of his eye in his room. Automatically he turned and shouted, “*Stupefy!*!” and he heard a thud.

He walked over slowly and could just make out the outlines of a person. They had disillusioned themselves. Swearing to himself, he tapped the body and there was Astoria, passed out in his bedroom.

Sighing now, he levitated her body out of his room and made his way to a nearby empty classroom, thanking Salazar that he hadn’t run into anybody else.

He put his wand against her chest. “*Rennervate,*” he muttered, and she woke up.

“Draco!” she said, trying to sit up quickly.

“Shhhh,” he said. “You were just stunned.”

“By who?” she asked.

“Me,” he said.

“But...” and he shook his head.

“No, Astoria. I’m a devoted servant. You can’t sneak around and try to find out what I’m doing.”

“But.. but...” and she started to cry.

“Bloody hell,” he muttered.

“I loooove you!” she wailed.

Draco looked down at her in horror.

“I love you, and I’m sure you’re meeting somebody else at night! You’re having an affair! I just know it!”

“Astoria, we’ve only been dating for three weeks,” he said.

“But I’ve loved you for *years!*” she said.

“Goddammit,” muttered Draco, now rubbing the bridge of his nose.

“Please!” she said, “Please tell me the truth! Is there another witch?”

Ironically, yes, thought Draco. Though I haven’t kissed her yet. Not that I would be opposed...

It was true, though. The weeks of occlumency lessons with Granger had made her more and more fascinating. And even though he knew it was wrong of him, he couldn’t help but want her. Even when he was with Astoria, he was thinking of Granger most of the time. His mind was full of her. He looked forward to their sessions together more than anything. He was forced to admit that his plan to use Astoria to get Granger out of his head hadn’t worked at all.

It suddenly occurred to him that he was thinking of Granger just then, instead of the sobbing witch on the floor.

“It’s true then!” she cried.

Draco sighed. “I’m not meeting anybody. It’s Death Eater business. That’s all true. But I don’t want to lead you on Astoria. I’m sorry, but I don’t feel that way about you.”

“So what,” she sniffed. “You just wanted to shag me then?”

“Well...” he said, and she wailed even louder.

“Fucking hell. Look, I think we should just be done here. Clean yourself up. I’m sorry if I misunderstood your intentions. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

She clutched at him, but he slowly extricated himself and made his way back to his room. He quickly changed the password so she couldn’t follow him and then he floo’d to the Manor.

“Sorry I’m late,” he said, as he walked into Granger’s room. He rarely bothered knocking anymore.

“I have so many places to be, Malfoy,” she joked. “You really held me up.”

He gave her a reluctant grin at that. He looked at her for a moment, and she just raised her eyebrows.

“Why are witches ridiculous?” he asked.

She got an offended look on her face. “Excuse me? What kind of prattish question is that?”

“I’m serious! I’m late because I had to dump Astoria Greengrass. She tried to follow me here.”

To his consternation, Granger got a sympathetic look on her face. “Oh no... poor Astoria.”

“What are you talking about? Poor Astoria... poor me! She was clingy and absolutely obsessed with you, I might add.”

Granger cocked her head at that. “Was she now? That’s interesting.”

“And then she told me she was in love with me, and I had to dump her.”

“Oh Malfoy, you didn’t,” said Granger, giving him an admonishing look now.

“Of course I did! She tried to follow me here because she was convinced I’m meeting another witch whenever I come here.”

“Well she’s not wrong,” said Granger, with an amused smile.

Draco just glowered at her. “You know I can’t tell her that.”

“Obviously, but still. She’s been in love with you for years.”

“What?” he asked, looking at her in amazement. “How on earth do you know that?”

Granger shrugged. “Common knowledge. Girls talk in loos. The Greengrass sisters have both wanted you for ages. They had a running bet with each other — fifty galleons to whichever sister shagged you first.”

Draco’s jaw dropped.

Granger started to laugh. “Don’t tell me Astoria won?”

Draco harumphed. “What’s it to you who I shag?”

“It’s not, really. But I’m absolutely starved for some gossip. So tell me. Was she any good? Or was it one of those shag her once before you break her heart situations?”

“I’m not discussing this with you Granger,” he said.

“Ah, so you shagged a few times but the sex was bad. Got it.”

Draco gave her a horrified look now. “That is *not* what happened!”

“Sure it’s not,” she said, giving him a teasing look.

“Honestly, you are the worst. This is why I hate you,” he said.

“You don’t hate me. I’m your secret mudblood lover, remember? The one you’re sneaking off with who sent Astoria packing for good.”

“Fuck it all,” he muttered, rolling his eyes as she laughed. Something about her laughter set him off.

“Alright, fine,” he spat. “If that’s how you want to be, let’s see what your lovers were like then, shall we?”

Her eyes got big for a moment as he thought, *Legilimens!* and then he was inside her head searching for romantic memories.

He knew he shouldn’t do this. He knew she was probably going to knee him in the crotch again. But she had crossed a line with him, and he was pissed.

It didn’t take long before he found a thirteen-year-old Granger staring at Gilderoy Lockhart and doodling in her notebook with little hearts around his name. *Hermione Lockhart* the notebook read. He chuckled to himself, and he felt her trying to push him out. He let it go for a moment before finding another, even more fascinating memory.

There was a fourteen-year-old Granger, staring at Professor Lupin in class.

He’s sick again. It must be close to the full moon. But God his scars are hot. And he’s a Dark creature. I wonder what it would be like to....

He could sense her horror at this, and he let her push him away until he landed on another memory, this time of Viktor Krum at the Yule Ball. He had pulled her into some bushes and Granger was staring at his lips.

“Hermoninny, you are so beautiful,” he murmured, as he leaned down to kiss her.

So that’s what it’s like then. It’s fine I guess, he heard her think.

He could practically feel her cringing as she pushed again, and this time he was back in the kitchen at Grimmauld Place.

“Sirius always did have a way with the girls,” said Remus Lupin.

“It’s true, I always got the birds,” said Sirius. “James only had eyes for Lily of course. And Remus here was always rather standoffish toward the ladies. But me...”

Sirius could have had me all he wants, she thought to herself.

Again, he felt her embarrassment, and he jumped forward, eventually finding a memory where she was sitting in an empty classroom, feeling forlorn, when suddenly Weasley and Lavender Brown came stumbling in, snogging. Draco felt absolute rage building, and then she was sending birds at Weasley wandlessly before disappearing down the hall.

He kept going and found another memory, this time of Slughorn’s Christmas party. Cormac McLaggen had pulled her into a corner and was practically attacking her with his mouth.

“Cormac... honestly... it’s fine... we should go,” she gasped, as he sucked hard on her neck and tried to shove his fingers inside her underwear.

“Want... you...” he muttered.

He felt her revulsion, as she pushed him back hard. “No thanks. I’m no longer interested.”

Then she spun on her heels, leaving a spluttering and obviously unsatisfied McClaggen behind.

Draco jumped forward and landed on a memory of Granger and Weasley, alone in a bedroom in Grimmauld Place.

“Mione,” said Weasley, walking toward her.

Yes! Finally! she thought. She looked up at him hopefully.

“I... your teeth are nice now. I don’t think I ever told you.”

She slumped. “Oh. Thanks, Ron.”

Draco jumped forward again and saw Potter and Granger in a tent. Potter was holding a sobbing Granger.

“He broke my heart!” she sniffed. “He just left us... he left *me*. What am I supposed to think, Harry?”

Potter hugged her. “It wasn’t you, Hermione. He’s angry with me.”

“But I thought he wanted to be with me! I thought... finally... and we’re all probably going to die! What if I die, and I’ve never gotten to...”

"I know, Hermione, I know."

She pushed hard, and for the first time he felt her power pulse. He was thrown out of her mind.

They just stared at each other.

"Granger, I..." he started.

"Get out," she said quietly.

He opened his mouth to say something else.

"Get OUT!" she shrieked, and he gulped as he stood and turned to walk away. When he got to the door he turned to look back at her, but her head was in her hands, and he thought she might be crying.

Draco felt a surge of guilt as he left the room, closing the door quietly behind him. He hurried back to his room at Hogwarts as quickly as he could.

Dear Journal,

What have I done? How do I fix this? I want Granger. I'll finally admit it.

I fucked it up with Astoria too. Obviously she was just a distraction and not a very good one, but I still led her on. But then tonight... well, I don't even care about Astoria all that much, so I don't know why I snapped. But when Granger teased me about it I just... goddammit, I can't even write it down.

She must hate me now, and I probably wrecked every bit of trust I've built with her. But I have to try, don't I? I need inspiration, and I need it fast.

Hermione

Dear Blonde Spawn of that Giant Arsehole,

Your father is horrible. I take back every nice thing I ever said about him. Sure, I teased him about Astoria but he's the one who dumped her! How was I supposed to know he was so damn sensitive?

He just tore through my mind to find all my failed relationships. It was nothing short of humiliating. I'm not sure how I'm supposed to let him into my head again.

Off to cry now. I hope he's happy.

Hermione rolled over, her eyes puffy from crying the night before.

I'm ridiculous, she thought, still sniffing. He doesn't matter. He's just teaching me. He's never cared about me.

The fact of the matter was Hermione was jealous. Ever since that night she had noticed lipstick on Malfoy's neck, she was jealous of whatever witch had caught his interest at Hogwarts. She was half-convinced she was getting Stockholm Syndrome and that's why she suddenly cared what he thought of her, but she couldn't help it. He was the only wizard she saw anymore.

She still 'talked' to Harry and Ron each day with the galleons, but they were going around in circles about Gringotts. She hadn't been able to find much information about the vaults or the security inside, despite the fact that she had been looking into it for weeks now. Harry and Ron just wanted to wing it, but she held them back. It was too dangerous to go in there and get caught.

So once again, they were stuck. They knew *where* a horcrux was, but they couldn't get it. And she still wasn't sure about the diadem of Ravenclaw. So she stayed in her gilded prison and the boys hadn't left Grimmauld Place. They were all slowly going mad. The meetings with Malfoy every other day had been a way to break the monotony and feel like she was making progress with *something*.

As they worked through her memories she was seeing sides to him she had never discovered before. He was funny, thoughtful, and wickedly smart. His ideas as he helped her manipulate her memories were so good she found herself turning to him more and more for his opinion on other things as well. And he hadn't been unkind to her. Sure, he teased her, but it was generally in good fun now. She got the impression that he enjoyed his sessions with her too, even if he did have a girlfriend somewhere.

She knew she overdid it when she teased him about breaking up with Astoria, but her heart leapt when he told her. He was single. He didn't seem torn up about it. He was the one who ended it. So she teased him in an effort to play it cool — she pretended to feel sympathetic toward Astoria even though she didn't — and she crossed a line with it. But then he crossed an even bigger one with her.

It wasn't that her memories of romance were bad, it's that they were practically nonexistent. Sure, she had kissed Viktor and Cormac, and Cormac had tried to feel her up once, but that had been it. She had clung to the hope that Ron would finally come around, but he had never acted on it... so she was a virgin muggleborn who had occasionally fantasized about teachers and men old enough to be her father and who had only snogged a handful of times.

It was mortifying, especially when her romantic history was laid bare by the wizard she was attracted to. It was even more appalling because that same wizard apparently had no qualms with sleeping with a witch on a very short timeframe. She wondered how many partners he had had, and she burned with jealousy as she thought about it.

He'll never want me now, she thought forlornly. As if being muggleborn wasn't bad enough – she was an inexperienced one. He had probably gone back to Hogwarts and laughed at her.

She sighed and then sat up as Tippy came into her room with a *CRACK!*

"Hi Tippy," sniffed Hermione.

Tippy looked at her curiously. "Miss is not well?"

"I'm fine, Tippy," she said. "Thanks for asking though."

Tippy nodded and said, "Tippy has something for Miss!"

Hermione furrowed her brow, as Tippy snapped her fingers and a truly stunning arrangement of pink roses appeared on the sitting room table.

"They is roses, Miss!" squeaked Tippy. "Master Draco instructed the garden elves to plant several new shrubs in the rose garden last week! These is from the Malfoy gardens!"

Hermione didn't know what to think. Though she knew it was a bit of a cliche, roses had always been her favorite flower. They were so very English, and she loved the way they smelled. She was particularly fond of the pink, yellow, and white varieties.

The shade of pink of these roses was lovely — it was a light pink with the barest hint of peach in the center. Hermione slowly walked forward and touched one of the petals as she tried to wrap her mind around what this could possibly mean.

"And Master Draco sent a note for Miss!" said Tippy, presenting a small card to Hermione with a flourish. She opened it hesitantly.

G,

I'm really sorry. I crossed a line. Can I see you tonight? No lessons, just talk. Let T know.

D

Hermione inhaled as she blinked. He was... apologizing?

This threw her off. She wasn't used to quick apologies. Harry and Ron both stewed. But he knew he had hurt her last night. He might not want her in the same way she wanted him, but

he cared enough about her to feel bad about what he had done. That was something, and her heart warmed at the thought.

She glanced at the flowers again. They were really beautiful. She tried to imagine Harry or even Ron sending her flowers as an apology, and she couldn't envision it.

She knew Malfoy had a streak of the old fashioned in him. She had observed it in small ways, like standing whenever she did, waiting for her to take a sip of her drink first, that sort of thing. It was as though he had had etiquette lessons growing up, and his behaviors were almost unconscious. She wondered if one of the things he had been forced to learn as a child was the art of an apology.

If so, he learned it well, she had to admit. She had already forgiven him, though she was still embarrassed by what he had seen. And as she stared at the roses she found herself burning with curiosity about something.

“You can tell Malfoy he can come,” said Tippy.

The little elf bobbed.

“And Tippy...” she said, as the elf turned to look at her again. “Do you mind checking the library to see if there is a book on flower meanings?”

Tippy smiled knowingly and disappeared, reappearing again very quickly.

“Tis a favorite book of my mistress,” said Tippy, as she handed it to Hermione.

Hermione flipped through it curiously until she found an entry for pink roses.

The pink rose symbolizes femininity, grace, sweetness, and innocence. It is believed that pink roses were the only variety allowed in ancient Jerusalem to represent the journey. In modern times, pink roses may be sent to express admiration or as an apology between lovers.

She bit her lip as she thought about it. Could he have known? Was it intentional? She wouldn't put it past him. It was the sort of thing a pureblood heir might know, not unlike which spoon one used to eat coddled eggs. Hermione still had not figured that one out.

She shook herself out of it. She couldn't read into it. She should just be relieved that he cared enough to say sorry. She handed the book back to Tippy as she rose to sit in her favorite chair. She picked up a book about the diadem of Ravenclaw. Only twelve hours to kill before Malfoy arrived.

Hermione heard the knock, and she nearly jumped. She had spent the last couple hours in an uncharacteristic state of nerves. It had gotten so bad she had called Tippy to take an early bath. Then she put on the only dress she had packed in her beaded bag. Then she second guessed herself and changed into yoga pants and an oversized jumper. She couldn't believe how ridiculous she was being.

She had thought about what to say to him and finally decided to use humor if she couldn't think of anything else in the moment. But instead of making fun of him, she would poke fun at herself. It was the only thing she could think of to get them past this encounter without utter mortification.

"Come in!" she called.

Malfoy opened the door and stepped in. To her surprise he wasn't in his Hogwarts robes like usual. Instead, he was in the white Oxford and grey slacks the boys wore underneath. She saw his sleeves were rolled up, and she stared at the Dark Mark tattoo.

Damn it's hot, she thought, and she nearly groaned. *Bad, Hermione, very bad. The Dark Mark is evil. Just because you think Malfoy is hot... ugh.*

She forced herself to look away as he walked in cautiously.

"Malfoy, a drink?" She asked, walking over to the sideboard to pour him some firewhiskey.

She saw the ghost of a smirk as he took it from her. She poured herself a drink, and as always, he waited for her to sip first before raising his glass to his own lips. He studied her for a moment.

"Granger, I'm sorry for last night," he said.

She felt herself blush. "You already apologized Malfoy. Anyway, we both crossed a line."

He narrowed his eyes at this a bit and took another sip. "Still, what I did was worse."

She just shrugged at this. "We're good, Malfoy."

He cocked his head to study her, as she moved to sit down. After a moment he sat too.

"What?" she finally asked, wincing internally. This wasn't what she had planned.

"I just thought you held grudges. You and those two idiots used to fight for weeks at a time."

She smiled a bit at that. She couldn't help it. "Noticed that, did you?"

He rolled his eyes. "You three were the center of attention at Hogwarts, even if you didn't realize it. Of course I noticed. Everybody noticed."

She furrowed her brow at this. “Well I don’t hold grudges. Not really. It’s just that the other two don’t apologize easily, especially Ron. And I can be like that myself if I think I’m right about something. All three of us are really stubborn.”

“Weasley really is an idiot.”

She frowned at him. “No he’s not.”

“He is,” insisted Malfoy. “I know I’m probably going to dig my own grave here, but he had you in front of him for ages and never took it.”

She shifted uncomfortably. She knew he was right. She had practically told him that herself.

“And I think you would have given him everything,” he said, giving her a hard look. “All of it. You were saving yourself for him, weren’t you?”

“I...” she sighed. It’s not like it wasn’t obvious. “Fine. Yes, that was always the plan.”

He nodded to himself with a slightly satisfied look now.

“What now?” she asked, feeling both bewildered and slightly annoyed.

“I was just thinking... Maybe it’s good he didn’t have the balls to take it. He’s not exactly your type, is he?”

Her jaw dropped. “Malfoy, I am this close to hexing you...”

He just laughed. “Look, I’m not being an arse, I promise. I’m just saying that now that you’re rid of him and you’ve given up on the fairytale of Weasley, maybe it’s time you found somebody more your type.”

“And what type is that?” she asked irritably.

“You tell me,” he shrugged. “Tell me what you want, and I’ll deliver him to you. Consider it my way of making it up to you.”

She just stared at him in disbelief and then burst out laughing.

His eyes were sparkling, and he sipped as he watched her laugh.

Finally she calmed down enough to say, “That’s a good one Malfoy... deliver him... will you gift wrap him for me too?”

He shrugged. “Maybe you have some kind of undressing kink. You tell me. No judgment here of course. What are you into?”

She just shook her head but started laughing again.

“Alright fine, I’ll play along. My dream lover.... Hmmm....”

She hadn't expected the conversation to take this turn, but she had to admit it was loosening her up. Malfoy's teasing wasn't malicious this time, and she was now feeling pleasantly warm from the firewhiskey. Speaking of which...

"First, he must drink firewhiskey."

Malfoy raised his eyebrows in amusement, but toasted her. "Excellent, Granger. I must say, that's a fantastic start."

She grinned. "Second... intelligent, obviously. I couldn't possibly abide a Crabbe or a Goyle or anybody like that. No offense."

"None taken. I can't abide them either," he said, and she laughed.

"Third.... Physical attributes." Now Malfoy narrowed his eyes as he listened closely.

"I know I'm rather short, but I have a thing for tall blokes. And on the thinner side. I'm not into burly guys like Crabbe and Goyle. Or Marcus Flint. Or practically the entire Slytherin Quidditch team, save for you."

"The opposite of Crabbe and Goyle in all respects, then. Noted," he said, his eyes sparkling again. "Hair color or eye color preferences?"

Hermione shook her head. "None. I've fancied brunettes, blondes, and obviously redheads at various points. As for eyes... well, Harry has some of the most beautiful eyes I've ever seen, and I don't fancy him. Never have. So I don't think eyes draw me in, really, though of course I appreciate nice looking ones."

"That's unusual, Granger," he said. She just shrugged.

"I've always been different from other girls."

"Fair point," he conceded. "Anything else physically?"

She bit her lip, wondering if she had the guts to tell him this. "One thing. But I warn you, it might surprise you. Most people would probably think it's out of character for me."

"I can't wait then," he said. "Tell me."

"Fine... I like scars. And tattoos. And piercings. That sort of thing."

She felt herself blush as his eyes darkened a bit.

"Do you now..." and she could see his eyes boring into her, and she wondered if he was thinking of his own tattoo.

"Yes," she said. "That's the entire reason I had those ridiculous fantasies about Remus and Sirius, you know. Remus has tons of scars since he's a werewolf. Sirius did too, but he covered a lot of them with tattoos."

“You’re right, that’s unexpected. Why though?”

She shrugged. “With the scars... well I suppose it’s because they’re a little dark. I have a few scars, and they’re all from dark magic. They don’t embarrass me, but they mean I’ve been through things. My dream bloke understands that side of me and might even have a side like that himself. As for tattoos and piercings... Well, I got an extra piercing in my ears last summer. That absolutely horrified Molly Weasley, by the way. It’s probably a good thing she doesn’t know about my tattoo.”

Hermione couldn’t help it. She laughed at the look of shock on Malfoy’s face. A moment later the shock turned to delight, as he looked her up and down, as though trying to find it.

“Hermione Granger... never say you have a tattoo?” he asked.

“Guilty as charged,” she said.

At this Malfoy studied her with a dangerous smile. “What is it?”

She bit her lip. “I can’t say just yet. You haven’t gotten to those memories. But it’s something relatively small, and it’s a work in progress, assuming things go the way I want them to.”

He paused for a moment as he digested this. Then he put his drink down and leaned forward with an intense look.

“Where is it then?”

Now Hermione gave him a little smirk. “Some place that only myself, my tattoo artist, and Madam Pomfrey has seen,” said Hermione. She paused for a moment before adding, “and Tippy too, I suppose, seeing as how she helped me bathe after I was tortured.”

At this Malfoy actually closed his eyes and groaned, as he leaned back and put his hands behind his head. Hermione couldn’t help but glance at his own tattoo while he did it.

“You’re killing me Granger, you know that right?”

Hermione just smiled mysteriously at this.

Malfoy took a deep breath as though trying to compose himself. “Alright, anything else?”

Hermione thought about it. “My dream lover notices I’m a witch.”

He furrowed his brow. “Obviously you’re a witch.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Of course. But I’ve spent my entire wizarding life surrounded by Harry and Ron and the Weasleys. Even the Order is mostly wizards. I study, I train, I fight. I don’t know much about wizarding fashion, and I rarely bother with make-up. I didn’t even pack any when we went on the run. People tend to lump me in as one of the boys, but I’m not. I may not be like Lavender or Parvati, but I do appreciate the occasional feminine thing. I’m not just a swotty bookworm who can kick your arse. Speaking of which, my dream

bloke doesn't give me books as gifts. It seems like everybody wants to give me books for every occasion. It's almost to the point where it feels impersonal. I love books of course, but unless the book is truly rare, my dream wizard would get me something else because he knows there are other things in life I like too."

At this she saw his eyes flick to the roses, and she blushed.

Yes, exactly like that, she thought.

"Alright, so in summary, the bloke I need to find for you is tall, smart, riddled with scars or tattoos, notices you're a witch, and likes to drink firewhiskey. Have I missed anything then?"

"Nope, that about covers it," said Hermione with a laugh.

"You do know you've just described nearly half the Death Eaters, right?"

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "I would argue that most of the Death Eaters fail in the 'smart' category since they practically worship somebody who would kill them without a second thought. But I'll make an exception for present company, seeing as how you're reformed and all."

He grinned. "Cheers, love. I'm glad you've noticed."

She felt a little jolt at the term of endearment. Had he ever called her something other than 'Granger' or 'Mudblood?' She didn't think so.

Malfoy drained the rest of his glass and stood. Hermione stood as well.

"Well I'd best be off to scrounge up a few wizards for your consideration. I'll still see you tomorrow, yeah? For regular training?" he asked.

"I'll be here," she quipped, and he smiled at this. He walked toward the door, and she wandered over with him. Just as he was about to leave she said, "Malfoy."

He turned to look at her.

"Those roses... thank you. They're gorgeous."

He gave her a small smile and raised an eyebrow. "They reminded me of you," he said, and then he turned and left her standing there, wondering what she was getting herself into with Draco Malfoy.

Dear Children of Malfoy,

Your father apologized and sent me roses. They are stunning.

I'm still a little hurt by what he did, but I've never had a wizard apologize to me that quickly before. Harry and Ron are both stubborn and tend to deflect when they're in the wrong. I do

too, for that matter. But Malfoy actually owned up to what he did.

We talked through it and had a rather fascinating conversation about my dream bloke. Of course I ended up describing him.... I'm hopeless, I know it.

Chapter End Notes

I would never make you suffer through Astoria for more than one chapter lol.

That being said, this is not the last you'll see of her.

Chapter 9: The Department of Mysteries

Chapter Notes

It's time for our first taste of Draco's darkness.

Draco

Dear Journal,

Did you know that I'm Granger's dream lover? I tick every single box.

What are the odds that she realizes it someday and lets me snog and/or shag her?

Because I really want to shag her. I know she's never done it before but... fuck. I want to find out what she's like.

Draco Malfoy had several missions at the moment.

First, there was his mission for the Dark Lord: recruitment at Hogwarts. This mission Draco was studiously ignoring, since he himself no longer supported the Dark Lord. He was fairly certain a few Slytherins would join up at the end of the year regardless, and he would get enough credit for them that he wouldn't die. He decided this was good enough, and he certainly wasn't going to go out of his way to find more.

Second, there was his mission to train Granger in occlumency. This, he thought, was going rather well. They were approaching the end of fifth year now. Granger still didn't block very well, but her storytelling was excellent, and her memory was good. They were leaning heavily on that technique, though she said they would probably need blocking for some of the memories she would be showing to him soon.

Finally, and most importantly, there was his mission to discover the precise location of Granger's tattoo. He wanted to know what it was. But the question of *where* it was had been driving him mad ever since she dropped that bomb on him.

He wasn't sure why the notion of Granger with a tattoo was so appealing, but he had become utterly obsessed. Maybe it was because it was rebellious. Maybe it was because it was a little out of character for her. Or maybe it was because no wizard had ever seen it.

Thanks to the yoga pants and that thing she called a sports bra and that day in the robe... Well, Draco had seen quite a bit of Granger's skin already. The fact that he hadn't seen *this* meant that it was someplace private, someplace hidden, someplace she was saving for somebody who was *not* Weasley. Fuck if Draco didn't want to be the first wizard to ever see it. The thought of anybody else finding it before him made him absolutely sick with jealousy.

Draco asked Tippy about the tattoo, but Tippy declined to dish on Miss. Draco even ordered Tippy to tell him, and Tippy actually refused a direct order without punishing herself. Draco had no idea how Tippy had gotten around her own magic to keep a secret like that from Draco, but she had done it. Eventually Draco gave her up as a lost cause.

His next strategy was to make a list of possible locations, and as he reviewed them he narrowed them down to breast, middle of the back, hip, or arse. He didn't think he was missing anything, and he kept thinking through all the outfits he had seen her wear to make sure he wasn't forgetting something.

Yes, he was absolutely obsessed with that fucking tattoo, and it meant that he was thinking about her naked. Often.

Naturally, when his thoughts strayed this way he was always reminded that just like her tattoo, no wizard had seen Granger naked before. Now that she no longer looked dangerously malnourished, he was certain her tiny little body would be perfect, and once again he was fantasizing about being the first wizard to see it.

Draco suspected that the memories he saw with the other blokes had embarrassed her. She was far more innocent than he expected when she arrived at Malfoy Manor. But Draco knew that if Granger was aware of the direction of his thoughts on the matter, she wouldn't be embarrassed at all. Her lack of experience turned him on. It made him want her even more. He wanted to be the first person to really touch her, see her naked, bring her to climax, and then fuck her silly. It would be all for him, and he would be able to learn things about the Brightest Witch of the Age that nobody else knew, not even Potter or Weasley. The prospect was intoxicating.

Speaking of Weasley, Draco had come around to Weasley a bit more, now that he was sure Weasley had completely fucked it up with Granger and posed no threat. He couldn't believe Weasley had been that stupid. If Draco had spent that much time around Granger before her captivity, Draco was certain he would have made a move ages ago.

In fact, the only thing holding him back from making a move right now was a fear of ruining her occlumency if she wasn't into it. She had to learn occlumency above all else, so he decided to bide his time a little longer until he was absolutely certain she would welcome an advance from him.

He thought she might be interested. She certainly flirted now and then. She even kept the flowers he sent alive with a special charm she managed to cast wandlessly. Every time he visited they were just as beautiful as the day he first sent them to her. But he was also the only wizard she had direct contact with, so he wasn't sure if it was really him or if it was the fact that he was a warm body she could talk to.

He had started dropping in most evenings, alternating training with talking. He also brought her the papers each day, which she would snatch from him and devour with interest while he studied, and some nights they stayed up late playing chess or exploding snap. Tippy rarely joined them anymore, and Draco wondered if this was another order she was disobeying, but Draco had no complaints. Evening after evening he got Granger all to himself, some nights spent in her head, other nights not, but each night was something he really looked forward to.

In the week leading up to his birthday he arrived a bit earlier than usual and let himself into her room. Granger glanced at him with a strained look on her face.

“What happened?” he asked.

She was staring at her galleon. “I’m waiting for Harry and Ron to tell me they haven’t been caught doing something completely idiotic. Should be any minute.”

Draco felt the tension thicken as the time ticked by. She was clutching her galleon like a lifeline until finally it glowed red, and a look of enormous relief crossed her face.

“Thank God,” she sighed. Then she pressed her finger to it, and it glowed blue for a moment before she threw it aside and put her face in her hands.

“What are they doing then?” he asked.

“They say it’s reconnaissance. Harry has his invisibility cloak, but it’s still risky. And it’s pointless, as I keep telling them.”

“Reconnaissance for what?”

“You’ll know soon enough. They’re really just feeling cooped up. Neither of them do well sitting in one place.”

Draco felt a lurch of guilt at this. Granger had been doing just that for a couple months now.

“And you? How are you doing with it?”

She gave him a grim look. “I wish I could go outside. I wish I could be doing something more. But I also know I’m safe here, and getting caught for a stupid reason doesn’t help us defeat You-Know-Who. The Malfoy library has gotten me farther on our actual mission than the months sitting in a tent did. There was a lot of research we still needed to do once Dumbledore died, and I haven’t had access to a really good library until now. So yes, I’m feeling cooped up. But I’m actually making progress, even if it’s slow. The boys are just being reckless and impatient. I’ve been telling them since we went on the run that this could take years, and we can’t afford to screw it up.”

Years, thought Draco, with a small measure of horror. He sincerely hoped it wouldn’t be that long. Once he was out of Hogwarts his missions would change and would probably become more dangerous and violent. He knew his mother was already plotting some way to keep him at Hogwarts for an additional year, but Draco couldn’t see how the Dark Lord would agree to it.

"I'll help," he suddenly said. "If I can. If there are things I can do that you lot can't do without getting caught... Just tell me. I want him dead."

She looked up at him, a bit startled, but then nodded slowly. "I'll think about it. Once we get to those memories we have a lot to talk about. Quite a bit of it is speculation on my part, but I want you to see the memories that form the basis for it first."

"Fair enough," he said, nodding firmly, and then he paused as he thought of something.

"You said it might take years," he said slowly. "So I assume you believe it will be at least six more months at a minimum, right?"

She looked at him curiously. "Right," she said. "I suppose we could catch a lucky break before then but I doubt it, given how long it's taken us to get where we are and how much more we have to do."

"Funny you should use that word," he said in a casual voice, as he started to smile.

"What word?" she asked curiously.

"Lucky," said Draco as he stared at her.

Her eyes went wide as she caught his meaning. "Are you saying..." she breathed, and he just nodded.

"Yeah," he said, with a satisfied smile. "I think we should brew some lucky potion. I'm sure you know it takes six months."

She sat back, and he could see the wheels turning in her head. "You know, Harry and Ron asked me about it once," she said quietly. "And I dismissed it because I thought it would take too long, and we were on the run. There was no way I could pack it up and take it with us from place to place without ruining it."

"But you aren't on the run anymore," he said reasonably. "You're here. And your occlumency won't be done before I'm finished at Hogwarts. I'll be moving home. So even if you rejoin Potter at some point I can take it over."

"But Malfoy, the ingredients... I looked up *felix* in the restricted section of the library once, and the ingredients are incredibly expensive. And some are very rare or dark. You'd probably have to get them on the black market or from some of those dark shops in Knockturn Alley."

"So? I'm a wealthy bastard, and I control a share of the Malfoy fortune all on my own. It became mine when I turned seventeen. I promise you, I can pay whatever prices the dealers are charging."

She got a thoughtful look on her face.

"Do you really think we could pull it off? It's known to be one of the most complex potions out there. It's well beyond N.E.W.T. level, and you aren't supposed to brew it without

approval from the potions guild. I'm pretty sure Slughorn has been the only person in England to brew it legally in the last fifty years. That vat of it that he had in class that one day was decades old. We might burn up a big chunk of your vault on it for nothing."

"We can do it," he said confidently. "You and I were always the best potions students in the year, at least until Potter somehow became a savant last year."

To his surprise Granger scoffed. "He's not a savant. Slughorn let him borrow Snape's old potions textbook the first day of term. You know Snape has a potions mastery. He wrote all these shortcuts in it, and Harry passed off Snape's tricks as his own work."

Draco tried not to laugh at the look of consternation on her face. He suspected this had been a sore point between them.

"Does Potter still have the book? Because that would help. Even though *felix felicis* isn't in it, I wouldn't say no to learning Snape's shortcuts."

Now she sighed. "Unfortunately not. That curse Harry hit you with was something he read in the textbook. Snape obviously suspected, because he demanded to see Harry's books after he healed you. Harry hid the book in the Room of Requirement and showed him Ron's potions book instead. Harry said the Room turned into some massive place with a ton of junk. He never went back to get it."

Draco stilled, knowing exactly which room she was referring to, but also knowing that he would never stand a chance of finding it in there.

"That's too bad," he sighed. "But I still say we should try. Like I said, we were the best in the year. The thing you will learn about me if you haven't already is that I believe in giving ourselves every possible advantage. Every single one."

As he spoke Granger got a gleam in her eye. "You know what Malfoy? You're right. It may not work but we might as well give it a shot. I don't see this ending in six months. And if you're willing to take a gamble with your gold to procure the ingredients on the off chance we might succeed..."

"I am," he said shortly.

"Then we'll do it. I'll ask Tippy to pull some potions books for me over the next few days, and then we can start."

Draco smiled. He was sure they could do it, and it would give him an excuse to spend more time with her. Maybe he would be able to finally get into her knickers once she saw firsthand how good he was at potions. It had always been his best subject. She was the type to get turned on by performing advanced magic.

"Occlumency tonight then?" he asked, changing the subject as he settled down across from her.

She took a deep breath. “Yes, the Department of Mysteries tonight. I don’t think there’s much to occlude since the Death Eaters were there, but it’s a significant memory for me so you should see it. You tell me if you see anything odd.”

He nodded and thought, *Legilimens!* and then he was in her mind.

To his surprise she wasn’t nudging him toward the Department of Mysteries, but instead she was directing him to Hogwarts, where she was begging with Potter to check to see if Sirius Black had been captured. Draco watched as Potter agreed reluctantly, and then they broke into Dolores Umbridge’s office to use her fireplace to call Grimmauld Place.

Draco remembered this part. Sure enough, he soon saw himself and other members of the Inquisitorial Squad bringing in Ron and Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and Neville Longbottom. Draco winced at the excitement on his own face when he saw they were all cornered. Then Umbridge started to cruciate Potter before Granger stopped her with her story about the weapon in the Forbidden Forest. This time Draco could feel her lying in her head, and he was chagrined to see that he fell for it just like Umbridge did. Granger and Potter soon left with Umbridge, and now he finally got to see what happened next.

Granger was stomping around the Forbidden Forest making an awful lot of noise and before long some arrows started flying, and they were cornered by the centaurs who carried off Umbridge. Then, unbelievably, a giant showed up and actually rescued them before the other students arrived.

Draco knew his jaw was probably hanging open as he watched Lovegood have a mad idea about flying invisible thestrals to London. Granger couldn’t see them yet, so Draco couldn’t see them either in her memory, and he felt her terror as she climbed on and held on for dear life until they took off.

At long last he watched them arrive in London and enter the Ministry of Magic. They made their way to the Department of Mysteries, finding nobody at all until they got to an odd room filled with tall shelves containing tiny glass orbs. Draco furrowed his brow at it, until Potter picked one up and then Draco heard his father’s voice.

“Very good, Potter. Now turn around, nice and slowly, and give that to me.”

Draco’s heart sank as he listened to his father try to take the ball that he called a prophecy from Potter.

Fuck, is this the prophecy then?

Draco had heard there was a prophecy involving Potter and the Dark Lord, but the Death Eaters didn’t know the contents. As he watched the conversation unfold, Draco realized that his father’s mission in the Department was to lure Potter there to collect the prophecy himself. Draco knew his father had failed to do it. This memory was why the Malfoys were out of favor. This memory was why he had been Marked.

He watched with rapt attention as Potter shouted and the students began exploding the shelves and little balls, which crashed to reveal ghostly figures talking in soft voices before

they evaporated. Draco couldn't hear any of them clearly because Granger didn't stop to listen. She was sprinting away with Potter and Longbottom, being chased by a few Death Eaters Draco couldn't yet identify.

Soon they burst into a room Draco had seen them walk through before, and Granger turned to seal the door before diving under a desk. The Death Eaters quickly entered and found them, and Draco felt a thrill of dread as one began to cast *Avada Kedavra* toward Granger. To Draco's great relief, Potter intervened before the spell was complete, and then Draco watched as Potter stunned Crabbe Senior. Longbottom tried to disarm the other Death Eater and accidentally disarmed Potter instead.

Of course fucking Longbottom's aim would be that bad, he thought. Potter wasn't Draco's favorite person by any means, but at least he could *aim*. Draco wanted to strangle Longbottom as he watched it.

Another one of Longbottom's stray spells soon hit a shelf of small glittering things that smashed, and to Draco's astonishment he watched as the shelf started to collapse and repair itself over and over again. But now his attention was drawn to Granger who blasted the Death Eater Draco now recognized as Rabastan with a stunner, sending Rabastan straight to a bell jar. Draco watched in horror as Rabastan's head shrank to a baby's.

As they were about to leave, Potter turned to Rabastan and raised his wand, but Granger stopped him, saying something about how you can't hurt a baby.

Potter's look of incredulity reflected Draco's precise thoughts.

Granger's bloody Gryffindor morals really manifest themselves at the most inopportune times, he thought.

He could tell Potter agreed with this sentiment, and Draco felt some sense of satisfaction that Potter wasn't quite as honorable as Draco had always assumed he was. But Potter didn't argue with her, and he left Rabastan there with his head like a baby.

The three wrenched open a door and sprinted out. To Draco's astonishment Potter was still carrying the prophesy, and the others were covering him until another door burst open and Dolohov came barreling through. Draco sucked in a breath as he saw Dolohov heading straight for Granger. He opened his mouth to tell the others he had found them, but Granger quickly silenced him just as his arm slashed through the air and something like purple fire hit her.

The memory went dark, and Draco released her.

They stared at each other, and Draco realized his heart was pounding and something that felt like rage was starting to flood his veins.

"What did Dolohov hit you with?" he asked, trying to control the anger in his voice. He thought she heard it anyway because her eyes widened a bit.

"We don't know," she said softly. "Some type of curse. We think he invented it. It punctured my lung and damaged my liver and spleen. Neville carried me into that rotunda with all the doors, but he had to leave me there while he went to fight with Harry in the Death Chamber. The Order apparently showed up very soon after I was hit, and Arthur Weasley got me out. He was sent to fight, but he saved me instead. Madam Pomfrey says I would have died if Arthur hadn't gotten there so fast or if Dolohov had been able to use his voice."

"He took you back to Hogwarts? Not St. Mungo's?" asked Draco, trying to ignore the thudding in his ears as he thought about Dolohov.

Granger nodded. "We weren't supposed to be there. Madam Pomfrey isn't part of the Order officially, but she's an honorary member in a way. She heals us and turns a blind eye. She had me on about ten potions for a week after that one."

"Was there any lasting damage?" he asked.

For some reason she blushed and gave him a slightly nervous look. "There's a potion I still take for my liver. I'm nearly out, but there's not much I can do about it. I always got it from the infirmary at Hogwarts, but obviously that's impossible now, and brewing it myself... well, again, procuring ingredients is a challenge. It will shorten my life on the back end if I don't take it, but it won't cause immediate damage. The curse is still in me, you see, and the potion keeps it from building. Over time though... the curse will strengthen again, and my liver will fail. If I make it through the war I'm going to have a cursebreaker look at it and really try to fix it, but the potion works well enough for now, so I haven't made that a priority. So there's that, and also... it gave me a large scar."

"I'll get the potion for you," he said immediately. "Whatever it is, I'll get it. The Death Eaters have infiltrated St. Mungo's, and I'm obviously at Hogwarts. I can get anything you need. Or I'll get the raw ingredients if you want to brew it."

She gave him such a hopeful look that he felt a momentary rush of warmth. But then he remembered Dolohov and went cold again.

"You said you have a scar from it."

She nodded and bit her lip.

"Show me."

He meant to ask her, not order her, but the hatred he was feeling for Dolohov made it hard to think. She nodded and then stood up. Automatically Draco stood too. To his surprise she pulled her shirt off, and she was standing there in that same sports bra and yoga pants. He watched as she rolled the waistband of her pants down just a bit, and Draco was torn between rage and lust as he stared at her. She ran her fingers along the thin purple scar he had seen once before, where it cut across half her stomach before it turned up toward her breasts and disappeared under her bra.

"Here," she said simply.

Almost unconsciously Draco walked toward her. She was so much shorter than him that he kneeled down in front of her to get a closer look. He reached out a finger and touched it, tracing the same path her hands had just taken, and he was surprised to find that her skin felt smooth under it.

As he touched her he marveled at her softness, and he felt himself harden as he stroked her. He felt her inhale, and he looked up at her to see a shocked but almost longing expression on her face.

“This shows how fierce you are,” he said, tracing the scar again. “Brave, bold, fucking brilliant...”

He was still on his knees as he continued to brush her skin lightly. It wasn’t lost on him that he was the scion of two very old, pureblood Houses kneeling before a muggleborn witch. But he didn’t care.

Finally he looked up at her and said, “Tell me, would I be morally justified in killing Dolohov for this? Because I want to. I will. The only thing that might stop me is your wand. It becomes temperamental when I try to use it to do something you wouldn’t approve of.”

Her mouth opened in surprise and she blinked a little. “Wait... really?”

His eyes bored into hers. “Really. That wand of yours has imbued your Gryffindor moral code, but I can sense a ruthlessness in it now and then as well. I’m sure it’s all because of you, love. Your wand lets me do magic that you would do. If it’s not something you would do, it blocks me. So please tell me. Can I be ruthless and fucking take Dolohov out of this world? Is revenge enough of a justification for you? Because it’s more than enough for me.”

Her eyes were wide and had gotten dark as she listened to him. Draco knew he had probably overplayed his hand with her, but he felt so much rage as he thought about Dolohov that he couldn’t bring himself to care.

She hesitated but then said, “I wouldn’t want you to damage your own soul that way. But is it justified for what he’s done to me and so many other people? Possibly. And.... Well, I’ve killed before.”

He felt spellbound now as he stared at her.

“*Avada Kedavra?*” he asked softly.

She shook her head. “No. It was a couple of stunners. But it was a situation where stunning would kill. I knew it would happen, and I did it anyway.”

At this Draco smiled a little and finally rose. He had been right about her. She had a ruthless streak, and now he was sure that her wand did too. If she had really killed before, then so could he. He cupped her chin as he studied her face.

“My soul is already damaged from all the things I’ve done. But making that fucker pay for this? Just thinking about it is making my soul heal.”

Her eyes were wide as he tucked a curl behind her ear and leaned down to kiss her cheek, inhaling that distinctive blend of lavender, rosemary and mint before pulling away.

“Tomorrow, Granger. We’ll talk occlumency tomorrow.”

He turned and left her standing there with the most curious expression on her face.

Dear Journal,

When I was tasked to kill Dumbledore I couldn’t do it. Ever since that night I’ve been dreading the moment the Dark Lord orders me to kill somebody else because I’ve thought I’m too weak for it.

Tonight I discovered that my failure with Dumbledore was never about weakness, but about motivation. With the proper motivation I’m now certain I can do it. Granger’s memory of the Department of Mysteries gave me all the motivation I need. Dolohov nearly killed her. He caused lasting damage to her.

I’m going to make him pay, and I’m going to smile when I do it.

Chapter 10: Blocking

Hermione

Dear Malfoy's Heirs,

Your father saw a memory tonight of Dolohov cursing me, and he promised to get revenge. I should be horrified by it. It was the first time I ever really sensed the kind of darkness he would need to make him succeed among the Death Eaters. I know I should have told him not to do it. I should have dissuaded him.

But I didn't. Because instead of feeling horrified, I felt safe.

Maybe that's why I trust him now. I'm sure it will shock your little pureblood heart when I admit that I'm developing feelings for him. And even if they aren't reciprocated, I know your father cares about me enough to make Dolohov pay for what he did to me.

I'm thinking about giving Malfoy free reign of my head to find the memories I'm trying to hide. I need to practice that, and like I said, I trust him. I trust him more now that I've seen his darkness than I ever did when I could only see light.

She was pinned down, arms over her head while he slowly explored her body, his hands firm and demanding. His lips burned as he kissed along the scar Dolohov had left behind before reaching her nipples, which he started to suck hard. She arched to bring him closer to her.

She wanted his heat, his weight, his darkness. She wanted everything.

"Brave, bold, fucking brilliant," he murmured to her, as he sat up and spread her legs for him. "Come on Granger, help me heal my soul."

She murmured words of encouragement to him and tried to touch him too, but her hands were still pinned, and somehow she knew he had tied her there and wouldn't let her go until he was done with her. She shuddered in anticipation.

The hands she had felt on her stomach — strong and purposeful — now gripped her thighs as he lowered his head to her center and gave one long lick. She felt something inside of her start to melt and then he laughed, and she caught a flash of blonde hair and silver eyes, watching her.

He lowered himself again for another lick and then....

She gasped as she sat up before looking at the clock and realizing it was still the wee hours of the morning. She groaned and laid back down in her bed.

It was a dream... just a dream... she thought. But her knickers felt damp, and something in her body felt wound up, and *God* if she couldn't get it out of her she might implode.

Almost unconsciously one hand drifted under the silky top of the pajamas Tippy had given her, while the other migrated down to the waistband of the matching shorts. She had never done this before, but she had read enough about sex and had talked to Ginny often enough to know that people did this. It was normal. *Surely* it would be fine, trying it here in the privacy of her room. Tippy wouldn't be in for ages.

She closed her eyes and tried to turn her brain off and just allow herself to feel. She pretended it was *his* hands as she brushed her nipples lightly, feeling them pebble beneath her fingers. She wanted it to be *his* hands that were exploring her center, which was oddly wet, but made it so easy to slip a finger or two inside.

She explored herself, for the first time ever, as she remembered her dream. He had *licked* her. She had never once thought about that before, but now she really wanted to try it. She couldn't quite imagine what it would feel like in real life, and in a moment of experimentation she brought her own fingers to her mouth before stroking back down there. It made a difference, she realized, as she stumbled upon the little bundle of nerves that she had read about. This was the secret spot — the spot that wizards so often missed — but she had found it, and she licked her fingers again as she touched it.

That tight feeling in her stomach was getting stronger now, and it continued to build. She didn't know what it was, exactly, but she knew she had to get it out. She'd never be able to sleep unless she did. She pressed that bundle of nerves harder and felt a jolt go through her whole body as she gasped. She tried it again, and another. And again. And faster now, and until suddenly, finally, the dam burst and she felt like she was suspended for a moment.

She distantly heard herself moan as it happened, and she slowly opened her eyes for a moment before closing them again. She didn't want the feeling to pass. It was so delicious. She wondered if she could do it again.

More confident now she remembered the feeling of watching him on his knees in front of her. She remembered the power she felt from him and the darkness she sensed in him as he stroked her reverently. He had given her a kind of declaration. Somehow, against all odds, she had been added to that very small list of people who were important to him. She still didn't know if he felt something romantic for her, but he cared about her in his own way. In that moment she realized he was similar to his namesake: he was just like a dragon that fiercely and jealously guarded the few things that were truly his. The rest of the world might burn, but as long as the dragon's possessions were safe, the dragon would be satisfied.

She knew she should have been appalled by how eager he was to kill for her, but there was a very small part of her that lived in the dark. It was the part of her that had held Rita Skeeter hostage in a jar and obliterated her parents and killed that one time, even though she never told her best friends about it. There was a part of her that had always been a little dangerous

and willing to cross lines that even Ron and Harry wouldn't cross. That part of her had reveled in Malfoy's own darkness and connected to it, and Merlin did it turn her on.

She licked her fingers again and put them back on that special place as she remembered his words and imagined his lips trailing her scar and not just his fingers. She imagined him pulling her pants off and putting his own fingers down there too before giving her another nice long lick from her dreams.

She shuddered and groaned as she got closer, and again, she felt something snap, and then she was floating for the briefest of moments. Hermione felt almost boneless now. She sank back down under the covers and went back to sleep.

Hermione was sitting with her galleon waiting for Malfoy to arrive. She had spent the morning with several of the darker potions books from the Malfoy library cataloging what they needed for *felix felicis* and several other potions she wanted to make. She knew they were lucky to have copies of all the books in the library at the Manor, but then again the Malfoys had always trended dark. She supposed it wasn't terribly surprising they had a copy of *Moste Potente Potions*. Hermione was thrilled because she was nearly out of Mad-Eye's polyjuice and really needed to brew more. She didn't think Malfoy would mind getting the ingredients for her. Knockturn Alley would have them.

Then again, some of the ingredients for *felix* felt like they would be almost impossible to find, and it really would cost a fortune. But she knew they had to try, and the fact that Malfoy was a wealthy Death Eater and could visit Gringotts and apothecaries without raising suspicion would help tremendously. Besides, she would be at the Manor for a while longer, and they could brew discreetly in her room. Her bathroom, closet, and bedroom all connected to the dressing room she had seen on her first day but had never used, and she generally kept the door to it shut. She had taken the time to wandlessly seal it off from all sides so Tippy and Narcissa wouldn't wander in, but it was plenty of space to set up a miniature potions lab for two.

She had to admit, as stressful as it was to think about all the work they would have to do, she couldn't deny that she was excited to partner with Malfoy to brew some potions. They had never done anything like that before, and for once they would be working together instead of competing with each other. She always had to work much harder in Potions than in any other subject at Hogwarts to edge him out for the top spot. It was the only class, other than Defense Against the Dark Arts, where she had ever had real competition from another student.

But now she was sitting on the sofa in a state of nerves as she waited for word from Harry and Ron.

We got in under the cloak. R confounded the guard goblin.

You two are being ridiculous. There has to be a better way.

We have to see. We're here. Sit tight.

So she did. She sat and waited and finally her galleon burned again, and she let out a sigh of relief.

We got to the lobby, but there's an enchantment on the door to the vaults.

What do you mean?

Couldn't get through without authorization. We couldn't even follow somebody who was allowed in.

So Gringotts will have to let you in. That's what I told you.

I know, but we wanted to see for ourselves.

PLEASE stop doing recon until I learn more about their security measures. I am still researching.

OK fine. We'll give you a couple more weeks before we go again.

Thank you. Did you do the fidelius charm like I told you to?

Yes, the spell you found to unwind the old one worked.

And you were able to re-cast it?

Took a few tries, but we did it with Remus's help. H is secret keeper. We will fidelius the Burrow, Shell Cottage, and Remus's house too.

Good.

The address of Harry Potter's residence is 12 Grimmauld Place, London.

Hermione stared at it, memorizing it. She hoped that would work when she eventually met up with them again, but she thought it would. She had memorized the address the first time from a scrap of paper Dumbledore wrote.

One of the really valuable pieces of information she had learned from Malfoy in the previous two weeks was that You-Know-Who had ordered his senior Death Eaters and the aurors to start combing the country for Harry again. The Ministry was fully in his grasp now, so he was using all available resources to find Harry. Malfoy told her with an eye-roll that he was personally responsible for searching Hogwarts. Of course Malfoy knew that Harry wasn't there, but he was pretending to search anyway. He said it was a good excuse to skip the Dark Arts class taught by the Carrows.

The news that You-Know-Who had redoubled his efforts to find Harry had inspired some frantic research by Hermione, with help from Malfoy. Harry and Ron had temporarily moved

out of Grimmauld Place and back into a tent that they borrowed from Bill while Hermione and Malfoy worked. Together, after quite a bit of effort, they had figured out how to break the old fidelius charm Dumbledore cast on Grimmauld Place and then place a new one to resecure it. She was relieved the boys had taken the time to actually do it.

Thank you. That should work.

Got it done in the nick of time too. They showed up yesterday to stake it out.

Please tell me you cast the spell larger this time.

We did. The boundaries are all the way to the pavement this time.

Good. Apparating to that top stoop was unnecessarily difficult.

Tell us about it.

Hermione heard the door open and Malfoy walked in. She gave him a small smile, and she tapped her galleon one last time.

I've got to go. Don't leave Grimmauld Place.

We won't. Enjoy your date.

Hermione's jaw dropped, but she didn't have time to question Harry — because she was sure that last message had come from Harry — about his final missive to her. She huffed as she put the galleon away.

“More recon?” asked Malfoy.

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Yes. And they got back fine. They didn't learn anything that I didn't already know. They've promised to sit tight for two weeks to give me more time to research.”

“Well that's something,” he said, as he wandered over.

He poured her a drink and handed it to her before sitting down himself.

“Drinking while occluding?” she asked, and he just grinned.

“It's an advanced skill,” he retorted. But then he sighed. “Seriously though, we never talked about your last memory. I've been thinking about it all day, and I think you're right that most of it is OK to show. The things I would occlude though are the thestrals and that ruddy giant.”

Hermione furrowed her brow. “Why?”

Malfoy shrugged. “They're just unusual elements of the story. The thestrals and that giant could be useful if there is ever fighting at Hogwarts. It's best if the Death Eaters don't know that they are resources you and Potter could leverage. So I would just change the memory to

show you running away from the centaurs or them letting you go. Don't even think about that giant's face. Then show that you flew to London on broomsticks. It's a long journey, but people do it. Otherwise, I think the memory is fine to show. Nearly all the Death Eaters who were in the Department of Mysteries are still active."

Hermione nodded. "Alright, then let's practice that change. It shouldn't take too long. And then I want to take a quick break to show you what I'm thinking for the potions lab before I show you anything else."

He gave her a curious look, but nodded and a moment later she felt him in her head. He brought her straight to the forest where she was stomping through the woods with Umbridge. After the centaurs attacked, she visualized them letting her and Harry go with a stern warning never to do anything like that again. Then when she met the others at the edge of the woods, they were carrying broomsticks. Ginny held out one for Hermione, and Ron held out Harry's firebolt. Hermione wasn't confident on a broom, but the others had forced her to fly enough that she was able to visualize kicking off and then sailing through the night. Malfoy watched for a little while longer to make sure she could hold that change before he finally released her.

"Good. That was perfect. It was believable."

Hermione nodded and exhaled. "Good. Then come over here for a minute. Let me show you where we can brew."

Malfoy rose and followed her to the dressing room.

"In here," she said. "If you let me have my wand for a minute I can conjure quite a bit of what we'll need."

He looked around the room and eyed her hesitantly but then handed her the vinewood wand. Hermione smiled broadly as the familiar power rushed through her, and then she began. It only took her a few minutes to conjure a wooden table, some shelves, a stepstool for her that made Malfoy smirk, and numerous glass jars for ingredients.

Then she turned to the table and concentrated hard. She opened her power fully and conjured a pewter cauldron. Then she conjured a second one. She turned to find Malfoy staring at her.

"You can conjure metal?" he asked in amazement.

Hermione shrugged. "Some. You know precious metals used for currency are impossible to conjure. But yes, I can do pewter."

He just shook his head. "Unbelievable," he muttered.

"Why?" she asked. "Transfiguration was always my best subject."

He gave her a skeptical look. "I thought it was Charms."

"No," she said. "Charms was a close second, but I'm stronger in Transfiguration. My wand's core is dragon heartstring, you know. It favors Transfiguration."

He just shook his head. "Still, the power needed to conjure *any* type of metal, let alone something as dense as pewter and that much of it..." he trailed off as he eyed the cauldrons in slight disbelief.

She just shrugged as she opened her beaded bag and pulled out a pile of Harry's galleons. She dumped them into one of the pewter cauldrons and lit a fire under it.

Now Malfoy looked at her like she had lost her mind as the galleons began to melt.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Making a gold cauldron," she said. "We'll need one for the *felix felicis*, and like I said it's impossible to conjure the precious metals used in currency."

"We can just buy a gold cauldron," he said.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "First, they cost a fortune. Doing it this way is much less expensive, and the gold content in galleons should be high enough for the cauldron. Second, you know it would draw attention. Only a few potions take gold cauldrons. People would wonder what the hell you're up to if you bought one. Getting the ingredients will raise enough questions as it is."

He fell silent as he watched her conjure a mold and then slowly levitate the pewter cauldron to tip the molten gold into it. She sent a cooling charm toward it, and after a few minutes broke the mold apart.

"Maybe a bit rough around the edges, but it will work," she said with satisfaction. "I'll be sure to thank Harry for his contribution to our potions lab."

He smirked at this, as she led him out of the small room. "Give me your list then, and I'll start working on ingredients," he said.

She pulled it out. "Here. I prioritized the things for the early stages of *felix*. Some of it we won't need until the halfway point or later so we can spread it out to not draw so much attention to ourselves."

He scanned down the list and raised his eyebrows at some of it. But he didn't say anything. He just nodded and put it in his pocket as he led her back to the sofa.

"So what will you be showing me next in occlumency then?" he asked.

Hermione bit her lip as she sat down. "Something we probably have to block."

He cocked his head at her.

"I can't think of a good way around it," she said. "I'm going to have to learn how to block eventually. I can story tell through fifth year, but starting in sixth year... there's a lot of

blocking.”

Malfoy nodded slowly. “Alright. Remember, with blocking you visualize hiding the information somewhere else. You told me at the beginning you wanted to use the muggle nonfiction section of the Hogwarts library. So lock it up tight in a book and hide it on a shelf. And when I try to force you to reveal it, you have to fight me in your mind to send me to some other memory that’s safe, preferably a memory that doesn’t involve the muggle nonfiction section. Think of your safe memory as your home base. You need to be strong enough to pull me away from the hidden memory I’m looking for and toward your home base. The more you practice, the faster you’ll get, and eventually you will just dwell in home base, and the legilimens won’t even be able to tell you’re blocking anything at all.”

“Ok,” she said, quickly trying to think of a memory that could serve as her home base.

Malfoy continued. “You should also expect to erupt some memories while we practice. When you erupt, you should still try to force me to home base, because eruptions tend to be things you don’t want the legilimens to see. They’re from your subconscious so they are usually memories we try to bury or avoid. That being said, if you happen to erupt a memory that’s safe or one we’ve already talked about, you can show it to me or try to storytell through it.”

“Right...” she said nervously.

Eruptions.

The eruptions were the reason she had been shying away from blocking. She had read about them extensively in the journal, and they made her very nervous. She really wanted to control the memories Malfoy saw, taking them in order. They had been able to storytell through most of fifth year, so he hadn’t pressed her on blocking. But moving forward she really had no choice. She was pretty sure that if she was going to hide the horcruxes, she would have to learn to block. And if she was going to learn to block, she would also erupt.

Malfoy seemed to notice her nervousness.

“Look, I won’t judge you for your eruptions. I had some pretty mortifying eruptions when my mother trained me in blocking. It’s just part of it. But this is why occlumency training can get really uncomfortable. You have to trust me not to judge you. I promise I won’t.”

She closed her eyes and nodded. “OK. You’re right. Thank you for that. I can’t control the eruptions until I can fully block you out, right? That’s what the journal said.”

“That’s right. Until you develop a strong block, your subconscious will just erupt on its own, through the small cracks in your block. There’s not much you can do about it.”

She nodded, and he continued. “Now, take a moment and visualize locking away the information you’re trying to hide in the Hogwarts library. Then pick a safe memory for your home base and tell me what I’m looking for. Give me an idea of what you want to block.”

She thought about the topic she had picked for the day and came up with a safe memory she could show him that related to it. Then she looked him in the eyes. "I need to block the contents of the prophecy. And I don't want to show you first. I want to see if I can do it."

She saw his eyes widen a bit, but he nodded and got a determined look on his face. "Alright then. I'm going to go looking for it. Get ready."

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes. A moment later she felt him in her mind.

Draco

She wanted to try blocking, *real* blocking. And for the first time ever, she wasn't going to show him the memory first.

This was new territory for them. Other than that day he had really fucked up and searched her memories for prior boyfriends, Draco had never gone poking around in her head totally unguided. Granger was adept at pulling forward the memory she wanted him to see, and then he would watch it unaltered, and they would work on any modifications it needed. It was a system that worked for them, especially in the early days when she was still on her guard around him.

But this... well, he would have unfettered access to her head. She had asked him to come find it. This would test his skills at legilimency as much as hers at occlumency, not to mention his restraint.

The temptation to poke around in her head was strong. There was so much about her he wanted to know. But so far he had resisted because that wasn't their arrangement, and he didn't want to erode the trust that had built between them. But now... well, she had invited him in. It would be very hard not to take a peek around under the guise of searching for the memory she was trying to conceal.

And then there were the eruptions. What would Granger erupt? There was so much about her that she had kept from him, so many things she didn't want him to know yet. A part of him was thrilled that he would finally see some of these secrets. Another part was terrified at her reaction when he finally did.

But there was nothing for it. It was time.

He took a deep breath and thought *Legilimens!* and he was in her head.

He waited for a moment and found that she truly wasn't helping him. He would have to find the prophecy himself.

The prophecy was about Potter. That much was clear. And it was obvious none of them knew about it before the Department of Mysteries. He didn't have to go back that far to find

something. He zeroed in on one that he thought could be helpful, and he pulled her to the hospital wing at Hogwarts. Granger was in bed with Ginny Weasley curled up on one end. Potter and Weasley were sitting nearby, and he saw Umbridge in a bed on the other side of the aisle.

“Too bad it smashed before we could hear what it said,” said Granger.

Draco felt no pushing at all, so he suspected this was a memory she was comfortable showing. Potter, however, got a guilty look on his face.

Potter knows, but the others don't. Potter must have told them later.

He kept searching and then latched onto another memory, this time with Granger and Weasley in Grimmauld Place.

“I wish we knew what it said,” she said to Weasley.

He felt her start to push, though it was a bit half-hearted, and he knew that he was close.

“I think we all know what it said,” retorted Weasley.

She was pushing very hard now, but Draco managed to hold on.

“Well yes, I think we can all guess what the general message was supposed to be, but I’ve been reading about them... and the exact wording in true prophecies is very important.”

Do you think Harry will face him then?” asked Weasley.

“Yes,” said Granger. “I don’t know if I believe in destiny, but if there were ever two wizards destined for each other...”

“It would be them,” finished Weasley.

Granger nodded.

Draco felt her start to relax now. Apparently they had gotten through the part of the memory she was trying to conceal. He almost moved to the next one, but for some reason he decided to watch a little longer.

“So we’ll be there too,” Granger said softly.

“Yes,” said Weasley.

They were quiet for a moment and then Granger turned to Weasley.

“Ron... if you ever have to pick between me and Harry, you need to choose Harry.”

Weasley gave her a gut-wrenching look.

“Hermione...” he started.

"I know! I know. But something about this feels bigger than us. I think it's going to be Harry in the end. We have to make sure he gets there, whatever it takes. All I'm saying is if you ever have to choose, you need to choose him. Make sure he survives. Leave me behind."

Weasley nodded slowly and said, "You need to do the same thing then, Hermione. Choose him and not me if it ever comes down to it."

"I will," she said, as she hugged him.

Draco felt sick at the promise they had made to each other, though it now explained why Weasley hadn't tried to recover Granger's body in the Manor that day. It was a decision Draco had wondered about at the time, because he might have been able to do it if he had really tried. But now Draco knew that Weasley had promised, and he thought she was dead anyway. He wasn't going to risk Potter to save Granger's body.

Fuck it all, he thought, as he pushed to find a memory with Potter in it, and then he landed on one.

He suddenly felt Granger fighting him hard, and Draco sensed that this was it. He bore down and tried to force her to show it to him.

Potter was standing in a bedroom with the others and said, "Dumbledore heard it. The exact wording was, *'The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born a the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord will mark him as his equal, but he will have power the Dark Lord knows not... and either must die at the hand of the other for neither can live while the other survives... the one with the power...'''*

She pushed him hard, and he was back in the hospital wing at Hogwarts, where she was saying, "I wish we knew what the prophecy said."

He released her and just stared at her.

"Fuck," he said.

"I know," she nodded.

"Ok, well you fought me out eventually. He was still talking when you kicked me out. Was there much more to it?"

She shook her head. "No, the last line was just a repeat of the first. You heard everything of substance. You-Know-Who knows the first half of it, but he never learned about the second half."

Draco nodded, trying to absorb the fact that Potter would have to kill or be killed. Then again, he realized Granger and Weasley were right. It felt inevitable in some way.

"OK, let's try again. Now that I know where it is, I'll go straight to it this time. Try to block me."

She nodded nervously, and Draco entered her mind, quickly settling on the memory of Potter reciting the prophecy. He felt her pushing him hard, but he fought her.

Potter was speaking. “Dumbledore heard it. The exact wording was, ‘*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the Dark Lord...*’”

She erupted, and suddenly Draco was watching one hand start to creep under her shirt while the other slipped into the waistband of her pants. He watched, in utter fascination, as she began to touch herself, and he thought he saw a flash in her head of *him* before he heard a slight gasp, and then she pushed him *hard* back to the hospital wing.

He released her.

They stared at each other again, and her face was aflame, but Draco could hardly find any words to comfort her. He had known this was possible. He himself had erupted any number of erotic dreams and memories for his mother when she trained him, but this was the witch he wanted. She was touching herself in this room. And he thought — or maybe he just hoped — that she was thinking of him while she was doing it.

He didn’t know what to say about it, so he chose to ignore it.

“That was better. You kicked me out faster.”

“But not before I...” she started, and then she flushed again.

Fuck, I have to say something.

“It doesn’t matter,” he said quickly. “Like I said, it’s normal. My mother got to see me wank to a picture of Blaise’s mum many times while she was training me.”

This news had the desired effect. Her eyes flew open in amazement, and then she burst out laughing.

“Alright,” she said. “Fair enough. We’re both adults, afterall. It’s...”

“Normal, yeah,” he said quickly. “Don’t worry about it. We’ll try again.”

She nodded and closed her eyes for a moment. Then she opened them, and he entered her head again.

Potter was saying, “Dumbledore heard it. The exact wording was, ‘*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches...*’”

She pushed and erupted, and now he was watching her teach Ginny Weasley the contraception charm.

“Honestly, Gin, your mother will kill Harry and probably me as well if you get pregnant! Then we’ll lose the war. If you two won’t use condoms, then you have to get this right. Now try again.”

“Why can’t I just take the potion?” she whined.

“Do you really want to ask your mother for some? I can’t brew it for you. I have to ration our ingredients because I have no idea when I’ll be able to get to an apothecary again. The charm requires nothing but concentration to get it right.”

“But I’m horrible at it! And besides, I don’t let Harry come inside of me!” Weasley insisted, and Granger rolled her eyes.

“I cannot believe we’re having this conversation! But since we are, let me tell you that the pull-out method has a very high failure rate.”

He felt another push, and they were back in the hospital wing. He released her, and raised his eyebrows in amusement.

“I thought you weren’t judging my eruptions,” she said, with a reluctant smile.

“I said I wouldn’t judge *you*. I sure as hell will judge Weasley and Potter for having unprotected sex in the middle of a war.”

She laughed a little. “I know, you would think that after seven children Molly Weasley would teach her daughter all about safe sex. But maybe she doesn’t know herself and that’s why she has seven children in the first place.”

Draco groaned at this. “I do *not* want to think about that.”

She laughed again. “Fair enough. Again, then. I’m getting closer. I think I need to start pushing for the block earlier in the memory.”

Draco nodded and entered her mind, and as soon as Potter walked into the room she pushed, and this time she erupted before Potter starting speaking.

Granger was in the miniature library in her suite, with drawings of a crown spread out before her. All of the drawings were slightly different, but he could see that all of them featured a gem in the center, and some carvings with words he couldn’t quite make out. He tried to focus on the words, but before he could read them she pushed hard, and they were back in the Hogwarts hospital wing.

“Good. That was much better. You got me out before he said anything at all.”

She nodded. “I’m still erupting though...”

“You’ve barely gotten started, Granger. Cut yourself some slack. And what was that memory, anyway?”

She just shook her head. “Something we have to find.”

He raised his eyebrows. “Where is it?”

“No clue.”

He sensed she wasn't being completely truthful about this, but he could tell she didn't want to talk to him about it. Still, something about that crown tugged at his mind. It was almost as though he had seen it before. He couldn't pinpoint it though.

"One more time, then, and we'll call it."

She nodded, and he entered her mind. Nearly the moment he entered she blocked him and sent him straight to the hospital wing at Hogwarts. He held it for a moment, trying to pull her back, but she fought him, and eventually he released her.

"Excellent," he said. "Nearly flawless."

She just beamed at him.

As he rose to leave, he suddenly remembered something. "Granger, here," he said, holding out a bottle for her. "It's your potion."

She accepted it with a stunned look.

He gave her a swift smile. "I had an acquaintance nick some from St. Mungo's stores. That should last you a good while, but let me know if you need more, yeah?"

She just nodded, and then she surprised him by standing up, walking over to him, and flinging her arms around him. He caught her automatically and wrapped his own arms around her, bemused by this sudden display of affection.

She pulled back for a moment, and Draco thought she must be standing on her tiptoes.

"Malfoy... thank you. Really. That potion saves my life. In fact... you keep saving my life, don't you?"

He just quirked an eyebrow at her. "Well I can't have you dying on me, love. That would be counterproductive to the war effort."

She wrinkled her nose at this, but laughed as she released him, blushing just a little. He let her go reluctantly as he gave her one last look before walking out of the room.

That night, once he was alone in his dorm at Hogwarts, Draco remembered the eruption he had watched when Granger's hands made their way down her pants. He closed his eyes, groaned, and dropped his hand to his cock to get to work.

Dear Journal,

What kind of sweet torture is it when you see the witch you want to fuck touch herself in her own memories? It's poetry. It's art. It's fucking erotic.

Then again, how can I train her in blocking when I know she has memories like that? I want to go searching for them. I want to see them all. It obviously mortified her, but when I saw it

the only thing I could think about was ripping her clothes off and touching her myself.

I made myself move past it because it embarrassed her, and she has to learn. But fuck, I think this is going to kill me.

And then there's the potions lab we're setting up. I knew she was good at Transfiguration, but watching her conjure everything today was unbelievable. She hasn't even had the seventh year class. It's no wonder her wand conjured that bloody lion for me in class one day.

I thought SHE was the one who might get turned on by advanced magical skills. And yet, I'm the one who's going to get hard every time I look at one of those bloody cauldrons she made. And I will be looking at them. A lot. Because felix felicis becomes absolutely insane by the end of it. I'm probably crazy for wanting to try it.

I'm going to lose my fucking mind. Or maybe I already have.

Chapter 11: The Heir of Malfoy

Hermione

Dear Reader,

I can't write this to Malfoy's kids, as it would not be age appropriate.

Suffice to say we started blocking, and I erupted. Merlin, it was exactly what I had been dreading. Let's just say it was an erotic memory of me by myself. Malfoy looked rather fascinated by the whole thing, but I was about ready to die from mortification.

I have to give him credit for how he handled it. He really didn't judge it and even told me about one of his embarrassing eruptions to make me feel better.

Still, I can't believe he saw it. And other than that look of fascination he didn't act on it at all. Surely he could see that the person I was imagining in my dream was him?

God, I'm so screwed.

Hermione heard a knock on her door. She quickly put the potions books away that she had been studying.

“Come in!” she said, and she watched as Narcissa Malfoy opened the door and poked her head in.

“Busy?” she asked, and Hermione just shook her head and smiled.

Narcissa stepped in and shut the door quietly as she walked over to sit next to Hermione in the little library.

“How are you holding up, my dear?” Narcissa asked.

Hermione was a bit taken aback by this. Narcissa didn’t usually stop in to chat.

“As well as could be expected,” she said. “A bit bored, but I’m making do.”

Narcissa nodded, and Hermione got the impression she was a bit uncomfortable about something.

Oh God, she thought, suddenly realizing why she might be here.

"Hermione, dear, Tippy has mentioned that Draco has been visiting you most evenings."

Hermione felt herself turn scarlet and tried desperately to breathe so her color would return back to normal.

"Erm, yes, he has. Most evenings, though not every one."

Narcissa nodded a bit absently at this.

"Tippy also mentioned that she thinks you two are becoming close?"

I know I believe in House Elf rights, but I am going to kill her, Hermione thought.

She settled for a shrug. "If I can be candid?"

Narcissa nodded.

"I think he's lonely," said Hermione. "He's the only student who is a marked Death Eater at Hogwarts. When I read the occlumency journal, I noticed he wrote a lot, especially last year when he began to push his friends away. He cares a great deal about Pansy, Blaise, and Theo, and he doesn't want them getting caught up in the Death Eaters because of him. So he has isolated himself from them in an effort to keep them safe. Plus, he has his own room there so he's not forced to socialize with anybody. I'm the only person his age who knows where his true loyalties lie. I don't know if that makes us close, but I suppose it gives us something in common that he can't share with anybody else."

Narcissa narrowed her eyes at this a bit, as she considered Hermione's words. Hermione desperately hoped this explanation would satisfy her. She didn't want Malfoy to stop visiting her on off nights, but she also didn't want Narcissa to guess her true feelings.

To Hermione's consternation, Narcissa's eyes roved over the roses that Hermione still kept fresh, as though studying them for a moment. Hermione tried not to grimace.

"And how is the occlumency coming then?" Narcissa asked.

Hermione exhaled. This was safer footing.

"It's going pretty well. I'm getting the hang of storytelling, and we're starting to work on blocking. That's harder, but I need to be able to do it. The... mission I have for the Order is critical."

"And does Draco know of this mission?"

Hermione shook her head. "Not yet, though he'll find out about it soon. We've been working chronologically to make sure I don't miss something."

"And the eruptions? How have you two handled that?"

Hermione sighed. "They're awkward. But honestly, Draco's been great about them so far. We pretty much ignore them."

Narcissa suddenly shifted tactics. “Has Draco dated anybody recently?”

Hermione felt like she was getting whiplash.

“Erm, I know he dated Astoria Greengrass for a few weeks. But she... ummm... had stronger feelings than he did so they broke up. I don’t believe he’s dating anybody right now.”

Now Narcissa looked her squarely in the eye. “Oh my dear, I feel certain that he is.”

Hermione furrowed her brow, as her stomach sank. “Who?”

To her consternation Narcissa just gave her a small smile. “I’m sure he’ll tell you in due course.”

“Oh. Right,” said Hermione, and she couldn’t help the slightly forlorn note in her voice as she said this.

Of course he would find somebody else to date. Somebody who is a pureblood. He cares about me, but just as a friend.

Narcissa rose now. “Very well, dear, I’ll check in a bit later. Draco’s birthday is tomorrow, you know, so I have quite a lot to do.”

“Oh, of course,” said Hermione, now feeling even worse. She couldn’t even get out to get him a gift. Not that she really expected him to drop by on his birthday anyway. Still, it would be nice to see him...

“Hermione,” she said, as she got to the door.

“Hmmm?” asked Hermione, a bit distracted as she wracked her brain for something she could give to Malfoy without leaving this prison she was in.

“The Malfoy men give their hearts once. It’s a family trait. In the generations when their wives died first, even when they died very young such as in childbirth, the Malfoy men have never remarried. Not once in over 900 years.”

Hermione was confused. *Why was Narcissa telling her this?*

“Oh, well... that’s very romantic,” she finally said. Then she frowned as she thought about it. “They’ve always married for love then?”

“Nearly,” replied Narcissa. “In generations where the Lord Malfoy’s love was deemed... unsuitable... then a marriage was arranged, and his lover was kept as a mistress.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at this, but Narcissa’s comment raised another question for her.

“There’s a title then? I had no idea.”

Narcissa gave her a small smile. “Yes, Armand Malfoy came to England with William the Conqueror in 1066. William gave Armand the land for the Manor and a noble title in thanks for his services to the crown. There was more mixing between wizards and muggles before the Statute of Secrecy of course, and the Malfoy’s certainly aren’t the only wizarding family who wound up with a title. Quite a few of the older families have them. And while the title came from muggles originally, the prestige of it has been adapted into pureblood circles over the centuries. It has been a means of securing property and wealth through the generations.”

Hermione felt something in her heart sink a little. Not only was Malfoy a pureblood, but his family was titled too. She had never thought of this since he was a wizard, but she should have realized it based on the opulence of his home. She knew of course that wizards mixed openly with muggles before the Statute of Secrecy in 1689. The old wizarding families had hundreds of years to acquire titles and land before they were forced into hiding, and now that she thought about it she realized how easy it would be for wizards to perform services to the crown with magic that would have warranted those kinds of gifts. Hermione sighed. It was the first time she ever felt he was truly out of her league. Hermione’s own family had always been rather well-off thanks to her parents’ professions, but they were common.

If Malfoy was a muggle, he probably would have gone to Eton with the rest of the peerage, she thought.

“So the heir to the title has always been allowed to marry for love unless he wanted somebody his family didn’t approve of...?” she asked, with a bit of dismay.

A muggleborn, the voice in her head whispered.

“It didn’t happen often, my dear. Most married for love. But the few times it was arranged, the Lord Malfoy did the bare minimum to secure a legitimate heir, and then he abandoned his wife to be in the arms of his lover. And when his lover was gone, he never took another.”

Hermione felt an odd twinge at this. She wasn’t sure what to say.

“How do you know all this?” she finally asked.

“I’ve always had an interest in family history. There are journals in the Malfoy library recording everything.”

Hermione bit her lip as she thought about it. Then she looked at Narcissa. “Why are you telling me all this?”

Narcissa gave her a hard look, as though debating something with herself. Finally she said, “I worry that in Draco’s generation, he and his chosen partner will be in the thick of it with this war. I don’t want either one of them to die young.”

“No, of course not,” said Hermione, now understanding. “Well for what it’s worth, if Draco falls in love and whoever she is dies in the war, I’ll stay his friend as long as I’m here too.”

Hermione thought it might break her heart if she had to watch Malfoy fall in love with another witch and then mourn her for the rest of his life, but if she survived she would do it.

She cared about him, and she would do anything for her friends, even things that were very painful. She had proven that much already when she obviated her parents to join Harry.

Narcissa gave her a small smile at this. “That gives me a great deal of comfort my dear. I think as long as you keep yourself safe, Draco will manage whatever comes.”

Hermione gave her a tight smile, now feeling worse than ever. “I’ll do my best.”

Narcissa gave her one last look and then swept out of the room.

Hermione wasn’t exactly sure why, but she felt her eyes well with tears as she thought about the next Lady Malfoy.

Hermione looked up in surprise to see Malfoy walking into her room. She had sent a message to him with Tippy — whom she barely managed to *not* strangle — to let him know that she had a birthday gift for him, but that he should wait until he had plenty of time to come get it.

“Happy birthday, but I know for a fact your mother was planning something. Shouldn’t you be there instead?”

He smirked. “I convinced her to hold the party earlier in the day. It gave me an excuse to skive History of Magic. Besides, I have some ingredients to deliver to you,” and he opened his satchel and started pulling out the things they would need to start *felix felicis*. “My only request is that you don’t do it without me. I want to help.”

Hermione eyed them eagerly. “Malfoy, this is amazing. We can start tonight if you want,” and he followed her into the small room where she started to decant ingredients into jars. “Now tell me – who was at this party?”

Malfoy leaned against the table as he watched her. “Just Death Eaters and future Death Eaters. Never a dull moment with that lot. But nobody tried to poison the cake this time, so overall, Mother deemed it a success.”

“Poisoned cake?” she asked with amusement. “Does that happen often?”

“Oh yes, there are attempts on Bella’s life on a regular basis. Not that I would mind if one of them was successful. But still, it would put a damper on the festivities.”

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh. He was in a playful mood tonight.

“So I take it you came by to bring me potions ingredients and collect your gifts then?”

He raised an eyebrow. “Gifts? As in plural?”

“Plural,” Hermione confirmed.

“Well, I admit I’m curious. I didn’t expect anything at all, given that you haven’t seen the light of day in months.”

“You’re in for an exciting evening, Malfoy, if you want it,” Hermione teased, as she finished putting the ingredients into the jars. “Gifts first, then *felix*, yeah?”

His eyes darkened a bit, and he looked her up and down. “I’m definitely up for some excitement.”

She blushed a bit, but reached into her pocket and pulled out a sickle and tossed it to him as she led him out of the small room.

He quirked his eyebrow at her. She just smiled and pulled out another sickle and tapped it with her finger. Malfoy’s burned red, and he nearly dropped it.

Happy birthday it read.

He stared down at it and then stared back at her. She just smiled and shrugged. “I made another set. They’re paired, so they’re secure. I know we see each other all the time, but I just thought...”

“It’s amazing,” he said quickly. “How do I make it write back?”

“You just tap the middle with your wand and think of what you want to say.”

He narrowed his eyes. “You’re doing it wandlessly from your end then?”

She nodded.

Still staring at her he pulled out the vinewood wand and tapped the sickle. Hers burned red, and she looked down at it.

This is flipping brilliant.

“Goddammit,” said Malfoy, now scowling at her wand.

“What?” she asked.

“I tried to make it say, ‘This is fucking brilliant.’ Your wand censored me.”

Hermione couldn’t help it, she just burst out laughing.

His lip twitched as he watched her.

“I guess you’ll have to keep it clean, Malfoy,” she said.

He raised an eyebrow. “But what if I want it to be dirty?”

Hermione's jaw dropped, and then she quickly shut it with a snap. She cleared her throat. "Well, if your theory about my wand holds true, I suppose you'll just have to wait for me to get dirty first."

He closed his eyes for a moment at those words, as though imagining it. "I can hardly wait, love."

Hermione felt herself blushing as she said, "Alright then, moving on. My other gift... you've been teaching me for months. I thought maybe I could teach you something in return."

He cocked his head, clearly intrigued. "What's that?"

"Do you want to learn how to cast a patronus?"

His eyes got big, and he started to smile slowly. "Yes. Yes, I do."

Hermione was pleased. She thought he might be interested in this. When he had watched memories of the D.A. during fifth year, she sensed that he was jealous of all the students who could cast one. Patronuses were usually seventh year material, but since the Defense class had been disbanded, he wouldn't learn it at Hogwarts.

"Stand up then," she said, as she rose and walked to a clear area near the sitting room. He followed her.

"Now you heard the incantation in my memories. It's '*Expecto patronum*.'"

"*Expecto patronum*," Malfoy chanted.

"Good," said Hermione. "Your inflection is good. Now let me see the wand for a moment, and I'll show you the motion."

He narrowed his eyes a bit and hesitated, but then he handed it to her. She gripped it, feeling warmth travel through her again. Her wand glowed just a bit, as though happy to be back in her hands. She saw Malfoy watching the whole thing with curiosity.

"Right," she said. "You turn your palm up like this, and then throw your arm out like so..." she demonstrated it. "Think of it as though you are hurling your magic toward a dementor. It takes some force. Here, you try it."

She handed the wand back to Malfoy and watched as he did it a few times.

"Good. The last thing then... and this is the hardest bit... is finding a memory or feeling that makes you happy. And it's not just anything that makes you happy. It's the thing that makes you the happiest in that moment. It's very hard to do when a real dementor is in front of you because they feed on your sadness. It takes a lot of willpower to pull something happy out of yourself when you are feeling so sad, but I've realized it's a bit like occlumency. You compartmentalize the sadness and extract the happiness."

"Something that makes me happy then?" he asked.

"Yes. The happiest thing you can think of. It can be a memory, or a person, or even a dream. But it has to inspire feelings of great happiness."

Malfoy stood for a moment, thinking hard. Then he turned and bellowed, "*Expecto patronum!*"

A white mist formed.

"That's excellent!" said Hermione. "That's fantastic for a first try. The mist means you're doing the wand movement and incantation correctly. It would hold back a couple dementors. But the thing you're thinking of isn't happy enough. Can you tell me what it was?"

"I was thinking of playing quidditch," he said.

Hermione smiled. "That's a good start. But you need something stronger. It has to fill you completely."

He thought again and shouted, "*Expecto patronum!*" and this time the silver mist was more solid, as though it was trying to form.

"Better!" Hermione said excitedly, her eyes sparkling. "That's fantastic, really. What was your memory?"

"Getting my Hogwarts letter," he said. Hermione looked at him in surprise. He just shrugged. "Father wanted to send me to Durmstrang, but I wanted to go to Hogwarts. I didn't know which place I would be attending until my letter came."

Hermione bit her lip as she thought about this. "Alright. So your memory of playing quidditch... I can see how that's happy, but it's also really competitive and draws out other emotions besides happiness. And the Hogwarts letter... well, it sounds like it relieved your anxiety more than making you truly happy. You have to find something that isn't wrapped up with too many negative feelings."

He furrowed his brow as he thought. "Fair point. What's your happy memory then?" he finally asked.

"Mine has changed over the years, but recently it's been a wish instead of a memory. I think of completing my tattoo."

His eyebrows shot up. "Now I have to know."

"No you don't," she teased. "But it's true. I have something in mind when I complete my tattoo. And for my patronus I think about how satisfying it's going to be."

She could tell he was still struggling to think of something, so she said, "When I had a block on my patronus, Harry had me feel the magic. I could feel his happiness, and it helped me identify the feeling I was trying to achieve. Give me the wand and stand behind me."

Malfoy handed her the wand and came behind her, standing very close. She smiled to herself.

"Now put one arm around my waist and cover my wand hand with yours. We're going to cast it together."

He didn't say anything, but he immediately slipped an arm around her and pulled her tight against his chest. The other hand covered hers while she was holding her wand. She felt her heart start to pound.

Breathe, Hermione. Honestly, don't be ridiculous.

"Ready?" she asked, and she was pleased to hear her voice sounded steady.

"Yes," he murmured in her ear. Hermione felt goosebumps erupt on her arms at the feeling of him so close. She took another deep breath and focused on her happy dream.

"*Expecto patronum!*" she shouted, and she threw her wand forward. Immediately she felt the thrum of her magic, and she heard Malfoy gasp at the positive energy that coalesced for just a moment before forming into her otter patronus that started gamboling around the room.

She watched it for a moment before she realized Malfoy was still holding her. She turned to face him, and to her surprise he didn't release her.

"Well?" she asked a bit breathlessly.

"I felt it. It's really powerful. You said it can be a dream instead of a memory?"

"Yes. As long as it's a happy one. It has to be something that inspires as much happiness in you as you felt in me. Try to recreate that power." She held the wand up in between them, and eventually he released her and took it.

He thought for another moment and then he looked at her intently as he shouted, "*Expecto patronum!*"

Hermione watched as the mist formed and then coalesced into...

"A Hebridean black..." she breathed, as she stared at the large dragon that had formed in the sitting room.

She spun around to look at Malfoy in amazement, and she saw he had a stunned, but delighted expression on his face. A moment later he flicked the wand, and it winked out. Then he looked at her and broke into the largest smile she had ever seen from him. She whooped and ran to him, and he scooped her up and spun her around, laughing.

"That was *amazing!*" she said, laughing too. "A dragon! You're a dragon! Do you know how rare a magical creature is? Dumbledore's patronus was a phoenix, and I knew dragons were possible in theory, but I've never seen one!"

Suddenly she realized he was still holding her, and her smile died as she watched his eyes drop to her lips.

Her heart began to pound so hard she was certain he could feel it. *Will he?*

But instead of kissing her he said, “What does a dragon mean then?”

She smiled at this. “Patronuses are supposed to be a reflection of your personality. I’d wager the dragon means you’re protective, maybe even possessive. When you want something, you do everything in your power to get it. When you decide something is yours, you keep it forever. The Hebridean black is ancient and has lived in the same territory in Scotland for centuries. And their territories are large because they’re aggressive in guarding it. The fact that it’s a magical creature... well like I said, it’s extremely rare. And it’s thought that a magical patronus is indicative of great magical ability and that the caster has an affinity for that specific animal. And then of course there are the names. Your first name references the dragon constellation as a nod to your mother’s family. And the species of your patronus mirrors it with ‘black’ in the name too. It fits... Draco.”

She watched a look of surprise cross his face and his eyes warmed at the use of his first name. She didn’t think she had ever called him by his first name before, but she could tell he liked it. He raised a hand to her face and brushed her cheek with his thumb. She felt her breath catch.

“You’re right. I’m very protective. And I’m finding I’m rather... more possessive than I initially realized. I do guard what’s mine. I even guard the things that I wish were mine.”

Hermione felt her head spinning. It was almost like he was talking about *her*. But that couldn’t be right. His mother was sure he was dating someone.

She opened her mouth to ask another question when suddenly there was a *CRACK!* and Tippy appeared. They jumped apart, Hermione blushing furiously and Malfoy looking supremely annoyed.

“Master Draco, Mistress wishes to see you before you leave.”

Malfoy snorted at this, but he gathered his things and then turned back to Hermione.

“I can probably take the time to start *felix* with you, but then I’ll have to go.”

She nodded and led them back into the small room and pulled out the book with the instructions.

“The first few months is mostly stewing anyway,” she said. “The schedule gets harder the closer you get to the end.”

She and Malfoy worked in silence for a few minutes, shredding shrivelfigs. She glanced at his hands and couldn’t help but notice how relaxed and confident he seemed as he prepped the ingredients.

“Malfoy,” she said suddenly.

“Hmm?” he asked with a small smile as he continued to watch his work.

“Are you dating anybody?”

He stopped what he was doing for a moment and turned to give her an amused look. “What makes you think that?”

She frowned. “It’s just... your mother dropped in yesterday, and we chatted a bit. She seemed sure that you are.”

He gave her a wry look now before going back to his shrivelfigs. “My mother likes to meddle. I love her dearly, but she’s always scheming. And she’s an optimist. She always thinks her plans are coming true, even if they aren’t. You’d do well to remember that.”

They both dumped their shrivelfigs into the gold cauldron and then Malfoy measured out some honeywater to begin the brew. Hermione wandlessly lit a fire under the cauldron, much to Malfoy’s amusement.

“Well...” she said, as they turned to prepping mandrake leaves, “is there anybody you *want* to date then?”

Hermione felt her face turning crimson, and she refused to look at him. But she felt his eyes on her as she stared pointedly at her leaves.

“Opportunities to leave school or the Manor for dates are a bit thin on the ground right now,” he said carefully. “But in a world where the Dark Lord was gone? Sure.”

Hermione bit her lip, wondering if she dared to ask him anything else, but then decided she didn’t. They worked in silence for another fifteen minutes until they had completed the first step.

“Alright, this stews for about a week,” she said.

He nodded and stood back for her to exit the little room first. “I had better go see Mother before she sends Tippy again.”

“Oh... yes. Of course,” said Hermione.

He started to make his way to her door when he stopped and turned around.

“Granger,” he said. Hermione looked up. “Thank you. Those gifts... they were amazing.”

Hermione smiled, very pleased that she had done so well given the circumstances.

“In our next lesson I’ll teach you how to make your dragon talk.”

He gave her an incredulous look, but she just smiled. “I’m serious. You can send messages with them. I’ll show you how to do it later.”

“It’s a date then,” he said, and he gave a little smile at the stunned look on her face as he walked out.

A dragon, she thought as she lay in bed that night. *His patronus is a bloody dragon*. As she played with her sickle she realized that he never did tell her what memory he used to conjure

it.

She was still twirling the sickle between her fingers when it suddenly burned red.

Dragons mate for life you know.

Chapter 12: Horcruxes

Chapter Notes

I hope you all are enjoying! I know I'm slow burning them a little bit, but I promise you that once they find each other they make up for lost time lol. There are quite a few chapters to go.

There are still a few barriers between them that need to fall before we get there. A big one, of course, is Hermione's great secret about the horcruxes.

Hermione

Dear Reader,

Draco Malfoy is a dragon, did you know? I'm both surprised and very much... not. It fits.

Also, we're trying to brew felix felicis together. Yes, it's illegal, but if we can pull it off it should give us an enormous advantage. The first few months are pretty easy, but then it ramps at the end. We're going to have our work cut out for us. Watching him brew though... Merlin it turns me on. He's just so confident, and he works effortlessly. I never really saw him do this in Potions class because I always worked at the front of the room, and he always worked at the back. But yes, for the record, brewing potions with Draco Malfoy is a massive turn on. God, I know, I'm being ridiculous.

Tippy keeps popping in, making vague references to Malfoy's relationship with some unknown witch. Malfoy just rolled his eyes at this so I don't think he's in one, but it seems to be the thing that the Malfoy family wants. It's entirely irrational to be bothered by it... of course he has to get married someday to pass down the title, and there is 900 years of pure blood working against me here.

I'm sure you're proof of that.

Not that I'm saying I'm thinking about marrying Malfoy. That's just crazy. I'm only eighteen, and it's not like we've even kissed. I have no claim on him whatsoever. But with the war and all... well, I've had to grow up quickly. Thinking about him taking up with somebody else is damned depressing.

After Draco's birthday, he settled into studying for exams while taking brief breaks for occlumency practice and *felix felicis*. Hermione hadn't seen him as often, though he swore it was temporary.

"I don't even know why I'm bothering with exams this year," he said. "It's not like I'm getting a job after Hogwarts. I'm committed to a life with the Death Eaters until that bastard is dead."

Hermione, of course, insisted that exams were still important, and she was a bit jealous she wasn't taking any herself. Still, she was glad the year was ending. Malfoy would be done and moving back to the Manor once school was out. She hoped she would see him even more often once he did.

He had messaged her, promising a longer than usual occlumency session this evening because he said he couldn't bear to study any longer. Hermione bit her lip as she thought about it. They were at the horcruxes now, and she still hadn't told Harry and Ron about her occlumency. Knowing she had delayed it as long as she could, she grabbed her sickle.

I need to tell H&R about occlumency.

Why?

Because the next thing you'll see is very classified.

It was a long while before he responded.

Don't tell them who I am or where you are.

Obviously I won't.

Fine.

She sighed. She could tell Malfoy was annoyed with her, but there was nothing for it. She picked up her galleon next.

I need to tell you something.

Found something?

No. Is this both of you or one of you?

It's just Harry. Ron is having a kip.

That's good. I wanted to tell you the person who is holding me is teaching me occlumency.

What? Why?

So I can keep their identity secret. But they are helping me keep other things secret too.

You've told them about the horcruxes?

Not yet, but it will be next.

Hermione, no.

I don't have a choice. That's the price of my freedom. I have to master occlumency.

We can break you out.

No you can't. I'm blood warded in, and I'm surrounded by Death Eaters.

Dumbledore didn't want others to know.

Well Dumbledore is dead. And they can help us, Harry.

How?

They are close to certain people and things. I really think they can help us finish this.

But nobody can know about it.

Harry the entire point of occlumency is so nobody knows. But if you're captured your mind is an open book. It won't stay a secret.

Again there was another long pause. She wrote another message.

I know you don't like it, but at this point I'm the only one of us who stands a chance of keeping it a secret if our minds are searched. You and Ron never learned occlumency.

Another long pause.

I don't trust him. He might tell You-Know-Who.

They won't. They have kept my secrets. They have been helping me.

How?

They told me he was searching for you. They helped me break the old fidelius for you.

What else?

They're protecting information about McGonagall and the Hogwarts defenses.

What else?

They're brewing felix felicis with me.

Wait, really?

Yes. It's a ridiculously hard potion. I don't think I could manage it by myself. But they are very talented in potions. We're doing it together.

Maybe. But what else?

For fuck's sake Harry they told You-Know-Who I was dead and occluded the truth while being tortured. What else do you want?

There was another pause.

He occluded while being tortured?

I didn't say it was a he, but yes, my teacher can occlude while under the cruciatus curse. They've had lots of practice with it.

That's horrifying.

Yes, but that's my point. You-Know-Who can perform legilimency while torturing people at the same time. My teacher can occlude through it. Our secrets are safe.

And Malfoy's teaching you all this?

I didn't say it was Malfoy. But yes, my teacher is training me to do it too.

So is that what you two do on your dates then?

I don't know what you're talking about.

Every evening you're tied up. You're dating him, admit it.

This statement was jarring enough that Hermione just stared at her galleon for a long moment. Inexplicably she thought of Narcissa's insistence that Malfoy was dating somebody. Surely Narcissa didn't mean *her*. Hermione was a muggleborn. Narcissa was kind to her, but Hermione was certain Narcissa would intervene if she thought Hermione was holding Malfoy's interest in a truly romantic way. Unless Narcissa expected Hermione to be the lover he kept on the side.... Hermione wrinkled her nose at this and pushed the thoughts away. It was just a coincidence, surely.

Again, I didn't say it was a he. And you're being ridiculous.

I know you don't swing that way, Hermione. It's definitely a he.

Oh my God, Harry. Seriously?

Tell Malfoy that if he breaks your heart I'll kill him after I kill You-Know-Who.

Nobody is breaking anybody's heart. It's just training.

You keep telling yourself that.

Alright, I'm done here. Can I please tell my teacher about the horcruxes?

It sounds like you will tell him whether I say so or not.

I won't. It's your mission. But they can help us. I'm sure of it.

You really trust him then?

I trust my teacher with my life. They've saved it a couple times already.

And you like him.

I didn't say it was a him.

You're impossible.

And you're annoying.

OK fine, you can tell Malfoy about the horcruxes. But you owe me big time.

Thank you. And why?

Because I'm the one who has to break the news to Ron that Malfoy is getting our secrets and our girl.

Despite herself, Hermione smiled at this a bit. Harry sounded exasperated, not angry. And she supposed she was right that she owed him for being the one to inform Ron.

Ugh, you are the worst. I have never once said that it's Malfoy.

I love you, Hermione.

I love you too, Harry.

Hermione just shook her head at the galleon, but the rapid messaging finally died out. She leaned back on the sofa, feeling drained but much lighter. She had been worrying over this for days as they got closer and closer to it. Harry had taken it as well as could be expected, and she was lucky to catch him alone without Ron. The only remaining issue then, was Malfoy. She picked up her sickle.

I messaged H. He says I can tell you.

What about R?

He doesn't know yet, but it doesn't matter. Two against one, he's overruled.

And you didn't tell them it's me?

Would I?

Mistakes happen.

I don't make those kinds of mistakes. But search my memory tonight if you're that worried about it.

There was a long pause and finally her sickle burned red one last time.

That won't be necessary. I trust you.

Dear Reader,

We're doing it tonight. I'm going to show Malfoy my first memories involving the classified information for the war.

Wish me luck because I have no idea how to occlude the last eighteen months of my life. Then again, I'll admit your father is much better at it than I am. If anybody can figure out how to do it, it's him.

Draco

Draco let himself into Granger's room after dodging Bellatrix in the hallway. He had gotten to the Manor earlier than usual, intending to have a long session with Granger and possibly a drink or maybe even a snog if he was lucky. He had spent most of the day wondering about this great secret she was going to reveal tonight — the thing she kept alluding to but would never talk about — the thing that evidently required Potter's permission to share. He had to admit that it was something that had been a barrier between them ever since their occlumency started. He sincerely hoped that this barrier would finally fall tonight.

Draco grimaced when he thought about it. It was galling that she felt she had to ask Potter first. But at least Potter had agreed. Draco tried not to act as annoyed by it as he felt.

"Hey," said Granger, standing as he walked in. He glanced at her and saw she was in jeans tonight and a large Gryffindor quidditch jersey. He belatedly realized it was Potter's jersey.

"Are you wearing Potter's clothes?" he asked in disgust.

She looked at him askance. "I wear his clothes all the time."

"Granger, if you need clothes, we can get you clothes."

"I don't need clothes. Harry's stuff is comfortable, and it's not like he can wear it right now."

"There's being comfortable and then there's wearing some other bloke's quidditch jersey," he said sourly.

To his dismay she got a teasing look on her face. "Oh Malfoy, don't tell me you're *jealous*. You know Harry's like my brother. But if you need me to take it off so you can

concentrate....”

She started to lift it over her head, and he said, “No! Fucking hell, do not strip or I won’t be able to focus on what we’re supposed to be doing.”

Then he clamped his mouth shut as he realized what he just said. He closed his eyes and rubbed the bridge of his nose, as he tried to refocus. This was *not* a great start to the evening.

Granger, however, looked positively delighted. “Never say so, Malfoy.”

“I’m a bloke, and I have eyes. Now sit down and tell me about this sodding secret of yours.”

She smirked at him for a moment but then walked over to the sideboard to pour him a drink. She shoved it into his hand.

“Here. You’re probably going to need this.”

“That bad?” he asked, eyebrows raising, and she nodded.

“Yes. I’ve been thinking about how to do this, and I want to try blocking again. I’ll explain stuff that you see. But I have to give it a shot.”

He was feeling tense now. She was clearly on edge, and it was making him nervous too.

“Alright...” he said slowly. “What am I looking for?”

“Something called horcruxes.”

Draco stilled and furrowed his brow. “I’ve never heard of them.”

Granger’s face showed some relief at this.

“I’m... glad, actually. They’re truly evil. As you’re about to find out.”

“OK, then,” said Draco. “I’ll go looking for horcruxes. Try to block me.”

She nodded, and he thought *Legilimens!* and he was in her mind.

Instinctively, he moved to the part of her brain where he sensed the most fear and stress. He could tell that horcruxes made her deeply uncomfortable, and so he set out toward those emotions in her mind. Very quickly he found a whole host of memories she was trying to block at the same time. It was so many memories that he knew blocking wouldn’t work for this. She was trying to block nearly an entire year from him. He knew that would never work, but he decided they would worry about that later. For now he simply picked the first memory he found and pushed hard as he began to watch, clamping down when he felt her try to fight him.

Potter was talking to Granger and Weasley in the Gryffindor common room. “So Riddle asked Slughorn about horcruxes. And then Slughorn’s memory went all odd. Slughorn’s voice kept shouting over himself that Riddle would come to a bad end, and he didn’t know

anything about horcruxes. But Dumbledore said the memory was tampered with, and the real memory is still inside Slughorn. I have to get it from him.”

“Can you use legilimency?” asked Granger.

“No, he’s —”

Draco felt a hard push, and then Granger was walking into the Gryffindor common room saying, “There’s nothing about them in the library! Not a single thing!”

Draco pushed again toward the next memory, and now Granger was harassing Potter.

“Harry, getting that memory from Slughorn is the most important thing!”

“I will! I just need more —”

Another push, and then again he saw Granger walking into the Gryffindor common room and she said, “There’s nothing about them in the library! Not a single thing!”

Draco felt her trying to hold him there, but he wrenched himself away and found a later memory with Potter, Weasley, and Granger. Suddenly he felt Granger really start to struggle, and he knew this must be it. He was finally going to learn this secret.

“I got the memory from Slughorn last night! I got him drunk at Aragog’s funeral, and he gave it to me. He doesn’t even remember it.”

“So what *is* a horcrux then?” asked Granger eagerly.

She was pushing so hard, but Draco fought to keep her there with all of his might. He had been so curious about this secret for ages. And if was honest with himself, he knew it was one of the things that was holding him back from starting things with her. He wanted her to trust him, and while this secret was hanging between them he didn’t feel like she did, at least not fully.

“A horcrux is an object that contains part of a wizard’s soul. The wizard splits their soul through an act of murder and hides part of it in the horcrux. Dumbledore said that as long as the wizard has a horcrux the wizard can’t die. His body may die, but the piece of soul in the horcrux never dies on its own, unless the horcrux is destroyed. In other words, as long as the wizard has a horcrux the wizard can resurrect himself like Voldemort did. Slughorn told Riddle what they were.”

Draco could see the appalled looked on Weasley’s and Granger’s faces, and he felt his own revulsion and fear as he thought about this.

Granger was fighting, and Draco felt his grip slipping, but there was still more.

“So You-Know-Who made a horcrux?” asked Weasley.

Potter grimaced. “Dumbledore thinks he made six.”

“Six!” shrieked Granger, and Draco himself was so horrified by this prospect that he felt his grip break, and then Granger erupted.

He was watching her studying the diagrams of crowns again, making notes and working on her own sketch that seemed to blend a few of them. Again, something about it looked familiar.

She pushed hard to send him to her home base, but he fought back. He wanted to see this. She must think this was one of the horcruxes, and he could have *sworn* he had seen it before. She was fighting him too, but he was getting closer and closer.

Finally he was close enough to the diagrams to see the words, ‘Wit beyond measure is man’s greatest treasure.’”

And Draco suddenly knew where he had seen it. But before he could release her, she tried to pull him out of the memory and erupted *again*, and this time the memory she brought him to was so different, so incredible Draco couldn’t bring himself to look away.

It might have been from that same memory he had seen before when she started to touch herself. Or maybe it was a different time. But all he knew was that he was watching Hermione Granger grip her breasts while her hand was in her knickers again, but this time her eruption had immediately brought him to the moment she orgasmed.

He was getting to see Hermione Granger climax for the first time, and he grew impossibly hard as he watched. He was sure it was the most exquisite thing he had ever seen, and he devoured the sight of her. All thoughts of horcruxes completely left his mind as she moaned and arched right there before him, but then all too soon there was another rough push and Granger was walking into the Gryffindor common room saying, “There’s nothing about them in the library! Not a single thing!”

Draco came to his senses and released her.

They stared at each other. Her eyes were wide, and her cheeks were flushed. Draco closed his own eyes for a moment to compose himself. He desperately needed a wank. The image of her face like that was permanently seared in his brain, and it took every ounce of willpower to force it back down.

Horcruxes. Not orgasms, horcruxes. For fuck’s sake man, get it together.

“Horcruxes,” he said out loud, because he didn’t know how else to start.

“Yes,” said Granger, swallowing hard with a determined look on her face. “We’ve been hunting them. That’s why this is top secret. If he finds out that we know, then he’ll...”

“Make more?”

“Possibly,” said Granger. “His soul is very unstable, though. I’m not sure that he *can* make more. But he doesn’t have to. He just has to move the ones he’s already made, and then we’re starting from scratch again.”

“So he’s hidden them?”

Granger nodded. “Yes. There’s one he keeps with him fairly often. But the others have been hidden.”

“What are they? How many have you found?”

“They’re mostly items associated with the Hogwarts founders. There were two items from Slytherin, probably one from Hufflepuff, and one from Ravenclaw. And then there was the diary he wrote in to open the Chamber of Secrets. And then...”

“Wait, back up.”

Granger sighed, like she knew what was coming.

“The Chamber of Secrets?” he clarified.

“Yes,” she said. “You-Know-Who gave your dad a horcrux before he fell in the first war. Your dad planted it on Ginny Weasley in our second year at Flourish and Blotts when he had that fight with Arthur Weasley. Ginny wrote in it, Tom Riddle’s soul possessed her, and she opened the Chamber.”

Draco felt numb. *Had his father known? Surely not...*

“We don’t think Lucius knew what it was,” jumped in Granger, as though reading his thoughts. “We think You-Know-Who just told him it would open the Chamber. The Ministry was doing a lot of raids that year, and we think he just wanted to get rid of it since it was a dark object.”

Draco shut his eyes, praying to every god he had ever heard of that Granger was right, and his father wasn’t truly that evil. He exhaled and looked back at her.

“Alright. The diary, then. Any more?”

“Nagini is the sixth horcrux.”

“Salazar save me,” said Draco in horror.

That snake had always creeped him out. Now he finally understood why. It wasn’t just because she was dangerous and liked to eat people. It was because she had part of the Dark Lord’s soul inside of her.

Granger’s mouth quirked at this a little.

“Quite. She’ll have to be last because she’s usually near You-Know-Who. The moment she’s gone, Harry has to go after the piece of soul left in his body.”

“And that’s how the Dark Lord dies?” He wanted to make sure he was very clear on this point.

“Yes, that’s how he dies,” she replied. “It’s the only way for him to die.”

“Granger, this is insane.”

“I know. But we’ve made progress,” she said.

“Tell me.”

“Well first, Harry destroyed the diary in second year. So that one’s been gone for a while, and it taught us quite a bit. For instance, You-Know-Who evidently doesn’t feel anything when a horcrux is destroyed. And we learned that horcruxes can fight back. The piece of Riddle in that diary nearly killed both Ginny and Harry.”

“Fucking hell. But that leaves you with five left then.”

Granger nodded. “Yes. But then Dumbledore destroyed a ring that used to belong to Salazar Slytherin. Remember his black hand last year and that ring he started wearing? The ring was cursed, and it was a horcrux. Somehow it affected his hand before he was able to finish it. I think he must have tried it on, but Harry insists Dumbledore wouldn’t be that stupid. I’m not so sure though.”

Now Draco cocked his head as he thought about it.

“It was a cursed ring?”

“Yes,” said Granger. “Like I said, the horcruxes like to fight back. Why?”

“Nothing, it’s just... well if it was a cursed object, how did he survive it? It killed his hand. Why didn’t it spread?”

Granger just shrugged. “He must have isolated the curse.”

“Or somebody else did...” said Draco to himself.

“Who?” said Granger.

Draco just shook his head as he thought of the person who taught him how to heal cursed wounds after he himself was cursed by Potter.

“I have no proof. Let’s not get distracted by that just yet. OK, so Dumbledore destroys a ring. Down to four.”

“Yes,” said Granger. “And we traced a locket of Slytherin’s to Dolores Umbridge in the Ministry of Magic last fall. We stole it from her, and Ron destroyed it a couple months before we were captured.”

“I remember hearing about that!” Draco said, his eyes getting large. “The Dark Lord was pissed that Potter got away from the Ministry!”

"Yes, but thankfully he didn't know we took a horcrux. The locket had been stolen a few times by the time it made its way to Umbridge. You-Know-Who had no idea she had it."

Draco thought about this. "You said you stole it last fall, and Weasley destroyed it a few weeks before you lot were caught. Why the long wait?"

"Because we didn't have a way to destroy it until then," said Granger. "Horcruxes are very hard to destroy. You have to permanently and irreparably ruin the magical container housing the bit of soul. Only a few substances will do it. One of those substances is basilisk venom. When Harry destroyed the diary in second year, he pulled the Sword of Gryffindor out of the Sorting Hat in the Chamber and killed a basilisk with it. The Sword is goblin made, and the blade is impregnated with basilisk venom, so it can kill a horcrux. We didn't have the Sword or another basilisk fang until then."

Draco squeezed his eyes shut to concentrate. This story was so unbelievable, and he was still recovering from that last memory he saw of Granger's orgasm. It was *not* helping him focus. He cast around for another question.

"Where did you find the Sword?"

Now Granger got a pensive look on her face. "It was odd, actually. Harry was lured out of our tent one night by a doe patronus. His dad's patronus was a stag, and his mother's was a doe though obviously she's dead. He says it felt gentle and friendly and almost like his mother was calling him, so he followed it. The patronus stopped at a frozen pond and Harry saw the Sword was at the bottom of it. Harry jumped in to get it. He nearly drowned, but Ron saved him. He followed the doe patronus too."

This news was sufficiently distracting to finally get Draco's mind out of the gutter.

"You have a friend then," he said slowly.

"Evidently. We don't know who it is though. Patronuses can identify somebody of course, but none of us knows who casts a doe, except for Lily Potter. It doesn't match any of the surviving members of the Order that we know about, nor anybody who was in the D.A. And the Sword had always been in a glass case in the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts, so whoever passed the Sword to us stole it from the Headmaster's office after Dumbledore died and probably right under Snape's nose. Harry was in Dumbledore's office the night he died, you know, and Harry is sure he saw it there. Harry and Dumbledore were together that night trying to find a horcrux. Dumbledore would have wanted the Sword nearby to destroy it as soon as they found it."

This piece of news finally answered another question Draco had been wondering about for months.

"It was Potter who saw Snape kill Dumbledore, wasn't it? Potter. And I bet he was under that cloak of his."

Granger nodded slowly. "Yes, Harry saw the whole thing."

Draco felt a surge of anger now. “Why didn’t he try to stop it then?”

“He couldn’t,” said Granger simply. “Dumbledore immobilized him under the cloak just as you arrived. Then you disarmed Dumbledore. Harry doesn’t have much wandless magic.”

Of course, thought Draco bitterly. Of course it was something like that.

But then he just realized what she said.

“Potter doesn’t have wandless magic... but Dumbledore did. So why didn’t he try to stop me? Or Snape?”

Granger’s mouth dropped.

“I.... I’ve never thought about that, actually....”

He could practically see her brain spinning, but he knew they were getting sidetracked.

“Nevermind, we’ll focus on Dumbledore and your secret friend later. Back to the Sword and horcruxes.”

“Right. Well you may remember that Bellatrix said Snape put the Sword in her vault. But if there’s a Sword of Gryffindor in Bellatrix’s vault, it’s a copy. Harry and Ron have the real one. Ours can destroy horcruxes. Ron used it to destroy the locket... of course, before he managed it the locket opened and apparently showed Ron images of me and Harry kissing. Harry told me the locket taunted Ron. It told him that Harry and I were lovers and no longer wanted him. Ron stabbed those manifestations of me and Harry before the Sword ever touched the locket itself.”

“Weasley’s the jealous type then?”

“A bit,” she acknowledged.

“This is mad.”

“Yes. It’s been a very challenging year,” she said a bit primly. Draco couldn’t help but smile a little at the expression on her face.

“Alright, so to summarize so far, you have destroyed three, and Potter and Weasley have the real Sword. You know where the snake is, and that one has to go last. So what about the other two?”

“One is Helga Hufflepuff’s cup. The other is something from Ravenclaw most likely, and I suspect it’s her lost diadem, though I can’t be sure. It’s been lost for centuries, but it’s also the only artifact associated with her.”

Adrenaline rushed Draco at these words, and he knew he was right.

“Do you know where they are then?”

"We think one of them is in Bellatrix's vault at Gringotts."

The adrenaline abruptly halted. If that was true, it was *terrible* news.

"Why?"

"Because when she tortured me, she asked us what else we took from her vault besides the Sword. She was absolutely petrified that we had stolen something else."

Understanding crashed over him now, and instinctively he was sure she was right. He had never seen Bellatrix so scared of *anything* before.

"That's why you wanted to watch that memory, wasn't it?" asked Draco slowly. "And that's what Potter and Weasley have been doing on their reconnaissance? They're trying to break into Gringotts."

Granger looked relieved that he had worked this out so quickly and nodded slowly.

"I've wanted to tell you for ages. And they are driving me mad. They want to wing it, but we can't get in that easily. They can't even get through the main door to the vaults without a goblin to help them. It's going to take a lot of planning, and even if they can get through the door there's not much information about the security of those vaults once they're inside. Harry's the only one of us who has a vault in one of the lower levels, but the Potter vault still isn't one of the super high security ones. He has a key, but we know that some of the vaults use goblin magic instead of keys to secure them, and we aren't sure what else there might be. And in any event, he hasn't been to visit his vault since the summer before sixth year. His memories of it are stale."

Draco nodded at this. "I may be able to help you. You're right that goblin magic is often used to secure some of the older vaults. I have keys for the heir's vault from my House, but the main Malfoy vault uses goblin magic. I think there are other security options that we don't use, but I could try to find out what they are."

Granger broke into a wide smile. "I didn't want to ask, but I was really hoping you would say that. I've been thinking for a while that you could get us the intelligence we need to break in."

"You should ask me. I want to help with this, Granger. It just may take some time to approach Father about it the right way. He would wonder why I cared about the security options for the main vault."

She gave him a shy smile, and her eyes sparkled. "That's fine. Take the time you need. We have to do it the right way. I'm just happy we can talk about it now. It's been driving me crazy keeping it a secret from you."

Draco smiled a little at this.

"And the last horcrux from Ravenclaw?" His heart started to pound again. "Do you know where it is?"

Granger shrugged. “No clue. Harry insists there must be a horcrux at Hogwarts. You-Know-Who hid the others in somewhat meaningful ways. The ring was at the ancestral home of his mother, which was the magical side of his family. The locket was originally in a cave he had visited as a child when he lived in a muggle orphanage. He terrorized several other children there, and we think that’s where he realized he was magical. One of them was left with your father, probably here at the Manor. We only have guesses about that one, but I suspect it was hidden in the Malfoy library. Obviously I’ve never seen your family’s library first hand, but you know it’s famous. It’s a symbol of ancient pureblood history and power. We think another is in Gringotts, which symbolizes wizarding wealth. You-Know-Who grew up with nothing, even though he’s descended from both Slytherin and the Gaunts. Harry says a vault like the Lestranges’ is something he would have aspired to. So for the last one... well, Harry swears he must have hidden it at Hogwarts because it was the first place in the magical world where he felt like he had a home. But Ron and I aren’t sure about that. We can’t think of where it would be.”

“Potter’s right. It’s at Hogwarts.”

Granger’s head snapped up so fast Draco was amazed she didn’t get a crick in her neck.

“WHAT?!” she nearly shrieked. Draco rubbed his ear.

“That crown from your memories. I’ve seen it before. At Hogwarts.”

Granger went pale and then red and then jumped to her feet. Draco automatically stood too.

“Where?” she asked, as she started to pace. “Where is it?”

“It’s in the Room of Hidden Things. The same room where I spent half of sixth year fixing that fucking vanishing cabinet. I spent months in that room. It’s absolutely massive, but that crown is on top of a stack of junk relatively close to the vanishing cabinet. I remember picking it up once and reading those words on it. It felt weirdly sinister so I put it back. But I know exactly where it is.”

“The Room of Requirement,” she breathed, looking like she was having a revelation. “Yes... of course... that fits... MALFOY!”

Granger was jumping up and down, positively squealing with delight.

“Malfoy, if you know where it is...”

“I’ll get it for you. I’m Head Boy. I can go anywhere I want in the castle. That room isn’t protected by any special enchantments. Like I said, it’s just absolutely massive and filled to the brim with junk. I just happen to know which pile of junk it’s in.”

“It’s a needle in a haystack then,” she said, nodding. Her eyes were sparkling as she thought about it “That fits too! He hid it in plain sight, a bit like the diary. But to find it, you would have to know the room is there in the first place. Most people have no idea it exists. And then you’d also have to get into the correct version of the room to find it... and then if that version of the room is really as big as you say...”

“It is,” assured Draco.

“Then you’d still have one hell of a time locating the diadem once you’re inside.... Unless, of course, you already know exactly where it is.”

“And I do,” finished Draco.

“Malfoy, I just...” and then she flung herself into his arms again. He held her tight and smiled down at her.

“Happy?”

“I’m ecstatic,” she said. “If you can really get it...”

“I can. I’m sure of it. I’ll do it tonight or tomorrow.”

“This is just so unbelievable. I’ve been stuck on that bloody crown for months!”

“Your diagrams were good, especially the one you drew yourself,” he said. “They were close enough that I recognized it.”

She beamed and hugged him hard. He buried his face in her hair and felt his mind start to swim as he inhaled.

Fuck it all she smells so good. And she’s so happy. Maybe she’s in a good enough mood that we can...

And unconsciously his mind drifted back to that memory of her orgasming. Draco instinctively tightened his grip on her.

But then he felt her breaking free, and he nearly groaned.

She’s going to kill me. Literally or figuratively, she’s going to kill me.

“I’m not going to tell Harry and Ron just yet,” said Granger. “I’ll wait until you bring it to me. If I tell them where it is, they’ll haul off to collect it themselves tonight.”

Draco nodded. She was right about that. “Yes, and that’s idiotic. It’s way less risky for me to do it.”

“I agree,” she said, biting her lip. Draco automatically watched her.

Draco was feeling eager to do this. She had been working on this for so long.

“Look, I know I was going to stick around to prep the next set of ingredients for *felix* with you, but we can push that a day or two. I’m going to go back now, and I’ll try to get in tonight if I can do it without being seen. And if not tonight, then tomorrow.”

She smiled broadly at him and nodded. “Message me then?”

“Of course.”

He couldn't help himself. He stepped toward her and leaned down to kiss her cheek. Her eyes looked a little glassy when he stepped back.

"I'll bring it to you once I have it, love."

"Any time is fine by me – just be careful."

"You know I will. I don't jump headfirst like you bloody Gryffindors."

She gave him a self-deprecating smile at that, and he gave her one last swift look before he strode out of her room, closing the door behind him.

He had just exited the East Wing to head back to his room when Bellatrix stepped out from behind a statue in a niche.

"Well, well, well.... What are you doing in the East Wing, Draco? Your bedroom is in the West Wing, is it not? Auntie Bella would really like to know."

Chapter 13: Draco's Revenge

Draco

If anybody had asked Draco what happened next, he would have said the vinewood wand acted of its own accord.

Almost unconsciously the wand fell from the holster on his forearm into his hand, and he felt it wrench his arm up and blast Bellatrix backwards with some type of magic Draco didn't recognize. He felt a fierce sense of protectiveness, righteous anger, and even a thirst for revenge coursing through the wand as he did it. It was as though the wand knew it had to protect both its true master and also its current bearer — and that if he failed in this task they would both be in mortal danger.

He thought the protective instincts he felt in the wand were partially from his own magic. Bellatrix had gotten too close to Granger, and the dragon inside of Draco wanted to tear her limb from limb for even approaching the section of the Manor that housed Granger's sanctuary.

But the protectiveness he sensed was coming from another source too. He felt some *other* person's magic he had never identified before. And that person wanted to protect *anybody* who was threatened by a Death Eater, not just Granger.

Curious, he thought.

The righteous anger... that was all Granger. Draco could tell she was pissed at Bellatrix for that round of torture. Granger might not talk about it much, but Draco suddenly realized that Granger might hate Bellatrix just as much as the Dark Lord and possibly even more than Dolohov.

And finally there was that thirst for revenge. That was all Draco. He had been dwelling on what to do about Dolohov for weeks and hadn't even realized how much he wanted revenge against Bellatrix too. She had hurt Granger. She had nearly killed Granger. She may not have caused the same lasting damage as Dolohov, but her actions were sufficiently evil to give her a permanent spot on Draco's shit list. The first moment he had an opportunity for revenge, the wand sensed his latent hatred toward her and pulled power from it.

The wand seemed to channel all of these emotions and blended the power from Draco, Granger, and that mysterious third person into a single spell. And now Bellatrix was slumped against a wall, blood trickling from her head.

Draco knelt down to check for a pulse.

She's alive, unfortunately.

He considered killing her. But oddly enough, he felt the wand almost tense the moment he had the thought. Granger's wand wouldn't assist him in cold-blooded murder, then. It would kill for him, but it would have to be justified. He had a burst of insight as he realized that it would probably have to be done in the heat of the moment, as a way to defend himself or somebody else.

This realization created a complication for Dolohov too. If Draco couldn't just *Avada* Dolohov from behind, then he would have to create a situation that would force the wand to do his bidding. This, he knew, would be very dangerous. Both Bellatrix and Dolohov were exceptional duelists. He couldn't very well challenge them without revealing his true loyalties.

As he continued to stare at Bellatrix, he considered simply strangling her. He was probably strong enough to do it. But he knew that if she died tonight it would create an additional problem of explaining her untimely death to the Dark Lord. Draco knew he had a similar problem with Dolohov, and that had been the primary reason he delayed his revenge. He hadn't yet worked out how to kill Dolohov without drawing the Dark Lord's attention to himself.

They couldn't just disappear. And he couldn't use the vinewood wand to kill them, unless it was in defense. But perhaps.... An idea came to him, but he had to check on one thing first.

"Tippy!"

The tiny elf appeared beside him with a *CRACK!*

She yelped when she saw Bellatrix.

"Tippy, be quiet. We haven't much time before somebody finds us. Tell me, which Death Eaters were in the Manor tonight?"

"They is you, Master Lucius, Miss Bellatrix, Mr. Rodolphus, Mr. Dolohov, and Mr. Rowle."

"The Dark Lord isn't here?"

"No, he is out for a few days."

"Have all the Death Eaters been together all evening?"

"No, they is having dinner and drinks but they is in different parts of the Manor. They is not staying together."

Draco nodded at this. "Where are they now?"

"Most is in the drawing room sir."

"Perfect. Then stay quiet for a moment while I do something. I need to concentrate."

He raised the wand to Bellatrix's face and murmured, "*Obliviate!*"

Draco felt the spell whisper across the wand. Usually he sensed a reluctance and even a bit of a warning when he used this wand for memory charms. The wand didn't like memory charms, he was sure of it. But this time, he was surprised to feel the wand's approval, as though it understood the utter brilliance of his plan and was willing to help him along with it.

Subtle, precise, the wand performed flawlessly. Draco felt Granger's magic stronger than ever as though it was helping him plant the story he wanted to tell inside Bellatrix's mind.

Bellatrix wasn't curious about Draco. She wasn't curious about the East Wing. She was curious about Dolohov and what he had been looking for in the Malfoy family library. Draco hadn't cursed her, it was Dolohov who had done that. She had confronted him, and he attacked her to cover up his tracks. Bellatrix had suspected Dolohov wanted to replace her as the Dark Lord's favorite. Now she was sure of it. He must be searching the Malfoy library for information about the Blacks — and about Bellatrix in particular — that he could use to weaken her in the Dark Lord's eyes. Bellatrix needed to be on guard. Dolohov was ruthless. And he would keep searching until he found any skeletons she had in the closet.

As Draco crafted this story he planted such a deep certainty about it in her mind that when she woke up, all of Dolohov's protests would fall on deaf ears. He would turn Bellatrix and Dolohov against each other. If he did it right, one of them would probably kill the other eventually. He just had to bide his time.

The spell finally complete, he whispered, "Tippy, I want you to take her to the library. Plant her in the stacks with the books from the Black collection that Mother brought with her when she married Father. Give it five or ten minutes, and then raise the alarm. Tell the other Death Eaters you were cleaning and stumbled across her there. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes sir," she whispered. She placed a hand on Bellatrix, but before she left she looked back at Draco.

"Was Miss Bellatrix looking for Miss Hermione?"

Draco's eyebrows shot up. He had never heard the little elf use Granger's name.

"Let's just say that my dear Aunt Bella was very curious about what I was doing in the East Wing."

Tippy got a grim look on her face at that and nodded firmly as she apparaeted away.

It's showtime, thought Draco, as he quickly made his way through the Manor to the drawing room. As eager as he was to collect the horcrux for Granger, he had told her the truth. He didn't jump in without thinking first. The horcrux had been safe where it was for years. It would be safe there for a few more hours. His first priority right now was making sure his memory charm on Bellatrix worked.

"Evening," he drawled, as he walked into the drawing room. He saw that his parents, Rodolphus and Rowle were all there. Curiously, Dolohov was not. Draco felt a slight tilt of anxiety at this, but he forced himself to concentrate.

Tippy's smart. And she adores Granger. She'll know what to do.

He saw a moment of surprise on his parents' faces when they saw him, before they both smoothed into looks of pleasure.

"Draco, I'm so glad you were able to get away this evening," said his mother, as though she had been expecting him.

Draco knew she was lying through her teeth.

"Yes, well, there are only so many times I can read my Charms notes before I want to *Avada* myself," he said with a huff. "I needed a change of scenery tonight."

Rodolphus and Rowle chuckled at this, and he saw his father also looked convinced. His mother, of course, knew better, but she assumed the passive look she always got on her face when she was occluding.

"Join us for a drink then, son," said Lucius. "After all, you're close enough to being done. I can't fathom what more you could possibly learn in the next two weeks. If you don't know it already..."

"Then I'm fucked," he said.

The others laughed appreciatively, and his mother got a scandalized look on her face.

"*Draco!* Honestly..." she said.

"Sorry, Mother," he smirked.

"I'm sure my nephew will achieve top marks, Lucius," said Rodolphus graciously.

Lucius turned an eye toward him. "Naturally. Narcissa and I expect nothing less, especially now that he is competing with those who are worthy opponents. Being in a pureblood environment has given Draco the incentive to strive higher and avoid distractions. Driving the mudbloods out was the best thing Snape has ever done at that school."

"No doubt," said Rowle, nodding firmly.

Draco was annoyed by this, but he forced his face to stay neutral as he accepted the drink from his father and lounged on the sofa. Almost involuntarily his eye was drawn to the marks in the floor where the chandelier had fallen on Granger, but his mother caught him looking, and he averted his gaze.

A moment later, Tippy appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Pardon me Master and Mistress, Tippy does not wish to interrupt, but there has been a grave accident!"

The others whipped around to stare at her. Rowle and Rodolphus sneered at her, but Narcissa cut in.

“Accident? What accident?”

“It is Miss Bellatrix, Mistress!” said Tippy, and Draco thought she was doing a convincing job of looking upset. She was wringing her tea towel in her hands, and her ears were drooping with anxiety.

“Tippy was cleaning the library, Mistress, and she is finding Miss Bellatrix collapsed! She is needing help urgently!”

At this, everyone in the room leapt to their feet.

“Lead the way,” said Narcissa firmly, striding forward. Draco got the impression that she was blocking Tippy from the others, and Draco hurried to catch up to do the same. Draco knew that Death Eaters had a tendency to kill the messenger.

Tippy led them into the foyer and through the handsome library doors, and then she wove in and out of the stacks until they came to the small section of books that contained Narcissa’s share of the Black family collection.

The others gasped when they saw Bellatrix, still out cold with blood trickling down the side of her head.

“Is she...” whispered Narcissa, but Rowle had pushed forward and crouched down.

“She’s alive. *Rennervate!*”

Bellatrix groaned as she opened her eyes and looked around. It took a few moments for her to gather her bearings, and Draco saw his mother studying him while Bellatrix collected herself. He just raised an eyebrow at her, and she gave a small nod before focusing her attention on her sister.

“Bella,” she said. “What on earth happened?”

Bellatrix frowned for a minute, and Draco held his breath. But then she snarled as she looked at Narcissa.

“It was that bastard Dolohov! He was searching the library for something, and he attacked me!”

The others looked at her in amazement.

“Are you sure?” asked Lucius carefully. “Dolohov is...”

“Trying to replace me as the Dark Lord’s favorite!” she hissed. “I knew it. I *knew* it!”

“But he left early my dear,” said Rodolphus.

“Don’t you ‘my dear’ me you wretched man!” sneered Bellatrix. “Of course he left early, and I followed him! He was here in the library searching the Black collection! He’s trying to find dirt on me! He wants to replace me!”

Dolohov had left early?

Draco couldn't decide if that helped or hurt him because Dolohov might have a real alibi. But Bellatrix seemed convinced. And he could tell the others, with the possible exception of his mother, were becoming convinced too.

"I will make him pay!" she said, as she struggled to her feet.

Narcissa rushed forward as Bellatrix swayed on the spot.

"Bella, dear, you need rest. And healing. Please, let us get you to your room, and I will call a healer for you."

Bellatrix opened her mouth to protest, but Draco stepped forward. "Mother is right, Aunt Bella. Dolohov can wait. You must have your strength first. Please allow me to escort you."

Bellatrix looked like she wanted to argue, but finally nodded once, and Draco took her arm firmly and began to lead her out. He could feel his mother's eyes burning on the back of his neck as they left the library together.

"I'll summon a healer immediately," she called after them.

As Draco slowly led Bellatrix up the stairs to one of the guest rooms, she gripped his arm and said, "You believe me, don't you Draco?"

"Of course," he said instantly. "Dolohov has always been jealous of you. You are the Dark Lord's most trusted servant. It's obvious to me he wants to replace you. He must have been looking for Black family secrets. Why else would he have been in that part of the library?"

"Yes... exactly," she said with an approving look.

"We will handle Dolohov," said Draco. "But you need your strength first."

"You are learning, Draco," said Bellatrix. "Your parents are weak, but you are a true Black. I have been worried you would follow in their footsteps, but I have seen you growing ever since you killed Dumbledore. I have great hope that you will be worthy as my heir."

"I strive to uphold the honor of both of my Houses," he said swiftly. "You must know I feel a very strong duty toward the House of Black, though I do not bear its name."

"I do know it," said Bellatrix with some satisfaction. "That is why I have never bothered to have my own children. I don't need to defile my body in that way to produce a worthy heir if you continue to grow strong for our House. Motherhood made my sister weak. I am convinced you pulled all the strength right out of her and took it for yourself."

Draco felt his stomach roll at this, but he forced himself to smirk.

"The Malfoys and Blacks have always taken what they want."

She nodded. "This is true. And since you are the heir to both, you are well bred for it. Yes, Draco, I believe I am satisfied with you."

"I am honored," he murmured, as they approached the door to her room. "Now please, allow me to assist you."

He opened the door and led her toward the bed. He flicked the vinewood wand, and the duvet turned itself down for her, as he helped her in.

"That wand..." said Bellatrix, eyeing it now. "It was the mudblood's, no?"

Draco felt his stomach clench. "It was, yes. Potter took my own that day."

"Of course," she said. "And does it work for you?"

Draco thought about how to phrase this. Finally he said, "It resists me now and then. But it was, after all, wielded by a mere mudblood. I am able to force it to do my bidding. It bends for me, even if it doesn't want to. And over time... well, I've been training it to submit to me."

This was a blatant lie, of course. Draco had never once gotten the wand to cooperate if it didn't want to. But he thought his aunt would appreciate the implication.

Sure enough, an evil smile flashed across Bellatrix's face at this. "Excellent. No mudblood would be worthy of a wand like that. The carvings... they enhance a wand's power, did you know? It is unusual. Ollivander did not do it very often."

Draco's brow furrowed. He didn't know this, and he wasn't sure if Bellatrix was right, but now he was curious.

"I'm afraid I was unaware of that."

"Oh yes," said Bellatrix. "Ollivander told me quite a bit about wandlore when he was with us. Carved wands are rare. Ollivander says it enhances the power by making the wand sense and imbibe its masters' own magic more readily. Over time, however, the wand can become more powerful than the master if the master is unable to harness it. He didn't make very many of them because he was afraid of what those wands could do, that fool. But in the right hands... it can be formidable. You must control it, Draco. You must dominate it."

"I am," he said. "And that explains a great deal. The wand resisted me at first. It was unusual. But my magic is far more powerful than the mudblood's ever was. The wand has grown accustomed to me. It prefers my magic over hers. I have been channeling it and training it to do my bidding."

"Good," she said. "You are truly my heir."

He lifted his aunt's hand and bowed over it, the perfect picture of pureblood etiquette. She surveyed him with some satisfaction.

"Leave me now, Draco. I'm certain Cissy will be here soon with that wretched healer."

"Of course. I wish you a swift recovery, Aunt."

He bowed again and backed out of the room, mind swirling with everything he had just learned about that temperamental wand. As Bellatrix predicted, Narcissa was making her way down the hall with an intimidated-looking healer, and she caught Draco's eye. He sighed to himself, but waited until she left the room. "Come with me," she said.

Draco followed his mother to an empty bedroom down the hall. She motioned him inside, shut the door and sent a silencing charm toward it. Then she looked at him.

"Draco, did you do that?" she asked without any preamble.

He just gave his mother a stony look. "She was investigating the East Wing."

Narcissa's eyes widened a bit. "Did she find..."

"No," said Draco, cutting her off. "I made sure of that. Nobody is getting into Granger's room. I won't allow it."

Narcissa narrowed her eyes a bit at this. "You care for her," she said.

Draco felt a muscle in his temple twitch, but he was determined to stay passive.

"We've become friendly, and she's critical to the war effort for the other side. She has to be protected."

"So you have dissuaded Bellatrix then?" she asked.

Draco nodded. "For now. I'm going to take extra measures when I move home."

"Like what?" asked Narcissa.

"I'm still deciding," said Draco. "But I need an innocent reason to go into the East Wing that's unrelated to Granger in case anybody catches me again. Once I'm living here again..."

"You won't be able to stay away from her," finished Narcissa.

Draco didn't respond to that. He knew it was true. Until he had finally bedded her, she would be a permanent fixture in his mind. He wanted her too much to keep his distance once he moved home.

Narcissa sighed. "Very well. Do what you must. I'll back you up. But you need to be careful, Draco. She's just..." Narcissa trailed off, apparently at a loss for words.

"I thought you liked her," he said, an unexpected lurch of annoyance shooting through him.

"I do like her. Very much," said Narcissa. "I just worry about you giving your heart to her."

"Because she's muggleborn?" asked Draco, now more annoyed than ever.

"No, because she's in the thick of it. She's Harry Potter's best friend. She may not survive this war. I don't want your heart to break."

Draco was uneasy as he considered his mother's words.

I don't feel like that, he told himself. I'm just attracted to her, that's all. It's just physical attraction.

"You don't need to worry about that, Mother," he said.

Narcissa gave him a deeply skeptical look. "If you say so. But still... I think it's best if we try to protect her."

Draco nodded with some relief. Even if his mother was wrong about his feelings toward Granger, Draco knew that Granger *was* very important to the war effort. And his mother was an important ally in her protection.

"I need to get back to school," he finally said. "I don't want to be missed."

Narcissa nodded. "Very well. Be safe, dear."

"I will. Keep an eye on Granger for me."

Narcissa gave him a soft smile, as he turned to leave, his mind spinning.

If the events of the night had made him realize anything it was that he desperately wanted Granger. That memory of her in the middle of an orgasm had caught him off guard and thoroughly filled his mind with her. He needed to feel her skin and see her naked and find a way to finally take her. It was time to stop fucking around and actually seduce her. The dreams he harbored about her body were so distracting that he knew he needed to find a way to do it. It was the only way he would be able to clear his head of her, and he needed a clear head if he was going to be going up against Bellatrix and Dolohov and eventually the Dark Lord himself. He couldn't afford any distractions.

A plan started to develop as he strode into his room at the Manor. He would lavish attention on her. He would flirt outrageously. He would make her hot. He would give her just a taste of what she could have with him before he finally did it. He would make sure she was randy for him because he was *Draco* and not just because he was the only bloke she got to see.

Once they had finally done it, he would surely be free of his obsession. He would have the clarity he needed to focus on his other tasks.

He approached the fireplace and threw some floo powder into the flame before stepping forward. A few moments later, as he emerged on the other side in his room at Hogwarts, he pulled out the sickle and tapped it with his wand.

Hermione

Dear Reader,

Malfoy's a bloody genius. He saw a memory of something confidential that has been stumping me for months. He knew exactly where it was, and he'll be helping me with it shortly.

I'm kicking myself that I didn't show him these memories sooner.

It was an amazing occulmency session. The only downside was the memory I erupted. It was another very erotic one and somewhat mortifying... but I got the impression that Malfoy didn't exactly mind seeing it. And in any event, we moved on from it quickly and made more progress with my search in a single night than I've made in months.

Hermione was on pins and needles waiting to hear if Malfoy had collected the horcrux. She was thrilled at the progress they had made in the last couple of hours, but she was also frustrated with herself for not telling Malfoy about the horcruxes sooner. They could have been down another horcrux by now if she had just trusted him with the information when he first asked about it.

Suddenly she felt her sickle burn and she snatched it, her heart pounding.

I got held up at the Manor so no horcrux tonight. I'll try tomorrow.

Her heart sank a little at this, but she resolved to be patient and grateful that he really didn't do things half-arsed.

It's OK. It can wait another night.

Excellent. Now you have the evening free.

I have every evening free if you aren't here. I haven't done any felix without you.

Is that when you always take your baths then? After I leave?

Hermione furrowed her brow. That was an odd question, and a rather personal one. She wondered what he was getting at, but decided there was no harm in telling him.

Usually.

Is that what you're doing now, then?

She inhaled, as understanding hit her. He was flirting with her, she was almost sure of it. But no boy had ever talked to her like this before. She hoped she wouldn't screw this up.

Yes, now that I know you're not coming tonight...

Oh, I'll definitely be coming tonight. Make no mistake about that. I hope you do too.

Hermione's jaw dropped. Now she was sure he was flirting. The innuendos were too obvious for it to be anything else. She felt that wonderful heat begin in her belly and start to migrate down between her legs.

I might have to. Once I'm done with my bath, of course.

Or you could try it in the bath.

Hermione bit her lip. The truth was, she was wearing some flannel pajamas sitting on the top of her bed. But Malfoy's messages were getting her worked up. Making a split second decision, she jumped out of bed and went to the bathroom to turn on the taps. As usual, the bath filled magically, and in a moment it was full and at the perfect temperature. Hermione slipped her pajamas off, dumped some salts into the tub and then slid in, still holding her sickle. She tapped it.

Now then?

Not a moment later it burned red. He had been waiting for her.

Fucking go.

She only had a moment to wonder why her wand wasn't censoring him this time before her free hand was sliding down her stomach toward her center. Something about his words made her think that he was doing the very same thing. She flicked and rubbed and tugged and pressed until she felt that still-unfamiliar pleasure building. Suddenly her sickle burned again, and she glanced at it, her eyes hazy.

Go harder now darling.

She groaned at the words, but she obeyed them instinctively, and she felt that well of pleasure filling, ready to be released at any moment. She knew she was close. *So close.* Just a few more minutes, and she would be there.... And the sickle burned one more time. She could barely read it through the fog in her brain, but just made out the words.

Come for me, and tell me when you do.

She gasped as the words made it through the thickness in her head, but she pressed down harder to get herself there and then she saw stars as she reached her peak. Without even realizing she was doing it she tapped her sickle back.

Now. Oh God...

A few moments later her sickle burned, as she felt herself coming down from whatever place she had just been in. The heat from the water and the excitement of the day was making her sleepy now. She slowly lifted the sickle up and had to force her eyes open to read it.

Fuck, you're perfect.

Hermione thought that something like joy must be ready to burst out of her. If this wasn't a clear sign that they were into each other, she didn't know what would be, short of him just kissing her. They had just had... *sickle sex*? She had an odd urge to giggle at the thought, before she read the message again and desire started to build once more. He had just gotten off too, presumably while thinking of her in the bathtub. She was almost sure of it.

She slowly rose and dried herself off before reaching for her pajamas again. She hesitated for a moment and then discarded them before going back into her room to pull out the silky set she had been wearing in the memory that she erupted earlier that day. She slipped into it, the fabric smooth on her skin, and she crossed the room to slide under the covers.

She picked up her sickle and tapped it.

I'm in bed now.

Sweet dreams darling.

Hermione fell asleep that night with a smile on her face.

Chapter 14: The Diadem of Ravenclaw

Chapter Notes

TW: References to sexual assault in Hermione's section.

Draco

Dear Journal,

Since we last talked I obliviated Bella and sent her after Dolohov. How long do you think it will take before she loses her shit and tries to kill him? I'm guessing less than two weeks.

I also learned why that snakefaced bastard won't fucking die. It's bloody terrifying. But no worries, we're working on it.

Finally and most importantly, I had the most fantastic wank of my life last night. I made a real move on her, and she got herself off in the bathtub (or at least she said she did). Fuck, but I wish I could have seen it.

Oh wait, I did see something, didn't I tell you? It was in her memories. She erupted into a moment when she was orgasmming, and I almost shot a load right there when I saw it. I'll admit it was brief, and I was so distracted by what I was looking at I didn't focus on her mental state while it was happening, but I'm almost certain she was thinking of me when she came. Tell me, journal, is there anything more perfect than that?

Now I just need to shake off Astoria, and things will be back on track.

Draco was forced to wait to collect the horcrux until his free period that afternoon. The professors were practically crippling the seventh years with last minute work before exams, and Astoria had taken to shadowing Draco whenever he emerged from his room. It was truly driving him mad.

Since their break-up a couple months prior Astoria had been moving through the stages of grief. Anger had been first, and she would hex him out of the blue whenever he walked through the Slytherin common room. Thankfully this stage had been short, though Draco suspected it was largely to do with the vinewood wand. The wand liked to cast a deflection

spell every time Astoria tried to catch him off his guard, and he felt a jolt of cold satisfaction every time Astoria's curses and hexes were turned back on her.

Hermione Granger, it appeared, did not appreciate Astoria Greengrass hexing Draco Malfoy.

After anger had come bargaining. This stage was also mercifully short because Draco barely acknowledged her whenever she approached him to talk about dating again. Astoria had offered him some rather kinky sex in unusual locations of the castle, but Draco continued to decline. By then he had admitted to himself that he wanted Granger, and nothing Astoria offered him was remotely appealing by comparison.

The longest stage, and Draco's favorite, was depression for the sole reason that she left him alone. Draco felt a strong measure of guilt whenever he saw her moping around the castle, eyes puffy and red, but he couldn't help but be relieved that she was finally getting the message that he was well and truly done. They weren't a thing. They had only dated a few weeks. And for Draco's part, it was simply intended to be a distraction from Granger. He had seen the error of his ways soon enough. Astoria just needed to accept it.

Draco was sure that once Astoria's depression lifted she would move on to acceptance. But he had forgotten that there was one other stage for her to work through first: denial.

Astoria, it seemed, was now deep in denial. She had evidently concluded that she and Draco were perfect for each other, and once the stress of NEWTs and the end of the year was finished, Draco would come back around to her. She was happier now, cheerful even, as the days passed and the end of the year drew closer. And now with just two weeks left, she was shadowing him, trying to catch him off guard so she could insert herself into his post-Hogwarts life.

Draco's only escapes were class, his dormitory, and Granger. Most other times of the day she would seek him out and hover near him, with the exception of the free period he had coming up. She had class then, and he decided to take his chance while she was otherwise occupied to explore the Room of Hidden Things.

As Draco bided his time that day, he thought about all of the revelations from the night before: the horcruxes, the fact that Potter had witnessed Snape kill Dumbledore, the diadem, Bellatrix, and then the truly hot wank he had experienced while messaging Granger. He sensed an odd connection running through these events, something he couldn't quite put his finger on. He knew it would come to him though. It was only a matter of time.

As his last class of the day ended and his free period began, Draco made his way along the familiar path to the Room of Hidden Things. He glanced around when he arrived and, still making sure he wasn't being followed, he walked in front of the stone wall three times until a familiar door materialized.

Draco pulled the door open and entered the room, silence falling as soon as he shut the door behind him. He was locked in now until he was ready to leave. Nobody would be disturbing him.

Draco wasn't in a hurry. He slowly made his way toward the vanishing cabinet and then from there walked several aisles over until he saw it: the tarnished silver diadem on top of the stone bust of an ugly warlock wearing a wig. He peered closer and read the words that identified it as Ravenclaw's, and only now did Draco truly appreciate that he was staring at a priceless artifact, one that was over a thousand years old, lost to the ages until it was found by the Dark Lord and left here as though it was worthless.

Draco picked it up, and he felt a darkness course through him as he touched it. He hissed at the feeling. It was sinister and evil. He was sure this was it.

Draco quickly opened his satchel and dropped the diadem into it, making sure it was at the very bottom of his bag just in case. Granger had told him that horcruxes were nearly impossible to destroy. He didn't have to be careful with it. He just couldn't be caught with it.

Mission accomplished, he took out his sickle to message Granger but then hesitated. He really wanted to see her reaction when he gave it to her in person. He shoved the sickle back in his pocket and started to turn toward the door when something else caught his eye.

There, under the stone bust, was a book. *Advanced Potions Making*.

Draco narrowed his eyes at it before slowly lifting the bust and pulling it out. He opened it to see it was published about fifty years earlier.

That was before Snape's time, he thought. But then again, he knew Snape didn't come from money. Perhaps the book had been second hand. He opened the cover and saw, "This book is the property of the half-blood prince," written in vaguely familiar spiky handwriting. Still unsure if he could possibly be this lucky, Draco flipped it open and thumbed through the pages. He saw page after page of annotations in that same spiky handwriting, and then he got to antidotes, which was oddly blank except for one missive written at the top.

"Just shove a bezoar down their throats."

Draco inhaled, remembering the stunt Potter pulled during this very lesson in sixth year. Draco had been in the middle of an emotional crisis trying to murder Dumbledore and had completely lost his head during the lesson. His antidote had been an utter failure. But he could still remember being so angry when Potter didn't do any work at all and yet received full marks when he showed Slughorn the bezoar.

Flipping again, Draco saw another note in one of the margins.

"*Sectumsempra – for enemies.*"

An odd feeling washed over him as he read it. This spell had nearly killed him because Potter foolishly cast it without having any idea what it actually did. Draco remembered he was crying in the bathroom when Potter caught him. He snapped and almost cast the cruciatus curse on Potter in the heat of the moment. He traced his finger over the words and sighed. If this was all the information Potter knew about the spell, then it was incredibly stupid but Draco also couldn't entirely blame him. After all, Draco had started it.

Shaking himself out of it, Draco looked at the book one last time and snapped it closed before putting it in his bag. He meant what he told Granger: having Snape's notes and shortcuts could only help them, especially when they got to the later, more difficult months with *felix*.

Hardly daring to believe his luck, Draco quickly made his way to the door. He pressed his ear against it and didn't hear anything, but he pulled out Granger's wand and disillusioned himself anyway. He thought about exiting, and the door materialized before him. Still listening carefully, he cracked it open and stepped out into the blessedly empty hallway. Draco quickly closed the door and removed the disillusionment charm before making his way back to his dorm.

The free period was just ending and dinner was beginning, but Draco was too excited to stay back and eat. He threw some floo powder into the fireplace and stepped in to exit into his room at the Manor on the other side. He knew this was risky. He didn't usually come to the Manor this early, and there would be questions if he was caught. But he had to get to Granger. He couldn't wait to see her face when he delivered the horcrux to her.

He disillusioned himself again and slipped quietly out of his room and down several halls, taking the servants' staircase to the East Wing. When he finally got there, he looked around and slipped in, Granger's room now straight ahead of him.

Grinning broadly, he cancelled his disillusionment charm, strode forward and started to open the door to her room when he heard voices that made him pause.

"Narcissa, this is really not necessary..." came Granger's voice.

"Nonsense," said his mother's voice. "I insist."

"But it's far too much, really, and I'm sure Mr. Malfoy wouldn't be pleased if he knew."

"What Lucius doesn't know won't hurt him," said his mother airily. "And if he finds out and doesn't like it, just leave it to me."

"But I..."

"The thing you must learn about Malfoy men is that they will do anything — and I do mean anything — for their women. If there is something you want from one of them, you have only to ask."

Exceptionally curious now, Draco opened the door. His mother and Granger both turned to look at him. Granger, he saw, was surrounded by a pile of robes in various shades. He started a bit when he saw her. She hadn't worn robes a single time since coming to the Manor, and she was just removing a set that was a flattering shade of amber that made the hazel in her eyes pop.

Granger blushed crimson when she saw him, and he smirked. He could tell she was thinking of their messages from the night before.

"Draco, honestly, don't you knock?" asked his mother irritably.

"Not if it means interrupting such a fascinating conversation," he retorted. "Tell me, does father know you're sharing your viewpoints on Malfoy men with others?"

She rolled her eyes at him. "It's no secret, my dear."

Draco grimaced at this a bit, realizing his mother was right. As cold as his father may be toward others, he had always been an absolute sap when it came to his mother, and he had never tried to hide it. Narcissa could do no wrong in his eyes, and anything she wanted she received. Draco had watched his father spoil his mother his entire life, and Lucius had raised Draco to believe that his mother's safety, happiness, and even her frivolous desires were paramount. It was the primary reason why Draco himself could never say no to her when she asked him to do something.

His grandfather had been the same way about his grandmother. They both died when he was young so Draco didn't have many clear memories of them. But he did recall one Christmas morning when his grandfather presented his grandmother with a truly spectacular emerald necklace, simply because she said that she thought it was pretty while passing it in the window of a shop. Draco would never forget the fond eyeroll and pleased smile his grandmother had given to his grandfather when she opened it, nor the look of utter satisfaction on his grandfather's face as he watched her eyes sparkle.

Narcissa had always insisted that the Malfoy men's devotion to their wives was a family trait, but Draco had scoffed at this notion growing up. He always thought that Narcissa's actual sample size was too small to make a generalization like that. Yes, it was true that the Malfoy men had never remarried after the death of their lady, and they were rather renowned for making love matches. But to think that there was some sort of biological imperative at work that caused the Malfoy men to go soft for their witches seemed unlikely.

To be fair, his recent activities related to Granger forced Draco to admit that perhaps his mother had a point. His attraction to Granger was still mostly physical. Or at least he thought it was. But then again, he had taken steps to have Dolohov seriously maimed or killed for her. He had spent a small fortune on potions ingredients for *felix* with more to come. And he had a horcrux in his satchel at this very moment.

Fucking fine, maybe his mother was right about this. Draco realized he would give Granger most anything she asked for, as long as it didn't put her in danger. But it wasn't like his mother had to *tell* Granger that he wanted to bed her so badly he was already whipped. Honestly, woman, couldn't she give him a chance first?

He pushed these thoughts aside as he surveyed his mother with a glare.

"And why are you here, Draco?" Narcissa suddenly asked. "You're supposed to be at school. Studying."

"I needed to eat. And I thought Granger and I could combine dinner and an occlumency lesson."

His mother raised her eyebrows and gave him a small, but triumphant smile, as though relishing the thought that she had been right about him. Draco just gave her a stony look

back and refused to budge.

“Very well, I don’t suppose I can argue with that. But when you are finished I expect you to go back and *study* Draco. Exams are upon you.”

Draco rolled his eyes at this, but didn’t argue as his mother called for Tippy.

“Tippy, please arrange Hermione’s new wardrobe, and then bring in dinner for her and Draco.”

“Yes Mistress!” she squeaked, and then she snapped her fingers and the piles of gauzy robes lifted up and floated toward the large closet. Another snap and Draco saw blouses, slacks, and dresses follow. Then a third snap and Draco watched with great interest now as various pieces of nightwear and delicate underthings moved to a nearby dresser.

He vowed to explore that last category more thoroughly at the earliest opportunity.

Nodding with approval, Narcissa now swept out of the room while Tippy disappeared to fetch dinner, leaving Draco and Granger to stare at one another.

“Erm, your mother doesn’t like yoga pants,” she finally said.

Draco smirked. “Shame. They’re my favorite.”

She blushed at this, and Draco admired the attractive tinge on her cheeks. She was flustered. That must mean she really *had* gotten herself off the night before. She hadn’t been pretending.

Excellent.

Before either of them could say anything else Tippy reappeared with a cart, loaded down with food and a setting for two. She arranged everything on a small table and Draco and Granger sat as she disappeared. He poured each of them a glass of wine and pushed one across to Granger.

“What’s this for then?” she asked.

“To celebrate.”

“Celebrate what?”

“What do you think? I came because I have something for you.”

Draco reached down into his satchel and pulled out the diadem with a flourish. Granger gasped and dropped her fork as she grabbed it to examine it.

“Draco...” she breathed as she stared at it, running her hands over it.

Draco couldn’t tear his gaze from her face. Her eyes were practically glowing, and her lips were parted as she inspected every inch of it. Finally she looked up at him and gave him a

broad smile.

“This is amazing. Thank you.”

He gave an easy shrug. “Of course. I told you I would get it.”

“I know, but I didn’t want to get my hopes up. We’ve been stuck on this one for so long...”

Her eyes flashed at him again. “Can I use my wand for a minute? I can feel the energy in it, but there’s a spell to confirm it. Harry will want to know.”

For once Draco didn’t hesitate to pass her wand over to her. He saw a few sparks glitter on the end of it as she touched it, as though the wand was happy to be back with its master. He just shook his head. It really was the most curious thing.

She started muttering an incantation as she tapped it, and after a moment it glowed a poisonous green.

She exhaled and sat back, handing her wand back to him. “This is it. Confirmed. This is incredible.”

She pushed her chair back and stood, and Draco automatically stood as well. Her eyes flicked to him in amusement, but she just went to the other side of the room to retrieve her beaded bag. She brought it back to the table.

As she opened it she said, “Malfoy, I really can’t thank you enough. I don’t know if we would have ever found this horcrux without you.”

“I was happy to do it. Anything to take down the Dark Lord.”

She was rummaging in her bag, and Draco watched curiously as he saw her arm disappeared inside of it.

“I need to let Harry know. If he didn’t trust you before, he will now.”

“I doubt Potter is ever going to approve of me. I’m holding you prisoner, remember?”

“Yes, but it’s not exactly against my will anymore is it? A private suite in Malfoy Manor sure beats our tent. And it’s nicer than Grimmauld Place too. I miss the boys of course but we would never have gotten this far if I hadn’t been here with you. He will see that as soon as I tell him you found another horcrux. Ah... got it. Why do these things always fall to the very bottom?”

She pulled out the galleon and then carefully placed the diadem in her bag before closing it.

“What’s with the bag then?” he asked.

“Undetectable extension charm,” she replied.

“Those are illegal,” he retorted, an amused smile crossing his face.

"That's a stupid law that was written because of lobbying from the company that manufactures the Hogwarts school trunks. They wanted to corner the market on trunks for Hogwarts students. If you could cast the charm on any old trunk or bag you would never buy a school trunk."

Draco smirked. "Fascinating. So you're willing to break the law then?"

"Obviously," she said, rolling her eyes. "I'm helping you brew *felix* aren't I?"

Draco smirked but dropped the subject as he watched her tap her finger to the galleon.

Harry, I have amazing news.

They waited a moment and eventually it burned red.

Malfoy is releasing you?

Draco looked at her quickly, but she just rolled her eyes. "No, I haven't told him. But you said yourself he guessed." Draco nodded cautiously as she tapped it again.

I never said it was Malfoy. And they aren't releasing me. It's something else.

What then?

I have a horcrux.

What?! How?!

Granger and Draco grinned at each other.

My teacher recognized Ravenclaw's diadem from my memories.

How?

I was looking at pictures of it in books. My teacher had seen it in real life before. They retrieved it today.

"You call me your teacher?" Draco asked, an odd sensation unfurling in his stomach at this. He remembered Granger had a history of fancying her teachers. He suddenly wondered if she still had her school uniform in her bag. He imagined pushing her over a desk and raising her skirt to...

"Yes, because you are. And that way I don't confirm your identity." Draco felt the lovely vision in his mind's eye implode as he snapped out of it.

You're absolutely positive it's a horcrux?

Yes. I did the spell to test it.

Where was it?

Hogwarts. Room of Requirement.

There was a long pause, and then the galleon glowed red again.

Was it on top of a stone bust with a wig?

Draco's eyes shot up to meet Granger's, and he just nodded at her in amazement. "Yes it was. He's right."

My teacher says yes.

God I've been an idiot. I actually put it there last year when I hid my potions book in that room to mark the spot. I just remembered.

At this Draco pulled the potions textbook out his satchel and showed Granger. Her eyes nearly bulged when she saw it, as she flipped to the front and said, "This is it! Snape's mother was Eileen Prince. She married Tobias Snape. He was a muggle." Then she quickly turned back to the galleon.

You believe me then?

Yes. And it makes sense Malfoy would have recognized it. It was near the vanishing cabinet.

Draco grimaced a bit, realizing that Potter definitely knew he was the one keeping Granger now. It would be dangerous if Potter was caught and Draco's betrayal was discovered. But then again, at some point Draco had come to accept that his betrayal would become public eventually. It was inevitable if he was helping Granger. Potter still didn't know about his mother though, and that was the most important thing.

"Give me that galleon," said Draco.

Granger looked at him questioningly, but she passed it over to him.

Potter, it's me. Granger has the diadem in that bloody bag of hers. I also found that potions text to help with felix felicis.

Finally ready to admit it was you then?

Yes, well, I would prefer it if your mind wasn't a fucking open book, but at some point I'm sure the Dark Lord will find out.

"Malfoy what are you doing?" Granger asked in alarm.

"Potter knows. He has enough circumstantial evidence to be certain about me. It doesn't matter anymore. Eventually the Dark Lord will know too. I'm not letting you lot do this without me so it's only a matter of time. Potter still has no idea about my mother, and I want you to keep practicing occlumency so you can occlude the horcruxes and her."

"You're sure?" She looked at him anxiously.

"Positive. You bloody Gryffindors need a dose of Slytherin if you think you're going to beat him."

She gave him a slow, but truly beautiful smile at this, and he couldn't help it. He smiled back.

The galleon burned again.

Promise me you will cast the contraceptive charm before you shag her.

Draco felt his lip twitch at this, as Granger gasped in outrage.

I know for a fact that Granger had to teach Ginny that one because you weren't doing it yourself.

Bloody hell.

Don't worry, I won't tell Weasley.

Draco threw the galleon back to Granger with a grin. He had to admit, as much as he didn't like Potter, there was something rather refreshing about being on the same side as him for once.

Hermione

What are you wearing?

What do you think?

Hmm, what do I think or what do I want?

Both.

What I think: some of those bloody robes my mother got you.

And what do you want me to be wearing?

Nothing.

It's closer to nothing than something.

Fuck, you're going to kill me.

Hermione smirked at her sickle for a moment before sighing and throwing it aside. She and Malfoy had been doing this for a couple weeks, and it was driving her mad. He had his last

exam tomorrow and then he would be moving back to Malfoy Manor and then... well, she didn't know yet.

Their messaging had gotten hotter and more direct. She was certain he was interested in her now, at least sexually. But the few times he had been able to sneak away during exams he had just come for dinner, spent a few minutes with *felix*, and then immediately returned to the castle. They hadn't even practiced occlumency because it took too long. The flirting in person was lighter than their messages, and he hadn't acted on anything yet.

Hermione kept telling herself they would start something once he was done at Hogwarts. She knew he cared about his marks, even though he wouldn't admit it. He was busy, he was distracted, but it was very temporary. She could be patient until he was finally home.

Suddenly Hermione heard a voice, and she froze. It was just on the other side of her door.

"You have been trying to discredit me with the Dark Lord, Dolohov, I know you have!" shouted a voice that Hermione thought sounded an awful lot like Bellatrix Lestrange.

Hermione felt her heart start to pound as fear flooded her veins.

They can't get in, she thought desperately. *Malfoy blood warded it. They can't get in.*

Still, she grabbed her sickle and her beaded bag and slipped out of bed, quickly making her way to the large closet, which she shut herself into quietly, as she willed her heart to stop pounding. She muttered a quick "*Lumos*," and a small ball of light emerged, which Hermione used to frantically search her bag for a pair of extendable ears. She found them and then whispered "*Nox*" as she fed the extendable ears under the crack of the door to her closet and toward the door to her room. Now she could hear everything loud and clear.

"...being ridiculous! How many times must I tell you it was not I who attacked you!"

"LIES!" shrieked Bellatrix "LIES! You keep sneaking around, looking for Salazar-knows-what! Tell me, what are you even doing in the East Wing? You know Lucius keeps this wing closed! Have you moved on to Lucius or Draco, now that you know you have nothing on me?"

"You're mad," he growled. "What are you..."

"*Crucio!*"

Hermione flinched and felt a bubble of panic at the familiar words spoken by the witch who had tortured her. She forced herself to breathe.

They can't get in. They can't get in. I'll be OK. Harry will be OK. They can't get in.

She was chanting it over and over as she palmed her sickle.

She was desperate to call for Malfoy, but she was sure that if she did he would come to her and give something away. He wasn't supposed to be here.

Finally, at long last, the screaming stopped, and she heard Bellatrix snarling again.

“Now then, care to explain yourself? Or I could just kill you, Dolohov. I’m not particular.”

“You can’t,” she heard him rasp. “You wouldn’t dare. He would kill you for it...”

“Would he now?” asked Bellatrix in that high, babyish voice that gave Hermione chills.

“Would he really kill me if I told him you were threatening something important to him? I am his most trusted advisor... his most devoted servant!”

Dolohov gave a guttural growl and then Hermione winced at the sound of a crash, as though a body had been slammed into the wall.

“You’ve had your chance,” snarled Bellatrix. “Tell me what you are doing in the East Wing or I will *Avada* you right here!”

“You...”

“Do not *TEST* me Dolohov!” she screeched, and Hermione shrank down, her panic starting to get the better of her.

They can’t get in. She won’t kill me. Harry’s not going to die...

“You wouldn’t...” he said again, and then Hermione was startled to hear another scream, and she flinched. She almost pulled the extendable ears away, but she forced herself to keep listening. She had to know what was going on out there.

Then Bellatrix’s voice said, in a mocking tone, “You’re bleeding out now, aren’t you? Would you like me to heal you? I know the countercurse but you have to tell me what you’re doing here first.”

“Malfoy,” Dolohov gasped. “The boy... he disappeared down here the other day, and I...”

Hermione heard a wet gasp, and she realized it was her own voice. Tears were streaming down her cheeks now. She was listening to this man she hated so much die, but his final words might condemn Malfoy too.

Bellatrix snarled. “What my *heir* does in the privacy of his own home is family business, Dolohov. It is my business and his parents’ business. It is none of yours!”

“Please!” he gasped.

“Lovely chatting with you,” she said. “Tell that little Mudblood bitch hello when you see her on the other side, won’t you? I know how much you fantasized about burying your cock inside of her before her unfortunate encounter with that chandelier. Bah. You always did like little girls who fought back, didn’t you?”

Hermione gasped and pressed her palm to her mouth, willing herself not to scream. She was truly panicking now. Dolohov had terrified her ever since the Department of Mysteries, and

the thing Bellatrix just implied that he wanted to do to her... Hermione felt like she was going to be sick.

And Dolohov had also told Bellatrix about seeing Malfoy in the East Wing. And Bellatrix was *right there*. If she tried to test the door and realized it was warded against her... then what? Was there some other way in? Could she dismantle the wards? Or would she just kill Malfoy too? Hermione felt herself spiraling, as her fear and revulsion threatened to unravel her.

Suddenly Bellatrix called, “ELF!”

Hermione heard the *CRACK!* of apparition and the shocked gasp of a house elf’s voice. Hermione didn’t know how many elves the Malfoys had, but she prayed it was Tippy just on the other side.

“Dispose of this filth,” said Bellatrix in a cold voice.

“Yes Miss,” squeaked the terrified elf, and Hermione’s heart started to pound. It *sounded* like Tippy, but she couldn’t be sure. House Elves all sounded very much alike to her. What if some other elf was now aware of the odd wards in the East Wing? What then? She knew House Elf magic was inordinately sensitive.

But a moment later Hermione heard a *CRACK!* on the other side of the door to the closet, and Tippy’s frantic voice was calling, “Miss? Miss? Where is Miss?”

Hermione started to respond when the door to the closet burst open, and Tippy sagged with relief when she saw Hermione huddled on the floor.

“Miss is safe now. I will inform Mistress,” she said before disappearing with another *CRACK!* before Hermione could say a word.

Hermione just hugged her knees to her chest and buried her head into them, as she tried to stop herself from shaking. The terror she had felt over the past few minutes was overwhelming her, and she wondered if she was going into shock.

A short while later Hermione felt a gentle pair of soft hands stroking her hair.

“Hermione, dear, it’s me,” said Narcissa’s voice.

Hermione just shook her head hard, and she felt the hands pull away and heard Narcissa mutter something to Tippy.

Hermione lost track of time as she stayed there, still shaking and silent until another pair of hands, warm and strong gripped her arms.

“Hermione,” said Malfoy in a gentle voice. “Look at me. Let me see your face, love.”

Hermione felt something in her relax just a fraction, and almost unconsciously she obeyed him and raised her eyes to look at him. His grey eyes looked like they were burning as they quickly scanned her face.

“Shit,” he muttered.

“Draco!” Narcissa admonished him, but he ignored her. His entire attention was focused on Hermione.

“What happened to you?” he asked quietly, as he started to stroke her cheek. “Obviously, you heard it...”

Hermione just gulped, and she closed her eyes for a moment. Finally, she opened them again and looked at Malfoy. “Can you just watch it for me?” she asked in a small voice.

He studied her for a moment, but then nodded as he cupped her chin to steady her. She felt him enter her mind, more softly than ever, almost as though he was afraid he would hurt her.

She focused on the memory from the moment she heard voices, and Malfoy soon found it and began to watch.

She was used to having Malfoy in her mind by now, and she knew that he could feel all of her emotions and often sense her train of thought when he viewed her memories. Likewise, she could occasionally sense his emotions and reactions to her memories in her head, though he was very good at staying neutral, and he had gotten better at it the longer they practiced together. Tonight though, he wasn’t staying neutral. She felt searing anger come from him as he watched the first part of the memory play out, then frustration when he watched her thumb the sickle and choose not to call him. Finally, it morphed to rage at Bellatrix’s last words to Dolohov, mixed with a deep sense of satisfaction that he was dead. She vaguely realized he didn’t seem concerned for himself at all.

At the end of it he released her and pulled her to him.

“Shhh, you’re OK,” he whispered. “She’s gone. And he’s dead. He’ll never hurt you again.”

Hermione gave a shuddering sigh of relief at this, but then she remembered Bellatrix.

“Bellatrix knows...” Hermione started.

“She’s caught me before,” he said softly. “I promise you, I can handle it. I have a plan in place for this very situation.”

Hermione felt something inside of her loosen a little more at these words. She didn’t know what Malfoy’s plan was, but he seemed totally unconcerned about Bellatrix. His only concern was for her. She would have to trust him.

“Bed now,” he said firmly, pulling her to her feet. Then he spoke to Tippy. “She needs a calming draught and dreamless sleep. I want twelve hours.”

Hermione opened her mouth to protest, but he gave her a fierce look. “*Twelve hours,*” he emphasized. “No arguments.”

Finally Hermione just swallowed and nodded.

He helped her into bed, fussing over the covers a bit until Tippy returned with the potions. Hermione barely noticed Tippy and Narcissa leaving them in the room alone as Draco sat on the edge of her bed and watched to make sure she drank every drop.

Her eyes started to droop as she sank back into the pillows. Just before sleep washed over her she felt him stroke her cheek one last time and say in a quiet, but fervent voice, “I told you I would make sure he died, darling...”

She didn’t really understand what he meant by this, but she sensed a thrill of danger in his words. Almost unconsciously she whispered, “Thank you, dragon,” as it all went dark.

Chapter 15: The Potions Master

Chapter Notes

This is a slightly different chapter than usual, but it's one of my favorites. I hope you enjoy it as much I do.

Draco

Dear Journal,

Dolohov's death might be my greatest achievement so far in the Dark Lord's army. Taking out Bellatrix will be more challenging, but I'm patient. I'll bide my time and find a way to get her too. Now that I have gotten that first, sweet taste of revenge, there is nothing that will stop me from finishing it. Anybody who has ever harmed a hair on her head will pay. As I work through her memories, I will find them all.

I wish she hadn't heard it. I wish she hadn't been so scared. But she's unharmed and will be OK. I've spent so much time in her head that I know my brave girl better than almost anyone now. She hid and tried to protect me by not calling me. She's as protective of me as I am of her. And even though she was scared, I know that she's pleased he's gone too.

The only thing that I didn't fully understand was her odd fear for Potter. Why would he have died too? She must have been afraid Bellatrix would break into her mind and find his location. It's the only explanation.

Draco did not feel even the slightest bit of remorse for arranging Dolohov's death. His only true regret was the fact that he didn't get to watch it happen, but at least he had gotten to see the aftermath. As soon as Bellatrix left the East Wing, Tippy went searching for Granger and then called his mother right away. His mother had then sent Tippy to Hogwarts to fetch Draco as soon as she set eyes on Granger.

Dolohov's body was still in the hall when he rushed to Granger, and he could see that Bellatrix had sliced him open stem to stern. It looked a bit like *sectumsempra*. Draco had given him a long, satisfied look before finding Granger. And when he watched Granger's memory, Draco felt nothing but dark anger at Bellatrix's final words and exceptional satisfaction that the lecherous bastard was dead.

Dolohov's warning to Bella wasn't even a complication. It only required a small change to Draco's original plan. But the thing it *did* do was make him certain he needed to develop an

exit plan for Granger. Even though her room should be safe, he wouldn't risk it again. The terror he felt in her mind while she was trapped in the closet had absolutely gutted him. He would make sure she never felt like that again. He just had to figure out the best way to do it.

Draco was now leaving his last exam of Hogwarts, which ironically had been the Dark Arts course. Predictably, Alecto had required a demonstration of the cruciatus curse, but as usual Draco had just stunned both her and the terrified first year she was using as her test subject and Obliviated both of them. The vinewood wand performed flawlessly, and Alecto declared that he received top marks when he revived her.

As he was striding out of the classroom, he saw Snape making his way toward him.

"Mr. Malfoy, I require a word about the patrol schedule for the Hogwarts Express tomorrow. If you could join me in my office please?"

Draco was immediately on his guard. Snape had never once sought him out about Head duties without Tracy Davis present. And other than a couple of legitimate Head meetings at the beginning of the year, his other interactions with Snape for the past year had all been Death Eater business at Malfoy Manor. Still, he couldn't very well refuse. He *was* Head Boy, and he noticed Astoria trying to push through a sea of students to get to him out of the corner of his eye.

Snape is better than she is, he thought, as he quickly nodded his assent and followed Snape to the stone gargoyle that sprang aside as they approached.

They were silent as they made their way up the slowly revolving staircase. As soon as they walked through the door, Snape shut it and attacked.

Draco felt his brain wrenching apart as Snape started searching for recent memories of Granger. Instinctively, Draco started to Occlude.

He pulled Snape into the fabricated memory he had shown the Dark Lord, remembering Granger being tortured at Malfoy Manor before the chandelier fell on her. He watched as Weasley pulled her from the wreckage, her head and chest crushed in, her neck at an odd angle.

He felt Snape push Draco hard for later memories than that, but Draco blocked and brought Snape into the nightmares he had had ever since that night, as he watched Granger's death playing on loop. Snape pushed harder, and Draco showed himself practicing with the vinewood wand in class and conversations with Astoria about Granger.

Snape suddenly shifted course and started looking for sources of emotional attachment. He pushed Snape to the memories of the few times he had shagged Astoria and held him there until Snape shifted one last time.

Now he was looking for Horcruxes, and oddly, Draco sensed he was trying to zero in on the memory when Draco gave Granger the diadem. It was almost as though he knew exactly where to find it. Draco felt himself starting to shake as he frantically crafted a false story on the fly. Instead of Granger on the other side of the table, he was seeing his mother. Instead

of giving her a horcrux, he gave her a tiara from their vault. He watched as her eyes glowed with excitement, a lovely bauble that had been lost in the piles of treasure the Malfoys had hoarded for generations.

Finally, Snape released him, and Draco stared at him. A mixture of fear and outrage coursed through him. In all of Snape's previous attempts at legilimency it had never been that forceful, that rough. He was nearly as good as the Dark Lord.

Draco said nothing. Long experience with Snape had taught him it was best to stay silent.

"That was rather exceptional occlumency, Draco. I am well pleased."

Draco didn't say anything, but just raised a single eyebrow.

"Wouldn't you agree?" Snape prompted him.

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about," said Draco in his best drawling voice. "I felt you in my head of course. The Dark Lord has done that often enough that I can identify it. But I don't know what you were looking for, other than wishing to see the Mudblood die. You needn't have been so aggressive, sir. I would have been happy to provide the memory for viewing in your pensieve."

Draco fought to keep his face passive as he said this. He had his suspicions about Snape that had been growing stronger as he marched through Granger's memories. Snape had been protecting key members of the Order. Snape had sent a copy of the Sword of Gryffindor to Bellatrix's vault, even though he had access to the real one. Snape had killed Dumbledore despite Dumbledore's skills with wandless magic. And Snape had lied to the Dark Lord to protect Draco.

For some time now Draco had had a strong suspicion that he wasn't the only Death Eater working for the light side. But he wasn't sure how to confirm this without opening himself and Granger up to risk. If Draco's suspicions were wrong, it would be catastrophic.

Snape gave Draco an appraising look. Finally he said, "I recently learned that Ms. Granger is not dead, but is evidently living in Malfoy Manor, presumably in one of the unused wings of the house. I have also learned that she and Potter, and I assume Weasley, have been seeking out horcruxes in an effort to bring down the Dark Lord. Finally, I have learned that you have been assisting them, and you delivered a horcrux to her approximately two weeks ago."

The bottom of Draco's stomach fell out as Snape recited this. But he made sure he didn't even blink.

"You've gotten much better at controlling your emotions, Draco," said Snape. "Truly, you have grown well this past year."

"Thank you, sir."

"Now then," continued Snape. "I assume you would wish to know how I learned of this."

"I admit I am curious, sir, to know why you would believe such ridiculous things."

"Yes, well, you will be relieved to hear that I'm the only person who knows. You see, Ms. Granger has a very small information leak... one of which she is evidently unaware. But luckily, that leak trickles only to me."

Draco furrowed his brow. "I have no idea what you're talking about, sir." For the first time since Snape attacked, Draco was being completely honest.

"No, I suppose you wouldn't," said Snape. "Seeing as how Ms. Granger doesn't know herself. Very well, then. As I'm sure you know by now the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix were previously at the home of Sirius Black, your mother's cousin."

Draco did not respond.

"I presume you know the name Phineas Nigellus Black?" asked Snape.

"He's my great, great, great grandfather," said Draco slowly. "On my mother's side of course. He was the last Slytherin Headmaster of Hogwarts before you, sir."

Snape gave him an approving smile. "It is so refreshing when one is not forced to explain the intricacies of pureblood family trees. Very well then, of course you are correct. And as you can see, Phineas Nigellus's portrait hangs here, as a former Headmaster."

Now Snape gestured to a portrait of a snoozing man, whom Draco was sure was peeking out at him.

"Phineas Nigellus's other portrait used to hang in Grimmauld Place, the headquarters for the Order."

Draco just listened, but he had a sinking feeling that he knew where this was going.

"After the Order err... vacated the premises and Potter, Weasley, and Granger moved in last fall, I'm afraid Miss Granger took it upon herself to remove Phineas's portrait and place it in a bag she carries with her at all times."

Now the snoozing man sat up, no longer pretending to be asleep.

"That obstinate girl defiled my portrait!" he whined. "She removed me from the house of my fathers!"

"Phineas, please," said Snape, rubbing the bridge of his nose. Draco had the impression that Phineas complained about this on a regular basis. Phineas harumphed, but quieted, and Snape continued. "You see, every so often Miss Granger or others are talking when she opens that bag of hers. And there was a moment a couple weeks ago when she was talking to you about a horcrux you had delivered while her bag was open. I'm afraid Phineas overheard the entire thing and reported it to me."

Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Draco knew there was nothing for it. He remembered the moment perfectly. Granger had taken ages to find her galleon to message Potter after he gave her the diadem, and both of

them had been talking about horcruxes without a second thought. He felt the vinewood wand start to vibrate in his arm holster, as though on a hair trigger. Draco refrained from calling it, but wondered if he would have any choice. The wand was poised for attack.

“Going to turn me in then?” asked Draco with his same arrogant drawl. He refused to be cowed.

“No, I don’t believe I will,” said Snape thoughtfully, and Draco felt the vinewood wand steady itself ever so slightly. “You see, I find myself rather pleased that Dumbledore was right about you. He was so very sure you would be an asset if only we could protect you long enough for you to see what there is for you on the side of the light.”

“You were really working for Dumbledore then, all along?” asked Draco carefully.

“Oh yes,” said Snape easily. “But then again, you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Draco looked at him cautiously. “I’ll admit, I suspected it.”

Snape nodded, but it looked like his mind was on something else.

“Dumbledore did not share the secret of the horcruxes with me nor anybody else in the Order that I am aware of. He evidently entrusted it to three teenagers whose minds are unguarded. It was an absolutely appalling plan, and he and I have had words about it.”

Now Snape glared at Dumbledore’s portrait, but Dumbledore pretended to continue to snooze. “In any event,” continued Snape, “I have worked out that there are at least three, and possibly four or more horcruxes.”

“And they are?” asked Draco.

“The diary that opened the Chamber of Secrets was surely a horcrux. The body of Tom Riddle evidently manifested itself there. It fits with what I have been able to discover about horcruxes in the past couple of weeks. Then of course there is the ring that destroyed Dumbledore’s hand. It was killing him, you know, that curse that was embedded in the ring. I managed to contain it for him, but there was no way to fully reverse it. He would have died soon after that encounter in the astronomy tower even if I hadn’t killed him myself. Then there’s the item you brought to Granger. And I suspect Nagini is a horcrux as well, given that the Dark Lord is able to possess her so thoroughly. What I do not know, however, is how many there are in total.”

Draco pursed his lips. He thought Snape was being honest. But he still wasn’t going to betray Granger.

“The exact number is not yet clear,” he lied. “We’re working on it.”

Snape grimaced at this. “Fine. But you should know, Draco, that the Dark Lord was surely aware Dumbledore was hunting horcruxes. I showed him any number of memories with Dumbledore’s burned hand wearing that blasted ring because Dumbledore never told me to occlude that information. I’m sure you did too and probably others did as well. And the

Dark Lord himself ordered me to move the Sword of Gryffindor to Bellatrix's vault. That Sword can kill horcruxes, thanks to Potter's foray into the Chamber of Secrets. I've worked that bit out for myself, and I'm certain the Dark Lord has as well. It's the only explanation for his odd request. He will know that Dumbledore was aware he made at least two horcruxes and that the means for destroying them resided in this office."

Draco closed his eyes for a moment, as the truth of this washed over him. "Fuck," he said.

"Language," retorted Snape.

"I can't say 'fuck,' when you tell me that he knows about it?"

Snape just raised an eyebrow.

"Fine," sighed Draco.

"You may not wish to tell me everything Draco, but if there is anything I can do to help I will. Please tell me if there is something you need."

Draco was startled by this. He hadn't expected Snape to offer help gratuitously. Draco thought about one of his more immediate problems.

"Sir, if you can think of a way for an... individual... to leave a blood warded room in the case of an emergency without dropping those blood wards first, I believe that information is something I might need."

Snape narrowed his eyes as he thought for a moment, and then he said, "I assume there is a fireplace in this room. If so, then all you need to do is find an excuse to connect that fireplace to the floo network and request a single, secure path to the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts."

Draco inhaled. Was Snape serious?

"I'm serious," he added, as though reading Draco's thoughts on his face. "There is only one other connection to the Headmaster's office now, and it is not one that is used. But if it were, it would not endanger your special guest."

"And it is...?"

"To Grimmauld Place," said Snape curtly. "A holdover from when Dumbledore was alive, of course. He rarely used it, but he connected it in case of an emergency before he fell out of favor at the Ministry of Magic. Of course, the floo network is being watched so that route should not be used unless it is absolutely necessary. I have not, however, severed the connection because I believe it could be... needed in the future. And I do not think the current inhabitants of Grimmauld Place are aware of its existence."

"Yes, of course," muttered Draco, thinking quickly. Then he looked at Snape skeptically. "How have you been getting to the Manor then, if this fireplace isn't already connected to it?"

Snape gave a negligent shrug. “There is a fireplace in my quarters that works just as well for that. Much like yours.”

“But aren’t your quarters connected to the office?” he asked, looking pointedly at a door behind the desk.

“The castle has rather advanced wards that are tied to the Headmaster to ensure that guests must pass by the gargoyle downstairs to get in and out of this office. I can assure you, it is secure.”

Draco felt a bubble of excitement growing. The plan could work. He just needed an excuse to execute it.

“Connecting the fireplace on my end isn’t an issue. I have something in mind for that. But there needs to be a good reason I’m connecting it to this one here,” and he pointed to the fireplace in the office next to them, “especially if it’s never used. There are a dozen other fireplaces in Hogwarts that could be used instead.”

Snape nodded in acknowledgment of this. “Yes, well, I don’t believe that will be an issue either. You see, your mother came to me recently and asked if there was some way to keep you at Hogwarts for the coming year. I considered her request and have asked the Dark Lord for your assistance with developing a defensive plan for the castle now that you are no longer a student here. I’ve made it clear that the Carrows are woefully unstrategic and untalented, and I need somebody I trust who can help me with this in the event Potter decides to come to Hogwarts to rally supporters. The castle’s defensive magic is ancient, but Dumbledore did not give it to me before he died. I’ve explained that I don’t know who holds that power currently, though I’m certain it’s not a teacher. None of them were in his inner circle. I believe the chain of succession would go through other high-ranking Order members, all of whom are currently in hiding. The Dark Lord wishes us to discover what these defenses are so we can develop a plan to counteract them in case they are activated.”

Draco just stared at him now, all the pieces of the puzzle falling into place. He could tell by the satisfied smirk on Snape’s face that he knew exactly who held the power to activate Hogwarts’ defenses, and he probably already knew what the defensive magic was. But it was a perfect excuse.

“We will need to meet frequently, of course,” said Draco.

“Naturally,” said Snape. “And I would not wish you to be seen wandering the halls every time we need to meet to discuss this. I believe a secure floo connection between my office and Malfoy Manor is the best course of action.”

Draco nodded once. “I’ll make the arrangements then.”

“Very good,” said Snape. “Is there anything else?”

Draco’s eyebrows flew up again. “Well sir...” he started, “candidly, we could probably use your help with a... project.”

“And what project is that?”

Draco looked at him, certain Snape was going to mock him for this, but his skills were too valuable to ignore.

“Granger and I are nearly a month into *felix felicis*,” he said.

Snape just stared at him in slight disbelief.

“You think you two can brew...”

“I know!” Draco cut him off. “Believe me, I’ve studied it. I know. The first few months aren’t bad, but once autumn rolls around...”

“It becomes nearly impossible, yes,” said Snape. “Not to mention some of the ingredients.”

“Right,” said Draco. “I’ve spent a lot of gold procuring some of those ingredients, and I don’t have everything yet. But she and I were the best potions students in the year. She’s literally blood warded into my home until further notice, and I’m moving back tomorrow. And we’re combining our skills for the first time on this. It’s actually going rather well. And...” he trailed off.

“And?” asked Snape, with one eyebrow raised.

“And we have your old potions textbook, sir. Potter used it last year and hid it after he cursed me. I retrieved it a couple weeks ago, and I’ve been studying it diligently.”

There was a ringing silence as Snape stared at him.

Draco hurried to finish. “I know you can’t help us directly, at least not until Granger’s occlumency is done. She can’t know about you. She would only come here if there was an emergency.”

Snape nodded once at this.

“But if we’re meeting anyway to work on the Hogwarts defenses, can you train me sir? You have a potions mastery. I... well, I always thought I would like to have one too... You know, if the Dark Lord wasn’t so keen on taking over the world and my father wasn’t the ambitious git that he is.”

He thought he saw a ghost of a smile on Snape’s lips at this.

“I know it can’t be official,” Draco continued quickly, “and the *felix* wouldn’t necessarily count toward my own mastery. But I’d like to do it anyway. Potions was always my best subject, and it could really help us. If we could actually pull off *felix*...”

Snape’s eyes were boring into his now. He was silent for a long while as he considered this, but Draco refused to break eye contact.

“Very well. I’ll train you as my apprentice for a potions mastery. And it can be official, we just have to keep it quiet. The potions guild is discreet, and the Dark Lord has never expressed any interest in it. As long as we are giving him something on the Hogwarts defenses, he won’t notice if I’m also training you in potions during our sessions together. I’ll submit the paperwork for it, and then we can proceed. I will apply for *felix felicis* to be your mastery potion, and then it will be legal and aboveboard. It’s rare for a potions mastery to occur in under a year because usually the apprentice needs time to train before attempting his mastery potion, but it does happen, and in the case of *felix* you have a few months to study before it gets really challenging. My own mastery took eight months, and I brewed Wolfsbane for it.”

Draco’s eyes were huge, and he felt his heart nearly burst with excitement. “Thank you sir, thank you. Seriously, this is just...” he trailed off, and Snape gave him a small smile.

“It will take a great deal of work, and you will have much studying to do before we get to the steps in autumn. For the guild to credit it, you also have to do most of the work on the potion yourself, though I can help you train for it since I’m the master supervising you.”

“Yes sir, of course,” said Draco quickly.

“May I ask how much of it Miss Granger has done?”

“She’s helped prep ingredients, but I’ve done all of the actual brewing. And I’ve been there every time she’s prepped.”

Snape nodded. “That should be fine then, but it would be best to pull her off of it for future work if you want it to count for a mastery. She can still help with the theoretical portions later on.”

“Understood sir. There are other potions she wants to brew as well. I’ll ask her to focus on those instead.”

Snape nodded and gave him an appraising look. “I’ll admit that having *felix felicis* on our side would be an incredible boon if you can actually do it. To my knowledge, Slughorn is the only living potions master in England who has ever successfully brewed it, though I’ll admit I’ve never tried. The one before him was the potions master who trained Slughorn himself, but he is dead now. Slughorn’s *felix* is about forty years old I believe, and he keeps it locked in Gringotts most of the time. Dumbledore offered him an absolute fortune for it during the first war, but Slughorn would never sell. Before he retired he used to give away vials of it now and then, but it was quite sporadic and was something he only did when he had a particularly favorite student in N.E.W.T. potions that he wanted to reward. This is just a conjecture on my part, but I would guess he only ever gave away five or six vials total in the years before he retired. If the Dark Lord knew that Slughorn had a stash... well, let’s just say that’s the primary reason Slughorn went into hiding until Dumbledore drew him out of retirement last year.”

“I know it’s going to be a challenge, but I can do it if you train me sir. I know I can,” said Draco eagerly, feeling nearly giddy that they were going to have Snape’s assistance with this and that he would be trained – properly trained – as a potions master.

"I've been studying potions instead of my other subjects ever since we started it," he added.

Snape nodded and gave him a small smile at this. "Very well. Once you are settled back home, we will begin. And now, I believe we are both late for the end of term feast."

Draco nodded and rose. But before they left, he asked, "Sir, I have just one final question."

Snape gave him a swift look.

"Why have you done this? For so many years?"

Snape gave him a grim look now and said softly, "You are not the only one who became involved with a muggleborn witch. Mine..." he sighed, but then he flicked his wand and suddenly a beautiful doe patronus was standing in front of them. Draco glanced at Snape's face and was shocked to see raw pain and heartbreak as he stared at the doe. After a moment Snape flicked his wand again, and the doe disappeared. "Mine was killed by the Dark Lord at the very end of the first war. She died along with her husband just before the Dark Lord failed to murder her infant son."

Draco was rooted to the spot, in disbelief at what Snape was telling him. *Snape had been in love with Potter's mother.*

But he could see the truth of this on Snape's face, and the doe patronus was proof. Snape had given the Sword to Potter and lured him to it using the same patronus as his mother. And Merlin, but it explained so much about Snape's behavior toward Potter over the years. Snape was sworn to protect him because of Potter's mother, but Snape also loathed him because Potter was not his. Unwittingly, Draco imagined Granger growing up to marry somebody else and bearing a son by another wizard. His stomach automatically clenched at the thought, and he felt an unexpected rush of sympathy for Snape that this had been his fate.

"I would not wish that pain on anybody, Draco," he said softly. "And you should bear something in mind as you continue to... work with Miss Granger. There is something about an enormously talented, Gryffindor-minded, muggleborn witch that is impossibly irresistible. But they will throw themselves headfirst into war. They will fight when they should hide. And they will sacrifice themselves for their family, even when they don't have to. The Dark Lord offered to spare her for me, if she would just stand aside so he could kill her son. But she refused, and so he killed her too. If I had known all of this during the first war... well, I would not have been able to stop my feelings for her. I knew her from the time we were children, and I cared about her deeply before we ever boarded the train to Hogwarts for the first time. But I would have protected her differently. I never would have left her protection up to her fool of a husband or even Dumbledore."

"I..." Draco hesitated. He wasn't sure if he wanted to admit this yet, but he knew he trusted Snape now. "I need to protect her. She's not mine... yet. But..."

Snape just gave him a knowing look. "You need not explain yourself to me. I understand perfectly well. She is critical to the war effort, even more so than Lily was. Salazar knows Potter and Weasley are absolutely hopeless without her. I would help protect her for that reason alone, even if you had nothing to do with her. That being said, I do hope you will bear

in mind what I have told you. You will need to insert yourself into her plans if you wish to spare her from this war. Gryffindors do not have a natural sense of self-preservation, and she would take an *Avada* for Potter without a second thought.”

Draco went cold at this, but he knew Snape was absolutely right.

“I will sir... and thank you. For telling me this.”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “We will not speak of it again. Dumbledore always insisted that I should tell other people, but it struck me as unstrategic. Then again, Dumbledore was a Gryffindor at heart. He was always enamored with love.” Snape rolled his eyes at this.

That reminded Draco of the last thing he wanted to ask. “Dumbledore let you kill him in the Astronomy Tower that night, didn’t he? After I thought about it, I realized he had wandless magic. He didn’t try to stop you.”

Snape just snorted. “He didn’t just let me kill him, he ordered me to do it. It was arranged between us months in advance. He told me to do it when the opportunity presented itself.”

Draco just stared at him in amazement. “But why?”

“He was dying anyway. I couldn’t reverse the damage from the curse in his hand, I could only slow it down. He wished for a quick exit. And besides...” Snape paused and moved to the door to open it, gesturing for Draco to follow. “He was aware of your mission. He did not wish for your soul to be ripped to shreds because of him.”

Chapter 16: Best Laid Plans of Mice and Men

Draco

Draco descended the staircase to make his way to the dining room, having just apparated home from the train. He was eager to see Granger, but his mother had informed him that she arranged a special family dinner to celebrate the end of school. Draco knew he had no choice but to show up. Anyway, it could be a good opportunity to secure the next part of his plan.

He entered the dining room and saw his parents, Aunt Bellatrix, and Rodolphus.

Perfect, he thought, as he glanced at Bellatrix.

He waited until they were through the appetizers and the main course had been served before he began.

“Father, while we are here I wanted to tell you that I feel it’s time I moved into the master’s suite in the East Wing.”

There was a ringing silence at this.

“Those were your grandparents’ quarters, Draco.”

“Yes of course,” he said. “But I’m the heir, and I’ve completed my studies. It’s time I moved into one of the masters’ suites. I have visited the East Wing a few times in recent weeks, and the elves have maintained it. It’s suitable.”

At these words he saw Bellatrix’s eyes narrow a bit. Draco tried not to smirk.

“You went into the East Wing without my permission?” asked Lucius, with a flash of irritation.

Draco raised his eyebrows. “I wasn’t aware I needed your permission sir, but I apologize for any offense. I simply wished to see what it looked like and whether it had been maintained. It had been over a decade since I’ve gone into that part of the Manor. I could not recall it clearly.”

Lucius pursed his lips, but allowed this to pass.

“I will not deny that the East Wing will be yours at some point. But the masters suites in each wing are for the master and the heir upon their marriage. You know this Draco. I moved into the master’s suite in the West Wing when I married your mother.”

Draco did know this. It was the only sticking point in his plan of course. The Manor had two large residential wings, and his father was right that for centuries the master lived in one wing and the heir lived in the other. The families and guests of each used the other bedrooms in

their respective wings. When the direct heir was unmarried, like in Draco's case, he stayed in his father's wing until marriage, and his own wing would remain closed off and unused until that time. Draco knew his father was a stickler for tradition.

"I do know that father, but the West Wing is rather... full at the moment with guests. I wish to have privacy. And frankly, as the Dark Lord expands his ranks of loyal servants, we will need the extra rooms, Salazar willing. I have every hope that several of my acquaintances from school will be joining us soon. It is fitting that I host them in my own wing. And it will solidify my authority over them if I am master of that portion of the Manor."

Draco watched as Lucius absorbed this, and then to Draco's surprise Bellatrix jumped in.

"Draco is right, Lucius. He is not only the heir to the House of Malfoy, but he is the heir to the House of Black as well. It is perfectly natural that he would have appropriate quarters now that he is out of school and fully qualified. It secures his position with respect to both of our Houses. And it will place him above his peers if they do indeed join our ranks. He is correct that he should be their host when they require lodging here."

"I agree," added Narcissa swiftly. "Of course it is a little early, but the circumstances warrant it, Lucius. In fact, I think Draco should have the entire suite at his disposal, including the lady's quarter's too. Of course the door between those suites will remain sealed until he is wed. Still, the whole thing should be his. It is only proper."

Draco gave his mother a cordial nod, trying not to give away too much on his face. She was backing him up, just as she had promised.

Thank you Mother.

"Yes, and I imagine it will become known that he has the lady's suite ready for a bride," added Bellatrix. "It will attract serious interest from eligible pureblood witches. He will be the most eligible wizard in Britain. He is handsome, wealthy, in line for a title, a loyal servant of the Dark Lord, and secure in his position within his family. The witches will turn out in droves for him once they know he is ready to wed."

Draco felt something odd unfurl inside of him at the unexpected turn in the conversation, and bile rose in his throat. Of course he couldn't very well object to Bellatrix's support if it helped him lock down the lady's suite too. Granger had been staying in the lady's suite — which had been his grandmother's — since the day she arrived. It was critical that he gain control over it for his plan to work. Still, he didn't relish the implication that somebody else would move there someday. Granger had been living there for so long he could no longer envision anyone else. As far as he was concerned, the room was hers.

Draco, however, saw his father's eye gleam at this. "You may be right about that Bella," he said thoughtfully. "There's nothing like dangling a prize when it comes to drawing out romantic interest, is there?"

Fucking hell, Draco thought. His plan to protect Granger had somehow morphed into a matchmaking scheme. He had to stop this as quickly as possible.

"Father, I agree the lady's quarters should remain unoccupied. It would not be fitting for anybody to stay there. But I'm young. I have no interest in getting married just yet."

"Nonsense," said his father dismissively. "You are eighteen, and you wish to open the East Wing for your personal use. You know of course that you're expected to continue the lineage of both Houses, and in light of current events..." he trailed off delicately. "Well there's no time like the present to consider courting. You will have ample opportunity to find someone you care about, but I do not think it wise to delay the matter unnecessarily."

Draco shot a look at his mother, and she just raised an eyebrow back. He knew he was stuck for now.

"Very well," he said. "Though I am quite discriminating."

"As we would expect," chimed Bellatrix. "But your father is right. You must secure both of our lines with an heir while you are in the Dark Lord's favor. It will not do to delay. You must be sure to serve him loyally while you select your bride."

"I will always serve him loyally," said Draco automatically, eager to move the conversation past his upcoming nuptials. "In fact, Snape informed me that my next duty will be helping him secure Hogwarts and discovering how to counter the castle's defenses. It is a critical job."

He wouldn't tell them about his potions apprenticeship of course. That was something he would keep to himself for now. But the task from the Dark Lord served as an excellent cover for his training.

They all looked pleased at this. "Snape is a favorite, there is no doubt," said Bellatrix with a sniff. "Though I have always wondered.... Still, a stronger alliance with him would be beneficial."

"I am very pleased," said Lucius. "The Hogwarts defenses have proved to be a complication. Snape is too busy with his duties to spend the appropriate time working them out. And the Carrows..." Lucius sneered.

"Yes," said Draco. "Snape told me that he informed the Dark Lord I was trustworthy and capable of the task. I will be working with Snape closely on the project."

"Very well," said Lucius. "You must work diligently at the task to remain in favor. And we will open the East Wing for you so that others perceive your position among our ranks."

Draco felt a rush of relief. "Thank you, father. I will inform the elves tonight."

Hermione

Dear Reader,

Dolohov is gone. Bellatrix killed him right outside of my door. It was terrifying, but Malfoy helped me when it was over. He was so gentle and kind. I didn't feel safe until he arrived, but once he did I was finally able to process what happened. He took amazing care of me, though he said something odd at the end about making sure Dolohov died. I don't know how he did it, but I get the impression he arranged it.

If that's true I should probably be horrified, but I'm not. Dolohov was evil, and right before he died I learned he wanted to rape me. It makes me sick to even think about it, and I feel so much safer knowing he's gone.

Things have shifted between me and Malfoy ever since Dolohov died. I'm not exactly sure what's going on, but I can tell something has changed.

Draco was supposed to be home, but Hermione hadn't seen him since the night Dolohov was murdered. It had been three days now since she had even heard from him on the sickle, and she had all but decided that if she hadn't heard from him by tonight she would contact him herself. She knew he was busy with his last exams, moving home, and working on whatever plan he had in place to distract Bellatrix, but she couldn't help it. She was worried about him.

They were in the middle of another long stew period for the *felix felicis*, so she had tried to bury herself into her research on Gringotts, but she was too worried about Malfoy to concentrate. And then this morning she started to hear quite a bit of activity in whatever room was through that sealed door. Tippy had arrived earlier to let her know she shouldn't be alarmed by it, but it proved to be sufficiently distracting that she really could not focus today.

Finally, just as Hermione was giving it up as a lost cause, she heard a commotion and looked up to see Malfoy walking through the sealed door. He looked different, somehow. Hermione couldn't place her finger on it, but he seemed older, more self-assured, and she noticed he was wearing a gold ring she had never seen before. He was dressed casually in a button-up shirt and slacks. His eyes warmed when he saw her.

"Granger," he said, smiling slightly as though somebody hadn't just been murdered the last time they saw each other. "Fancy some occlumency? It's been a while."

Hermione raised her eyebrows but nodded as they moved to their normal positions in the sitting room. "Is everything... OK?" she asked hesitantly.

He lounged on the sofa, looking perfectly relaxed, as he said, "It's all handled with Bellatrix, though you should know we've opened the East Wing. I told her that I was simply exploring it to find a more suitable room now that I'm done with Hogwarts. I've moved in next door. Nobody will be disturbing us now."

Hermione just stared at him.

“You’ve... moved in?”

“Yes, to the bedroom that connects to this one. It gave me an excuse to ward the whole thing and be seen going to these rooms by the others. There’s no need to sneak around anymore.”

“That’s...” she stopped. She didn’t know what to think. He would be so close. Then something he just said registered. “Your bedroom connects to mine?”

He raised his eyebrows. “Through that door.”

“But it’s always been locked,” she said.

Draco seemed to contemplate her for a moment. “Yes. Well, that’s because the room it connects to has been unoccupied until now.”

“So I’ll be able to go in there too?” she asked curiously.

He studied her. “At the moment it’s one-way. I’m working on it though.”

“And other Death Eaters will be around now?” she asked nervously.

“Yes, but like I said both rooms are blood warded. My mother and I are still the only people who can get in and out. I can assure you that nobody will attempt to come in here. Your suite is part of my quarters now, and I’m the master in this wing. Nobody will be suspicious that this room is warded against them just like mine is.”

Hermione got the impression that there was something he wasn’t telling her. But finally she nodded. “Alright then.”

“And I’ll be taking over the *felix* from here,” he added casually.

“Pardon?” she asked.

“You heard me. I’ll be doing the *felix* myself. You have plenty of other research to be working on, and you can work on the healing draughts and polyjuice. I’ll focus on *felix*.”

She just stared at him, now certain that he wasn’t telling her everything.

“Why? It’s nearly impossible.”

“It’s possible. I’ll be fine. Like I said, you have plenty of other things to be doing.”

She could tell from his tone that there was no use arguing with him about it, at least not right now. She decided to drop it. The schedule hadn’t gotten challenging yet, and she was sure he would ask her for help once they finally got to that point. “Alright, fine then. Occlumency.”

Draco nodded. “We left it at the end of sixth year. I’ve been thinking about this, and I think we need to develop a story to explain what you three have been doing for the past year. There will be some blocking too, but you’re better at storytelling. And you can’t block an entire year. It’s too much.”

“Alright,” she said. “Should we go chronologically then?”

Draco nodded. “Let’s go back to you showing me the real memories first. I’ll help you build the story with minor blocking when it’s required.”

Hermione nodded, thinking about where to start. “Alright then, I’m ready.”

He looked at her, and Hermione felt him touch her mind as she pulled him to her first Order meeting after Dumbledore died. They were in Kingsley Shacklebolt’s house, which was a handsome estate on the outskirts of London. Ron was with her. Remus, Tonks, Moody, and McGonagall were also present.

“We’re glad you two are finally with us officially,” said Kingsley, smiling warmly at Ron and Hermione.

“We’ve been in the thick of it since the beginning,” said Ron.

“True,” replied Kingsley.

“We wanted to discuss a couple things with you tonight,” said McGonagall. “The first involves Hermione. The second, both of you.”

They both nodded.

“First, Hermione. We wanted to discuss the Hogwarts defensive wards,” said McGonagall.

“OK?” she said with a question in her voice.

“As you may have guessed, I am the person responsible for activating the wards if Hogwarts is ever under attack. We anticipate You-Know-Who will keep Hogwarts open even as he rises to power, but if there is ever a... skirmish there, the castle has quite a few defensive mechanisms that will help our side. I’m first in line.”

Ron and Hermione nodded, and Hermione felt herself wondering where they were going with this.

Then Professor McGongall continued. “If I die... then you, Hermione, are next in line.”

“Excuse me?” she asked.

“Yes, Hermione. You’re next. You’ve proven to be trustworthy, and it takes somebody who is very magically powerful to do it. Dumbledore turned the castle’s defensive magic over to me and established the line of succession before he died.”

“How do I activate it?” she asked.

"There's not much to it, actually, though Dumbledore told me that the records he has studied of it indicate it will really push the limits of your power as the defensive wards turn on. They will pull magic from you while they are activating, but once they are on they will be self-sustaining, and you will be able to control them. That being said, to start the process you simply have to be inside of the wards and call upon the school to perform its duty to defend those who are inside of it. It is a... feeling. And a call. You will be able to do it instinctively."

Hermione looked skeptical. "You're certain?"

McGonagall nodded. "The moment the power passed to me, the knowledge of how to activate the defensive spells passed too. I won't tell you any more than that. It's not necessary, and it's information that we cannot allow to fall into the wrong hands. If the power ever makes its way to you, I can assure you that you will know how to do it. However, you must be within the boundaries of Hogwarts for it to work."

"Alright," said Hermione a bit hesitantly. "And is there anybody after me?"

"Harry," said McGonagall. "And after that it reverts to whoever the Headmaster happens to be at the time." Ron and Hermione stared at her.

"Harry is unaware of course," added McGonagall. "And Dumbledore believed he should remain unaware. Dumbledore said he has quite enough to be worrying about without the defensive wards too, and in any event he'll feel them and will know what to do if the power ever passes to him."

"Why are you telling me then?" asked Hermione.

"Because you must be at Hogwarts to activate that magic, and we understand you have been given your own mission by Dumbledore. We thought it wise for you both to be aware that if we raise the alarm that Hogwarts is under attack, you need to stop your own mission immediately and come to the castle in case we need you. We expect Harry will be with you if that happens, and you will bring him along."

Hermione and Ron both nodded.

"And the other thing we wanted to discuss," said Kingsley, "is moving Harry from his aunt and uncle's house. We will be breaking the protective spells there a few days before he turns seventeen. So far there will be eleven of us going. We were hoping you two would be willing to go as well."

"Yes," said Hermione and Ron together.

"Excellent," said Kingsley. "You can both stay here for the next few days until it's time. The general plan is for six of us — including you two — to polyjuice into Harry. Each Harry will have a separate guard. We will be using brooms, thestrals, and Hagrid's flying motorbike — all things that are untraceable — to move him. Each Potter and paired guard will be going to a separate safehouse that's been warded against the Death Eaters. We're hoping they don't

know about the move, but we can't risk it. The separate Potters should confuse them if they show up."

Hermione felt a sense of foreboding at this plan, but she and Ron both agreed.

Suddenly Malfoy released her, and she could tell he was thinking hard.

"The information about Hogwarts needs to be blocked," he said. "That's too critical to be shared, and I get the impression this was the only conversation about it?"

Hermione nodded. Malfoy had a satisfied look. "Good. Then it should be blockable. It's not something you spent any significant time thinking about. As for the other..."

"The Death Eaters showed up. They surely know about it."

Malfoy nodded thoughtfully. "Perhaps. I don't think you need to modify the conversation about it, except to remove McGonagall from the scene and the mention of thestrals. Again, that's a resource to keep quiet if possible, and I've never heard mention of them during a Death Eater meeting. I want to reserve judgment about the move itself until I see it."

"Fair enough," said Hermione. "Let me try blocking the part with McGonagall and the thestrals. I'll replace her with Tonks."

"Good," said Malfoy. "Ready then?"

She nodded and felt him enter her mind again, as he tried to find the conversation with McGonagall about Hogwarts' defensive magic. He was pressing hard, and Hermione was struggling to hold him back. Just as she was about to pull him forward to the next part of the conversation, she erupted.

Now she was standing in her childhood home, pointing her wand at her parents behind their backs and whispering "*Obliviate*," as tears ran down her cheeks. On and on it went as slowly, but surely, she planted fake memories in their minds and a desire to move to Australia. She watched herself disappear from the pictures in her home, and she let out a sob as she was sure she would never see her parents again.

She tried to pull Malfoy back to the Order meeting, but he had already released her, and she realized she was crying as she stared at his stunned face.

They were quiet for a moment and then he asked a bit hesitantly, "You obliviated your parents?"

"Yes," said Hermione, wiping her eyes quickly and trying to compose herself. "I gave them new identities and planted an idea in their heads that they wanted to move to Australia. Then I made them forget me. It was to protect them. I knew the Death Eaters would go after them, and I had to be with Harry. I couldn't guard them myself. I did it right after Dumbledore's funeral."

"Shit," said Draco. Hermione just nodded and looked at her knees.

“Granger,” he said, and she looked up at him.

“You did what you had to do,” he said. “That was... well it was brilliant, actually. They’ll never be found there.”

She just swallowed and nodded.

“Is it...” he started.

“Permanent?” she finished. He nodded.

She shrugged. “I hope not. But possibly. If I survive the war I’ll try to find them and see if I can reverse it. If I don’t... well, I made it very strong. They’re not going to wake up in ten years and wonder what happened to me.”

She thought he swore under his breath as he rose and settled on the couch next to her. To her surprise he pulled her in for a hug. Instinctively she buried herself into his chest.

“You’re going to survive the war. I’m going to make sure of it. And then we’ll go find them together,” he said.

She felt some pleasure shoot through her at these words before she pulled back a little and gave him a small smile. “Thanks. I hope so.”

“Should we call it?” he asked, but she shook her head. “No, I need to be able to block that memory.”

He didn’t say anything but continued to hold her as she felt his mind touch hers. This time she blocked him without an eruption, and she replaced McGonagall with Tonks in her mind.

He released her again. “Better,” he said. “That was good.”

“Let’s keep going,” she said.

“You’re sure?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “There’s so much to show you from the past year. It’s going to take forever if we break after each memory.”

“Alright,” he nodded, and he released her from his arms and moved back to the other sofa. Hermione let him go a bit reluctantly before she felt him back in her mind again.

This time they were in the Dursley’s kitchen, arguing with Harry about the plan to transform into him. Harry finally gave his disgruntled consent, and Hermione watched as the polyjuice turned gold and she drank the contents. Soon she became much taller with much poorer eyesight.

She stripped down to change into larger robes and bid farewell to the others as she joined Kingsley in the garden.

"I hate thestrals," she muttered to her companion. "I still can't see them."

"Just hang on," said Kingsley's slow voice. "Hopefully we won't have any action."

Anything to help Harry defeat Voldemort, she thought with a grimace, as she launched into the air.

The moment they were in the air, all hell broke loose, and Hermione ducked as killing curses started flying around her. She swiveled on the thestral she still couldn't see to find Death Eaters following them. She hesitated for only a split second because she knew this would kill them, but then she made her decision. She started stunning Death Eaters in the air. She caught two of them, and they fell through the sky and a moment later the thestral became visible to her for the first time. She felt her own revulsion at this. The first time she had seen death had been because she had taken a life.

I had no choice, she thought a bit desperately, as she struggled to hold back her nausea at what she had just done. She forced herself to put it out of her mind and continued to fight until there was a shout and all the Death Eaters disappeared, following the large form she recognized as Hagrid, who was escorting the real Harry.

"Kingsley!" she cried, "They are after Harry! We have to turn around!"

"No can do, Hermione!" he shouted back. "Hagrid's got some extra firepower, and their safe house is the closest! They'll be OK!"

Sure enough Hermione caught a distant glimpse of flames in the air before she lost sight of them, and her stomach rolled with anxiety as they finally began their descent. She and Kingsley nearly crashed into his garden as he turned to her and spat, "We were betrayed. Come on," and he led her toward a portkey. After a few long minutes they were pulled through the air, where they landed with a thud in the Weasley's garden.

Malfoy released her and Hermione was surprised to see he was glaring at her.

"What?" she asked.

"Do you have a death wish? What the hell was that?!"

She gave him a baffled look. "You heard the plan in the other memory."

"There's hearing it and then there's seeing it. I can't believe you agreed to be bait! That's completely unacceptable Granger!"

"You know it's dangerous! I did what I had to do!"

"Bloody hell," he said as he rubbed his face with his hands.

Hermione huffed and waited.

"Fine. OK. I think we put you on a broom instead of a thestral. And Kingsley should be the one to kill those Death Eaters, not you. Again, we want you to appear..."

“Powerless,” she said with distaste.

He just shot her a furious look. “Yes. It’s your biggest advantage. And if you insist on placing yourself in unbelievably dangerous situations like the one I just witnessed, then I expect you to use every advantage you have! You need to fight like a Slytherin Granger, not a fucking Gryffindor!”

His voice was raised by the end of it, and Hermione felt her temper slipping, but she just said, “Fine. Again then.”

He took a moment to breathe and then he was back in her head. She made the small adjustments he suggested, and then he nodded.

“That was fine. And that’s enough for today.”

“But...” she started, and he shook his head.

“No, if I see another memory like that I won’t be responsible for my actions. We’ve done enough today. We’ll go again tomorrow.”

Then without saying another word, he stood up, spun around and strode into his room, slamming the door behind him.

Dear Reader,

I’m writing to you again to inform you that your father is being absolutely ridiculous. So what if I had to fight Death Eaters in the air? So what if I used myself as bait? He’s acting like I can’t handle myself! It’s not like I want to always be in danger. It’s all You-Know-Who’s fault!

I care about your father a great deal, but he can still be a giant prat about certain things. And Merlin, he has a protective streak a mile wide.

He wants me to fight like a Slytherin and not a Gryffindor. Fine. Bloody fine.

Chapter 17: Ready to Erupt

Chapter Notes

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

Draco

Dear Journal,

I'm burying myself in potions and occlumency. I haven't told Granger about the mastery because I'm not sure I'll be able to pull it off, and she would want to know who's supervising me. But even she has commented that I'm studying an awful lot. She seems impressed by it though. Maybe studiousness is the key to her heart? I hope so.

I don't know how this happened, but I'm in deep. I've gotten attached. I feel an emotional connection to her now. Salazar save us both.

She was just next door. He saw her every day. He was in her head for hours at a time training her, watching her memories, adjusting them, helping her block them. When he wasn't in her head he was studying potions and working on *felix* in her room.

It was nothing short of excruciating.

What had started as dislike had rather quickly morphed to physical interest. Draco placed the blame for that on her yoga pants and mystery tattoo. But after the initial shock wore off and the realization settled into him that he was fantasizing about her even while he was naked with another witch, he realized there was no sense in fighting it. She was attractive — rather beautiful, in fact. And she was fit. She was powerful. She wasn't afraid of him. She could even kick his arse in a duel when she was wandless. All of that really turned him on. So sure, he was attracted to her. He wanted to shag her. But he had sworn to himself that's all it was.

Most of the time he believed himself. For a while he was sure that if he seduced her he would be able to get her out of his system and then move on from her. He knew he had to be careful with his seduction — she still had to learn occlumency, so he needed her to trust him — but if he was successful then he would get the taste he craved and then be done with her like every other witch he had bedded. And he was sure that sex was all it would be. They were two people, fighting in a war they had no business fighting in, lonely and stuck with one another. Who could really blame them if they released some of the pressure by exploring the sexual tension between them?

He told himself that's why he had begun flirting with her and then using his sickle to send her dirty messages. It was all part of his plan to get her into his bed and out of his head.

But now that he was in such close proximity to her, he was forced to recognize the flaws in his plan and the lies he had been telling himself. He had been lying to himself since nearly the beginning. The roses he had planted in the Malfoy garden during that moment of weakness should have been his first clue. He had never intended to give them to her. He didn't even want her to know about them. But he had sent them to her the very first time he really fucked up.

At least she didn't know everything about them yet.

Then there was the potion he procured so her life wouldn't be shortened by Dolohov's curse, not to mention the vow he made to avenge her. He had lied to her about the potion. He hadn't asked a contact at St. Mungo's to get it. Instead, Draco had visited three of the seedier apothecaries between Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley to find several of the rarer ingredients and then skipped class for two days straight and brewed it himself, adding a few enhancements that he thought would make it even more effective for her. And as for Dolohov, well they were friends now weren't they? Dolohov had hurt her. He deserved to die. He would feel that way about any of his friends, or so he told himself.

Then there was the horcrux. But that was just his contribution to the war effort, and it was easier for him to get it than anybody else since he was Head Boy and knew where it was. Besides, she was central to the war and the horcrux would make her trust him enough to keep him in the middle of it too. He told himself that this would give him the chance to exact revenge against the Dark Lord for everything he had done to Draco's family. And it would help him atone for his sins.

But of course he had been lying. He had been lying about all of it. Every single thing he had done was because he cared about her.

The moment he was finally sure he had been lying to himself was when he saw her huddled in that closet just after Dolohov had been killed. The fear and terror he felt as he searched her mind for what had happened ignited something inside of him that made him want to put her in a bubble and then burn the rest of the world to the ground. Dolohov had just been the warm-up act. He had vowed vengeance against anybody who had ever harmed her in that moment. And he immediately began to work on a plan to ensure she would never be that scared again.

The problem was that Draco was in it emotionally now, not just physically. He had finally accepted it. He didn't like it, and he even resented her for it a little bit. But there was nothing he could do about it. His mother had told him his entire life that he would be wired this way, just like every other Malfoy male. He could bed dozens of witches and have no real regard for them, but the moment he felt an emotional attachment he would be done for.

Growing up he had rolled his eyes at his mother every time she got on this topic. He didn't really believe her that all it would take was emotional attachment. Sure, his father and his grandfather had both modeled single-minded devotion for him, so he expected to find that himself eventually. And he knew he would be given some license in choosing a partner

because of the Malfoys' rather famous history of love matches. He was far luckier than many purebloods in that respect.

But he also thought he would be older and would court first and would eventually find somebody he liked and then decided to love. He always thought he would have some agency and choice in the matter as it was happening. He had always believed love was a choice, and once he chose it then he would get married and become a devoted husband like so many of his ancestors.

In furtherance of this belief, Draco had always trained himself away from the half-bloods and muggleborns at Hogwarts. He thought love was a choice, and he didn't choose them. But somehow, due to circumstances largely out of his control, his emotions had been triggered by a muggleborn witch who would be shoulder to shoulder with Potter at the end of this fucking war. And just like his mother predicted, he had fallen hard. He wasn't certain if he was in love with her yet, but he had a suspicion he would be soon if he wasn't already. And he hadn't even kissed her yet.

Fuck.

Of course it would be her. It was just his rotten luck. Or maybe instead of bad luck it was penance for the evil he had perpetrated before he accepted the truth about the Dark Lord.

And it wasn't the muggleborn thing that bothered him. He didn't care about that at all anymore. No, it was the fact that she was in the very center of the sodding war and might die.

The realization that he wanted her for far more than just sex had wrought a change in him and his behavior toward her. He continued to work to protect her. It had become his primary motivation for everything he did and every decision he made. He was becoming obsessive about it. But he had also put up a barrier between them to protect himself while he did it.

The flirting had become more innocent on the whole — he caved to flirtatious behavior more often than he wished, but he tried his best to keep it mostly professional between them now. And their sickles had largely gone silent since he moved into the room next to her. After all, he could just open the door and talk to her if he needed to tell her something.

He was pulling himself away from her to protect himself. He still desperately wanted her, but he wouldn't be able to bear it if she rejected him. He was certain that he wanted her far more than she wanted him. But he still didn't know if her interest in him stemmed from anything other than the fact that she had no other alternatives. He was still the only bloke she could see in person. Draco knew that as soon as he gave her a way to escape she might leave him. So yes, he wanted her more than anything, but he also wanted her to *choose* him. Because the moment she was free to leave she might rejoin the Golden Trio and then go fall in love with some other bloke.

If that was to be his fate he wasn't sure he wanted to find out what he would be missing.

But having her this close to him was truly driving him mad, especially as he continued to train her in blocking, and she continued to erupt.

Since moving back to the Manor her eruptions had taken a turn. While she still occasionally erupted memories of Order meetings or information about Potter, most of her eruptions had become sexual. Sometimes he saw her touching herself. Sometimes he saw her dreams. Sometimes he saw her reach climax. And each time Draco felt nearly consumed by desire for her, and he was forced to push it aside. He always tried to move on as though nothing had happened, and then as soon as they were done, he would flee to his room to wank. But it was unsustainable, and it was making him crack in his determination to hold her at arms' length. He loved spending time with her and occlumency was his excuse for it. But he also needed her occlumency training to be finished as soon as possible for his own sanity.

The eruptions were made somehow worse by the fervor with which his father and Bellatrix had thrown themselves into matching Draco. They had spread the word in pureblood circles that Draco was ready to marry, and his aunt's prediction had been correct. The witches whose families sympathized with the Dark Lord had turned out for it. Every few days he was forced to dine with some new pureblood socialite. He wanted to *Avada* the lot of them.

"Miss Dubois, it was truly a pleasure to meet you," said Lucius smoothly, as dinner was concluding that night. "And I am eager to learn more about your family on our next visit."

"Of course!" she tittered, as she rose. Draco gritted his teeth as he automatically rose too. Her voice was like nails on a chalkboard.

"Draco, it was so lovely to meet you," she said, now turning to him. "I do hope we can spend more time together soon. Your... accomplishments... are most impressive."

He saw her eyes flick down to his signet ring and a look of greed flashed across her face before she smoothed it into a simpering smile.

He just grimaced at her, as he raised her hand to give the back of it a perfunctory kiss. To his displeasure she leaned into him and kissed him on the cheek before pulling back and giving him a smoldering look. He had to force himself not to wipe his face.

"I must insist on another dinner," said Lucius, as the group escorted her to the door. "This time with your parents as well. I quite wish to become better acquainted."

"That would be lovely," she said with a dazzling smile. "They have been abroad, you know, but they will be back in London next week."

"We must make it next week then," said Lucius as he bowed her out. "We will send an owl."

"I do thank you. They will be most pleased to meet you," she said as she bid them farewell.

Draco turned to his parents. His mother had been largely silent through the meal, which was his only measure of relief. He suspected she didn't enjoy his father's matchmaking any more than Draco did. His father had carried the entire evening.

"She likes you," said Lucius.

"She just wants the title and the money," sneered Draco.

"She's an eligible pureblood. One who was tutored at home and clearly well-bred. Your aunt was quite hoping you two would get on."

"I'm not interested," said Draco. "And *her* only interest is being Lady Malfoy. Didn't you see how she looked at my ring?"

Lucius sighed as they walked back into the foyer. "You are making this more difficult than it needs to be Draco."

"Am I?" asked Draco. "Did you find mother by having arranged dinners with dozens of pureblood witches? No. You two met at Hogwarts."

"But you said yourself there was nobody for you at Hogwarts," countered Lucius.

Draco didn't say anything to this, but just pulled away in a huff.

"Let him go, dear," he heard his mother tell his father. "He's young. It's a lot of pressure."

"He's the heir. And we're in a war," came Lucius's reply.

"I know, but..." his mother's voice faded away, and Draco didn't hear anything else. He was already striding toward the East Wing. He was so annoyed at his father that he nearly walked straight into Granger's room. He remembered at the last moment that he shouldn't do that, and he went into his own room first before barging in through their connecting door.

She was curled up on one of the sofas in the sitting room drinking a cup of tea. She just raised her eyebrows at him.

"Don't ask," he snarled. "Occlumency."

She studied him for a moment, and he saw several odd expressions flash across her face. But before he could pinpoint what she was thinking about, she got an oddly closed look on her face and nodded.

"Alright," she said. "I think we were about to break into the Ministry."

Draco nodded curtly as they got into position on opposite sofas. He looked at her and thought, *Legilimens!* and then he was in.

He watched as Granger, Potter, and Weasley apparated to the visitor's entrance at the Ministry of Magic. She stunned Mafalda Hopkirk before offering puking pastilles and nosebleed nougat to some bloke in magical maintenance and Albert Runcorn.

Fuck, they got Runcorn. Draco was impressed, but he could tell they didn't know who he was, at least not right away.

He watched as she figured out how to flush herself into the Ministry — Draco had heard about this but had to admit it was truly odd to watch — and then soon they were in the foyer of the Ministry before quickly becoming separated.

She made her way to the Muggleborn Registration Commission hearings, where she was seated next to none other than Dolores Umbridge. Draco felt her revulsion and nerves as she was forced to take minutes of the proceedings. She kept checking her watch to see how much time she had left with her polyjuice until Potter-as-Runcorn whispered in her ear that he was behind her, and Granger jumped so hard she nearly hit the ceiling. As he was settling down behind Granger, Umbridge leaned forward and Draco saw it: the locket.

Granger actually gasped and commented on how pretty she thought it was.

Umbridge is so idiotic, thought Draco. He could tell Granger was lying through her teeth about it. But Umbridge preened and claimed it was from the Selwyn family, and before she could say much more Potter stunned her. Granger quickly removed the necklace and cast *geminio* to duplicate it before noticing that the dementors guarding the proceedings had gone rogue.

There was nothing for it. Potter cast his patronus, which Draco knew would identify him to any Death Eaters. Then he made his way to the waiting area to save the rest of the muggleborns. *Of course he did*. He was always such a bloody hero.

Draco was outraged to see that the muggleborns slowed them both down considerably, though Potter did his best to throw around his weight. Potter must have noticed Runcorn was feared by now. But despite Potter's efforts, just as they rendezvoused with Weasley, the real magical maintenance wizard showed up and Yaxley put the whole scheme together more quickly than Draco could ever have believed possible. He chased them, and they fought, but Granger inadvertently pulled him through the fidelius charm at Grimmauld Place before shaking him off and apparating the trio to some woods.

He released her, rubbing his temples. The risks he saw her take in these memories always put him on edge, and coming off of that horrendous dinner he was in no mood to watch her nearly get killed, even if it had all happened months ago. He forced himself to breathe and think.

“The story we’re using is that you lot broke into the Ministry to learn information about the Sword of Gryffindor. Dumbledore tried to pass it to Potter in his will, and the Ministry stopped it from happening. You concluded there must be something the Ministry knew about it, and you targeted Umbridge because she’s deep in the Ministry and sympathetic to the Death Eaters.”

“Right,” she said.

“I think your memory works for the most part, at least until you get to the horcrux,” he said. “You are going to have to block the part where you noticed it and stole it. But as for the rest of it... I could tell you ended up in that hearing purely by accident. It doesn’t compromise your story. If anything it helps support the narrative. You all broke into the Ministry, but you were unsuccessful in finding any information about the Sword. Eventually Potter found you and pulled you out of the hearing to regroup. You’re capable of casting a patronus. It’s advanced magic, but you struggled with it, and Potter even commented on it. So I don’t think you need to block it.”

"Alright, so I just have to block those few moments with the horcrux? That's all?"

"That's all," said Draco.

"Again, then," she said, and Draco reentered her mind. He moved forward to the moment when Potter whispered into her ear, and he felt her start to block the horcrux. He pushed against her block hard, and suddenly she erupted.

Draco vaguely realized she was touching herself again, but this time instead of just seeing her hands he realized was seeing something else — something that was almost like a different memory as she was doing it. And in that different memory, instead of Granger touching herself, it was Draco who was taking her.

He had pressed her against a wall as he plunged into her from behind. He was larger than her, stronger than her, and there was something about it that was dark and hot. Granger was gasping both in the part of her memory where she was using her own fingers and also in the part of the memory where Draco was ramming into her. Then she shattered in both at exactly the same time, as she pushed him out and back toward the Ministry of Magic.

Draco immediately released her, blood pounding through his veins as he stared at her.

They didn't say anything to each other for a long moment. He could see a slow blush traveling from her cheeks down to her neck, and he couldn't help but watch its progress as he thought about the memory and what it would feel like to take her against a wall like that.

That was one of her fantasies, he realized. That's why her mind had felt split while he was in it. He was seeing both a memory of herself, but for the first time ever he could also clearly see what she was imagining as she brought herself to climax. It wasn't just a vague hint or flash of her thoughts, but a full-blown fantasy he had just witnessed. He started to harden as he imagined it too. He was, rather unfortunately, very turned on.

He gritted his teeth and forced himself to put it aside. "Try again," he ground out.

The second time was successful, and she managed to block him. Draco called it. He had to get out of there. As he stood to head back into his room, she rose too, and as usual he got a glimpse of that perfect arse as she turned around to walk to the sideboard for a drink.

Something about the frustration he was feeling toward his family, combined with that searing memory he had viewed, and now that perfect arse that she was practically presenting to him made Draco snap. Before he could think twice about it he said, "There's one detail I forgot to correct from your memory."

She gave him a questioning look over her shoulder as he strode toward her. He placed his hands on her hips and pushed her hard against the wall next to the sideboard. He felt her breathing stutter as he pressed himself into her back, his erection firm against her arse so she would be sure to know exactly what she was doing to him.

He leaned forward and whispered into her ear, letting his lips graze it lightly as he spoke.

"If I ever get to fuck you like this, you won't be able to stay upright while I'm doing it."

Then he gripped her hips and inhaled her scent one last time before he released her and stepped back. "I'll see you tomorrow," he said in a deceptively light voice.

He spun on his heels to walk into his room and slammed the door behind him.

Dear Journal,

I am well and truly fucked.

Hermione

Dear Reader,

I'm almost sure he wants me, "acceptable" match or not. He used to be more direct about it, but he's been holding back ever since Dolohov died. I can't figure out why, except for the obvious pureblood vs. muggleborn thing.

I really thought he no longer cared about that though.

I think he's seeing other witches now. The other night he came to my room for occlumency, and I noticed lipstick on his cheek again. But I want to bring him back around to me. I need to make him want me as much as I want him. And while I normally wouldn't confess these things to you, I'm telling you about it because I think the occlumency is the way to do it, and I'm supposed to be recording my experiences.

I erupted a fantasy the other day, and he nearly snapped. It was the first time since Dolohov's death that he really showed his desire for me. So that's my plan. I'm going to force my fantasies upon him. With any luck, he'll ignore the obvious social discrepancies between us and all the other witches he could have instead and just give himself over to me.

Operation Seduce Draco Malfoy is officially underway.

Hermione had finally come up with a plan for Malfoy. Ever since Dolohov had died, things had taken a bit of a turn with him. Their occlumency was going well, and Malfoy spent a lot of time with her working through memories of their horcrux hunt. When he wasn't helping her with occlumency he was usually studying potions with a fervor she had never seen from

him before and working on *felix*, and he still flirted with her on occasion. But he had put up some sort of wall between them now that he was back at the Manor and living in the room next to her.

The eruptions had also taken a turn, though Hermione knew it was her own fault. Ever since she had touched herself for the first time, she had started doing it with increasing frequency. She knew she should resist, but she couldn't stop herself now that she was in such close proximity to him and yet so far away. Her eruptions had become predominantly sexual as a result.

Most of the time, Malfoy just closed his eyes for a moment and then ignored the memory he had just seen. But then there was that one night when he had seen one of her darker fantasies, and he had actually shoved her against the wall for a moment at the end of the session. It had really turned her on, and it had given her an idea.

By now, Hermione had mostly gotten over the mortification of having her sexual fantasies erupt now and then. She was sure it was no secret that she was attracted to him and wanted him. She was sure he wanted her too, but something had derailed their progress and was now holding him back from her. She had also deduced that he was meeting other witches. He had made some vague references to it, and she could occasionally smell their perfume on him when he showed up to their sessions. He refused to give her any details, but she was sure his family was trying to set him up with an eligible pureblood.

The situation was driving her truly mad, and she was becoming increasingly jealous as his evenings were tied up with "dinners with guests." She wanted him all for herself, and she wanted him now, before some other witch dug her claws in.

Hermione knew she could always make the first move with him, but she rather felt like she already had by entrusting her mind to him. He had a front row seat to those memories, and even though she usually suppressed them quickly she knew he had gotten an eyeful. So she needed more than flirting and the occasional innuendo from him. She needed him to really start it with her because she had never been so frustrated in her entire life.

In true Hermione Granger fashion, she approached the seduction of Draco Malfoy as a problem to be solved. She knew he had exceptional self control. That was what made him so good at occlumency in the first place. And she also knew she would have to be subtle about it. He was so observant that he would catch on immediately if she did anything too out of character. But she thought she was affecting him, and she hoped that just a little more pushing would make him break.

She started by enlisting Tippy for some help, requesting back issues of *Witch Weekly* as something light to read to pass the time. Tippy was happy to oblige, and even Narcissa commented that she was glad Hermione was taking a greater interest in fashion.

Ha, she thought, as she turned to the back, past the fashion and makeup sections and toward the articles she was really seeking.

"How to Make Him Come... and Stay for More!"

"We Asked, They Answered: 5 Wizards' Favorite Fantasies!"

"Enchant Him in the Bedroom With Your Magic!"

Tippy also scoured the Malfoy library for her in search of some wizarding romance novels, the likes of which she had never read before. Tippy had returned with a rather astonishing selection, and these Hermione skimmed with some interest. She knew it was fiction so the various sex scenes she read were a little too good to be true, but it gave her an idea of what to expect and something to aim for.

Hermione's research led to her to conclude several things. First, many wizards were turned on by visual cues. This was good news because it meant that she was probably right to think that the things he saw in her head were affecting him. Second, she should draw attention to those favorite body parts: breasts, arse, legs, neck, and lips. And finally, there were far more techniques and positions than she had ever realized. These she studied very carefully and even made a few diagrams with notes to make sure she understood exactly what she was supposed to do.

Once she was armed with some knowledge about things she had never done before in her life, Hermione began to curate her memories.

The first evening of occlumency lessons that had come after the start of her new project told her she was clearly on the right track. She showed up in a tight T-shirt that hugged her breasts and the yoga pants he had once commented on. She licked her lips as they sat down, and his eyes immediately dropped to look at them when she did it. Trying not to laugh, she said, "I need some more practice with blocking memories of the locket. We wore it for so many months, and I'm still struggling with it."

He nodded with a slightly pained expression on his face, and they launched into various mundane memories with the locket. Sure enough, as they worked through it, her block slipped and there was an eruption of her subconscious.

She recalled a fantasy she had developed of Malfoy pinning her down on the bed and pounding her against it as she moaned and arched. When he released her, he looked like he wanted nothing more than to make that fantasy come true, but he forced himself to ignore it.

The following night she started to get more intentional about it, and she created a crack in her block to encourage an eruption.

It was an excellent one too, she thought. This time she was on her knees sucking him off while he leaned back on the sofa he normally used for their lessons. His hands were in her hair as she took him in deeper and deeper. She made sure to give him a good long look as she imagined him coming in her mouth, before forcing the 'memory' away.

When Malfoy released her, he looked absolutely gobsmacked and actually called a fifteen minute break. He practically fled into his room, and Hermione had a sneaking suspicion he had gone in there to wank. She smirked.

Several days later she erupted a memory she had carefully curated earlier that afternoon — she watched herself in the mirror as she tried on a lacy black bra with matching knickers that Narcissa had inexplicably purchased for her as part of her wardrobe overhaul, wondering loudly to herself if Malfoy would ever see it. Then she picked up her jeans and a jumper to get dressed. It was the same pair of jeans and jumper she was wearing in real life. Once she was sure he had seen the memory, she pushed hard to clear it, and after another moment Malfoy released her too. He was staring at her outfit as though he was trying to see through it.

When he called the end of lessons that evening, they stood, but before he went into his room he walked over to her and pulled her to him.

“Was that intentional?” he finally ground out.

“Was what intentional?” she asked him innocently.

“That memory. Of you... in the bathroom... and what you’re wearing...” and she was pleased to feel the hand that he had around her waist gripped her hard, as though he was trying to feel if there was really lace beneath the fabric of her jeans.

“You of all people should know I can’t control my subconscious,” she said.

“Right,” he said. “Of course. Your subconscious. Fuck, I need... I need to go.”

She reached up on her tiptoes and kissed his cheek.

“Goodnight then. We’ll keep working on it tomorrow?”

“Yeah. Tomorrow. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

He turned and started to leave, running a hand through his hair distractedly. Hermione turned around too, and as he opened the door to his room she intentionally made a sound as she started to pull her jumper over her head. She sensed him turning back around at the sound, and she heard his breath catch as he saw the black band of her bra. She heard a muttered “goddammit” before he shut the door firmly.

She almost laughed out loud. She could do it. She could make him crack.

Chapter End Notes

We're getting close now... poor Draco lol

Chapter 18: Septimus and Rose

Chapter Notes

This is another one of my favorite chapters. I hope you all enjoy.

TW: Oblique reference to suicide.

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

Draco

Dear Journal,

Is she trying to kill me? I think she's trying to kill me. And fuck, maybe it's worth the risk if I could have her just one time.

But no. I can't lose control. I can't let her in unless she'll give me everything. I wouldn't survive it if I only had a piece of her.

And once I solve the problem with our connecting door, I'm sure it's going to get worse. If I ever see her in my room and near my bed, I'll be truly lost. I have no choice though. I have to keep her safe above all else. I have to figure out how to get her through that door.

Maybe St. Mungo's will give me a private room when I finally go mad.

Draco was in his family's library, trying to find a solution to the door problem. When his father gave him the signet ring, it allowed him to enter the master's suite in the East Wing. The lady's suite where Granger resided was a regular bedroom, but the master's suite was warded to only open for a bearer of the signet ring and his wife. Lucius and Narcissa were the only ones who could pass through the doors to that room until Draco received his signet ring too. Draco's blood wards would keep his father out of those suites, but the magic of his room was also preventing *Granger* from using their connecting door. And that was a major issue.

After his conversation with Snape, Draco had applied for a floo connection to his new, private fireplace to be connected only to the headmaster's office at Hogwarts. Draco had pushed the application through the floo office at the Ministry, and the connection was now in place. But Granger had to be able to go through their connecting door in order to use it. Draco thought it would be too suspicious to connect her fireplace directly, and at the time he had been sure he could find a workaround to the door. But it was taking him far longer than

he thought it would, though admittedly he hadn't been able to devote very much time to it thanks to his potions studies.

Then again, if Draco was being completely honest with himself, he had also dallied just a bit in finding the solution to the door problem. He knew that the minute he solved it, she would have a means to escape and leave him. He knew this was a risk because her occlumency training wasn't yet complete, and he wanted her to stay at the Manor with him indefinitely.

But he also knew it wouldn't be *that* much longer before they were done with occlumency anyway, and now that she didn't have to stay for *felix* either he was sure his time with her was dwindling. He and his mother both promised to release her once her training was done, and he finally decided that he would just have to trust her to stay with him, at least for now. He couldn't stand the thought of her being stuck in the closet again like that night with Dolohov - she needed an emergency exit. Besides, if she opted to stay past the end of her occlumency training, then he would finally know that she really chose him. And maybe then he would truly know her feelings, and he could lower some of the walls he had built with her.

As he dug into the door problem, he spent a great deal of time reading about the Manor's wards, which made him hit dead end after dead end. It wasn't until his father made a snide comment about arranged marriages that Draco thought to look through the Malfoy family journals. Finally, at long last, Draco landed on something that could be helpful, as he read from Septimus Malfoy's journal from the late 1700's.

Now that Father is gone and I am Lord Malfoy, I have moved my wretched wife to our townhouse in London and installed Rose in the lady's suite. She is my heart, and all is now as it should be.

Draco read entry after entry about Rose, his ancestor's lover. Septimus had been truly captivated by her, both before and after his marriage to Charlotte Malfoy. Draco knew that most of the Malfoy heirs had married for love, but a few had arranged marriages and had taken a lover on the side. As he read the entries about Rose, Draco couldn't help but think of Granger.

She's so beautiful.

I want her to be mine forever.

I doubt there has ever been a more brilliant witch than her.

I wish I could have married her, but Father would have never approved.

If she has any flaw at all, it's that her blood is not pure.

Draco grimaced at this but forced himself to keep reading until he finally found what he was looking for in Septimus's final entry.

She's gone, and I wish I could follow her. How do I live without her? How do I even breathe? I've instructed the elves to bury her in my family's tomb, next to the spot that is reserved for me. I know our traditions dictate that my wife is to be buried there, but I have ordered it to be done as I wish. Rose was my wife in all ways that truly mattered. My greatest regret in life was listening to my father and marrying Charlotte, instead of following my own heart. I did it solely to preserve the pure blood of Malfoy, but it was a dishonor to all three of us. Our purity should have ended with the birth of my heir, and my greatest wish for future generations is that they will not be as foolish as me.

And so, while I may have dishonored Rose in life I have resolved I will not do so in death. She will be buried at my right side, where she has always been.

Her clothes and personal effects have been distributed to the poor. Her jewelry has been returned to the Malfoy collection, except for the necklace which allowed her to live as my true wife — that favorite gift that she wore always. This necklace I shall place in her tomb, in the same place where the rings of the other Ladies Malfoy may be found. After all, her necklace gave her all the privileges of my House that a ring would have afforded her, except for my name.

Draco thought about this and then flipped back to an earlier entry he remembered.

I gave her the necklace. It's a rose like her name.

He flipped back further to an entry that had nearly made him give up the first time he read it.

I am the Lord of the Manor now. The wards answer to me. I have thought of dismantling them for my love, but I shall not. It would betray the traditions of my House. In any event, my heir is not likely to need it.

He kept reading, until he finally found it.

I had a necklace made for her. It is goblin worked and just as delicate as she is. Now that I'm Lord Malfoy I will be able to work my magic on it. I'm certain my English Rose will be thrilled.

After stumbling across these entries, Draco was sure his ancestor must have enchanted the necklace to bypass the wards. He could surely do it as the Lord of the Manor. He had

thought about dismantling the wards entirely to let her in, but evidently opted not to for the sake of tradition and because they would not cause an issue for his own heir. He had given Rose another way in instead.

Draco was contemplating this as he suddenly felt his Dark Mark burn. He groaned, suspecting he knew what this was about and desperately hoping he wouldn't be a target tonight.

He made his way out of the library and toward the large dining room the Dark Lord preferred to use for Death Eater meetings. He slipped into his normal chair at the end of the table and briefly caught Snape's eye before looking straight ahead. He sat perfectly still for several long minutes while the others arrived until the Dark Lord concluded nobody else was coming.

"So I see the rumors were true. While I have been away and traveling, Dolohov has disappeared," he said in a dangerous voice that made Draco's heart begin to pound.

"Dolohov was one of my loyal servants. He braved Azkaban for me for over a decade. I do not think he has deserted me. So I would like an explanation."

He looked around at his Death Eaters and nobody said a word.

"Very well then... the hard way," said the Dark Lord, and just as he was raising his wand to Bellatrix who sat on his right she spoke up.

"Please Master. I can explain."

Voldemort lowered his wand and waited.

"I learned of a plot to harm Nagini. Dolohov was mortally afraid of her, my lord. I caught him stalking her in the gardens one night, and I executed him for his betrayal."

Well fuck, thought Draco. He didn't know if Bellatrix was very brave or very stupid. Dolohov had been "missing" for several weeks, but the Dark Lord had been busy chasing some wandmaker in Eastern Europe, and it had mostly flown under the radar until now. Draco couldn't believe she had owned up to it after all this time.

"A plot to harm Nagini?" hissed the Dark Lord. "Dolohov knew Nagini was not to be touched."

"As I said," emphasized Bellatrix, "he was mortally afraid of her."

To Draco's shock Yaxley now chimed in. "It is true, my Lord. Dolohov had frequently expressed his distaste for Nagini in private conversations with me. It would not surprise me if he sought to harm her."

There was another long silence as the Dark Lord absorbed this. "Very well," he said. "Then there will be no punishment Bella. You were right to strike him down. And I wish this to be a lesson to you all. I value Nagini above each and every one of you. She shall not be touched. She shall not be harmed."

There was a murmuring of assent at this, and then the Dark Lord turned to business, as the casual dismissal of Dolohov's death washed over Draco.

He had done it.

Dolohov was gone, the Dark Lord knew, and he was apparently no longer concerned by it. Of course the Dark Lord valued his horcrux more than any particular Death Eater, even one who had spent well over a decade in Azkaban for him. Draco didn't know if Bellatrix was aware that Nagini was a horcrux, but he thought her lie had been inspired.

Draco listened as one by one they provided updates on the status of the war to the Dark Lord. Draco learned there had been a skirmish with the Order, and two of the lower ranked Death Eaters were now dead. His father reported financial pledges from new pureblood families who wished to remain unmarked but who supported the regime. And then they got to Snape, who reported that he would be focusing on discovering the Hogwarts defensive wards over the coming months and that Draco would be assisting him.

"Draco is well-versed in wards and other defensive spells, my lord," said Snape smoothly. "I am certain he will be an asset in this project."

"Excellent," the Dark Lord replied. "Draco, you will work most diligently on this task, yes?"

"Of course, my lord," said Draco.

To his relief, those were the only words he was required to say for the entire meeting. As Draco suspected, Theo and Pansy had both volunteered to take the Mark, though they would be in the lower ranks to start. Draco's stomach turned at this, but he knew there was nothing he would be able to do to talk them out of it. And in any event, the Dark Lord gave him the credit for it.

"If you and Severus are unable to complete your task by the first of September, then I will expect you to continue your recruitment efforts while you are at Hogwarts. You knew students in the years below you, yes?"

Draco gave a curt nod, and the Dark Lord said, "Then I expect you will be just as successful as you were this past year."

When the meeting broke up, Draco rose and quickly made his way out of the dining room before anybody stopped him. Throughout the entire meeting he had found his mind dwelling on Septimus's journal, wondering if he could bring himself to do what he suspected he needed to do. But he made his decision while he sat there and listened to Yaxley talk about the newest agenda for the Muggleborn Registration Commission. Yaxley reported that those muggleborns who had been sent to Azkaban would soon be kissed and then killed. It was a way of securing the Dementors' support and truly begin the purge of muggleborns from their world.

Draco had felt revulsion and deep fear for Granger, and he knew his decision was made for him. He needed to secure her escape from the Manor in case she ever required it.

He quietly made his way to the ballroom, which had an exterior door leading to an elevated terrace. Draco looked around to make sure he wasn't being followed, and he disillusioned himself, creeping down the terrace stairs to the gardens and weaving through the hedgerows to the family cemetery on the fringes of the Malfoy property.

The cemetery was really a large mausoleum, built entirely out of marble with row upon row of vaults for the remains of the Malfoy family. Draco had never spent much time there, preferring to memorize his family tree out of books, rather than on grave markers. He visited his grandparents annually on the anniversary of each of their deaths to place flowers, but otherwise he avoided it. He found it too morbid to linger in the place where he knew he himself would rest for all eternity.

Now, however, he dimly lit his wand and took his time reading the names in order to find her. His fingers brushed the cold marble until he reached Septimus Malfoy, born in 1765 and died in 1810. And there to his right, just as his journal had described, was a marker that read *Rose Atwater*, who Draco saw also died in 1810. He looked at the dates closely and saw that Rose had predeceased Septimus by a mere two weeks.

Did he die of a broken heart or did he choose to join her? Draco wondered.

Her marker read, "Purity of the soul transcends that of the blood." Draco stared at it, in slight disbelief that it was still here. He had learned from the journals that she was a muggleborn witch who was rather high in the instep in the muggle world, and yet here she was, surrounded by purebloods in her final resting place instead of being with her own family. Draco could only assume Septimus had placed a permanent sticking charm on the door of her crypt so that future Malfoys could not remove her without destroying the entire mausoleum.

Draco glanced around and finally found Charlotte Malfoy on the opposite wall, placed to the left of her son, rather than near her husband. He turned back to Rose.

His finger traced her name, as he contemplated what he was about to do. It felt wrong, somehow, but he knew Granger's safety was more important than his own discomfort.

Besides, he told himself, she and Septimus are both dead. It won't hurt them. And if he knew what our world was turning into for muggleborns, Septimus might even approve to keep Granger safe.

Taking a deep breath he placed his hand on a thick stone ledge at the bottom of Rose's tomb. All of the tombs of the Ladies Malfoy had a similar ledge, usually used for flower arrangements, but Draco knew they were all hollow. The rings of the ladies and those of their husbands were placed inside upon the deaths of each. Though the Malfoy jewelry collection was extensive, it was a family tradition to craft a new ring for each wife, rather than pass down an heirloom. In that way the wives wore their rings for their entire marriage and kept them even in death.

The ledges could only be opened by the master or the heir who wore a signet ring. And they were only opened to place the rings of each lord or lady inside; Lucius had always been very clear about that. Draco knew it would be his responsibility to place his father's ring in Narcissa's ledge when he died one day, and he may have to do it for his mother too, if Lucius

predeceased her. So Draco had always known he would be putting something *in* one day. But despite the fact that he was surrounded by a small fortune in jewels, he had never once been tempted to take something *out*. It would be nothing short of grave-robbing, according to Lucius, and Draco had always agreed with his father on this point.

And yet here he was. Draco was just relieved he wouldn't have to somehow break into her actual tomb to get it.

Draco had only seen his father do this once, when he opened the ledge beneath Draco's grandmother's tomb to place Abraxas Malfoy's ring inside of it. Draco recalled what his father did to open it, and he pressed the crest on his signet ring into a perfectly round divot on the front of the ledge. Suddenly the ledge glowed, and the top of the ledge seemed to slide back, revealing a small cavity beneath it. Draco reached in and fished around for a moment until he pulled out a necklace that glinted in the wandlight. He held it up to look at it and noted a pendant with a diamond in the middle that glittered brilliantly, surrounded by something that looked like petals. He couldn't see it clearly, but he remembered the journal said it was a rose. It didn't *look* like a traditional rose to him, but then again the lighting was poor.

He gripped it and placed it into his pocket, pressing his signet ring into the divot again to close it. He cast one last, apologetic glance at Rose's tomb before turning to walk out. He studiously ignored the empty tomb closest to the door that he knew would become his own one day.

Draco made his way back through the gardens, up the stairs to the stone terrace, and then he slipped back into the ballroom before canceling the disillusionment charm. Before long he was entering the East Wing, stepping into his new room before eyeing the door that connected to Granger's.

Before he could second guess himself, Draco strode forward and opened the door, where Granger looked up at him from a large book and gave him a small smile. As usual, he felt a mixture of warmth and longing as he looked at her, and his discomfort at the thing he had just done melted away. He knew he was right to protect her like this. He only hoped it would work.

He surveyed her. Tonight she had foregone the robes his mother had foisted upon her and was back in her favorite yoga pants and, to his consternation, Potter's old quidditch jersey again. Draco scowled.

"One second, I forgot something," he said, as he turned around and hurried back to his room, where he grabbed something out of his dresser.

"Here," he said, throwing it to her as he reentered her room. She caught it with surprise. "If you want to wear a quidditch jersey, you're wearing mine. Not Potter's," he said.

She rolled her eyes at him, but he thought she looked pleased. Then she got a mischievous look on her face. "Fine then, turn around," she said.

He raised his eyebrows but did as she asked. A moment later he saw Potter's jersey soaring over his head to land at the far side of the room, and he nearly groaned as he felt himself get hard. He knew she must be topless. He warred with himself about this. He knew he shouldn't look. It would make things even worse than they already were. But if he turned around right now, he could probably see...

"It's safe to look," she said, as she interrupted his train of thought. He pushed away the flash of disappointment that he wasn't going to see her without a shirt on after all. He slowly turned, and his eyes widened. He immediately decided that the sight that met his eyes was almost as good as seeing her topless. Almost.

Draco was broader in the shoulders than Potter so his jersey was correspondingly bigger. Granger nearly swam in it, but it meant that the neckline was more open and cut a deep V down her chest. It gave him a tantalizing view of her neck and decolletage, with the slightest hint of cleavage at the bottom of the V. She held her arms out and did a flirtatious little twirl before putting her hands on her hips and smiling at him, her eyes twinkling. Draco felt that familiar possessiveness rear up inside of him at the sight of his name on her back, just above her perfect arse.

Mine, he thought. I want her to be mine. Even if she doesn't know it yet.

He had sworn to himself that he wouldn't do this. He knew he had to keep his walls up with her until he knew how she felt about him. But seeing her in his jersey and yoga pants tested his resolve, and he couldn't help but walk toward her with a smirk on his face.

"This is infinitely better," he said, as he pulled her toward him. His eyes dipped back down toward her neckline. "Fantastic view too," he added.

Granger rolled her eyes and smacked him lightly on the arm. "You prat," she said, but she was grinning. He knew she wasn't really mad at him.

"Speaking of giving things to you, I have something else," he said, as he started tracing circles on her lower back.

"You're full of surprises tonight. What is it then?" she asked.

He dropped one hand from her waist and slipped it into his pocket where he pulled out the necklace, dangling it in front of her.

She took a step back to see it more clearly and touched the pendant to examine it.

"Malfoy..." she breathed, her eyes widening. "It's a Tudor rose... It's *stunning*." She looked up at him quickly as though she wasn't sure what to think about a gift like this.

A Tudor rose, he thought, now looking at it more closely. He hadn't been able to see it clearly in the dark of the mausoleum, but now he recognized the unique shape. The center of the rose was the diamond, framed by five inner petals made of silver and five outer petals made of gold. It was fitting for a muggleborn witch named Rose, he thought.

Draco didn't know the muggle royal family tree very well, but Septimus had written that Rose was distantly related to the Tudors through an illegitimate birth. That birth had taken place centuries before, but the boy was known to his father and therefore raised as a gentleman. Over time his heirs even married into the fringes of the royal family once or twice, though Rose herself obviously had not, having disappeared into the wizarding world instead at the age of eleven. But despite Rose's rather impressive family lineage, Septimus's father had still objected to the match.

Draco knew his ancestor must have been celebrating her muggle family tree by having the goblins craft this for her. Draco felt a moment of affection for Septimus.

"Family legend has it that this necklace should help you pass through that door that connects our rooms. I thought we could test it to see if it works."

She gave him a piercing look at this, but nodded.

"Allow me," he said as he gently spun her around. He opened the clasp on the necklace and carefully placed it on her before refastening it. He brushed the back of her neck lightly as he finished, before turning her back to face him. He could see she was fingering the pendant now.

He stepped back to admire her.

Perfection, he thought.

"Go ahead and give the door a try then. Let's see if this works."

She gave him a slight nod and then walked cautiously to the door. She placed a hand on the door and gasped just a little, as though she had felt the pendant activate. The handle, however, turned, and she opened the door and took a tentative step through it, with Draco following behind her.

She turned to look at him, her eyes dancing now. "It worked!"

"Yes," said Draco, feeling both very relieved and also a keen sense of anxiety now that she was standing in his room. She could leave him now, whenever she wanted to.

He watched as she looked around it for the first time. Draco's suite was arranged in much the same way as the lady's suite, though ironically it was slightly smaller. The biggest difference between the two rooms was the fact that Draco didn't have a separate dressing room. Evidently his ancestors believed that the Ladies required a separate area for this, but the Lords did not. Of course, they had devoted Granger's dressing room to *felix*, but the fact remained that the lady's quarters had more square footage than the master's quarters.

He saw her eyes roving over his own study area which was also a little different. Like hers, his was lined with enough bookcases to house a miniature library. But whereas hers was furnished with a couple sofas, a coffee table, and a chaise lounge, Draco's featured a large desk floating in the middle.

As he watched her, he saw her look a bit curiously toward the bathroom. Draco knew that the lady's suite bathroom was arranged in white marble and gold. The master's suite was similarly equipped, but it was in more masculine colors and featured black marble and silver.

Finally, he couldn't help but notice her eyes lingering on his bed.

Fuck, he thought. He knew this was going to be hard for him. All he could think about was seeing her on his bed, spread out before him.

Draco forced himself to move past it.

"Since the necklace works, that means you can come in here anytime you're wearing it. I wanted you to have it because I wanted you to be able to get into my room if there's an emergency or if something happens to me and Mother."

"Why?" she whispered, turning back toward him and taking an unconscious step forward. She took another step and was now a shade too close for comfort. He could smell the bath salts she favored so much. He really wished she would move a step back. He was barely hanging on as it was. Then again, he couldn't bring *himself* to move away either.

"The fireplace," he said quietly. "My fireplace. I connected it to the floo network. It only goes to one location. It's secure. I... I don't want you to leave. You're safe here at the Manor, and your occlumency isn't done yet. But if you ever think you're not safe... if something like that situation with Dolohov ever happens again, I don't want you to be stuck here, terrified you're going to die. I want you to get away. Just throw some floo powder into my fireplace and step into it. There's only one connection, so you don't even have to tell the fire where you want to go."

Her eyes were huge. Draco knew that she understood he was offering her an escape. He just prayed she wouldn't take it.

"Where does it connect to?"

He shook his head. "I can't tell you that. Your occlumency isn't done, and I really hope you never have to use it. But I promise you it's safe. I am absolutely certain about that. And the person on the other end of it would help you, even if I can't. I want you to wear the necklace at all times while you're here."

She stepped toward him again, and now she was so close Draco felt himself getting a little lightheaded. He couldn't help it. He reached up to tuck a curl behind her ear.

"Mother doesn't know. Just us and the person on the other end. That person is loyal to you and an exceptional occlumens. Your secret is safe with them. So you could leave at any time now, but... I really hope you'll stay."

He heard her breath catch, as she searched his face. "Why are you doing this for me?" she whispered.

He reached a hand up to stroke her cheek with the pad of his thumb. He wasn't sure why. He knew he needed to keep his distance from her, but he could feel something shifting between them at this very moment.

"You said it yourself. I'm a dragon. I guard what's mine. And you... well, let's just say that includes you."

She stared at him, and her eyes were huge now.

"You really won't tell me where it goes?" she asked softly.

"I can't," he said, shaking his head. "Because your occlumency isn't there yet. You're getting better, but the eruptions recently..."

He caught a flash of guilt on her face as he said this, and something about it struck him as odd. He narrowed his eyes as he thought about it.

"They *are* eruptions, aren't they?" he asked slowly.

"Yes of course," said Granger quickly. Too quickly.

He could see she was struggling to make eye contact with him. He was studying her closely now, as realization hit him.

"They're eruptions..." he said slowly, "but you aren't trying to stop them."

Now she raised her eyes to look at him, but she didn't contradict him. He thought about the implications of this fascinating discovery, and he felt a fire slowly start to light inside of him. That longing he had been suppressing took hold of him, as his eyes roved over her, memorizing every detail of her face.

"You've been wanting me to see them," he continued. "Because you push me out eventually, don't you? But you wait until I've gotten a good look first. In fact..."

He inhaled as something else just occurred to him. Something incredible. Something *wonderful*.

"You've been curating them for me, haven't you? Just in case I might see them..."

Granger still didn't say anything to this, but she stood her ground, giving him a challenging look now. He raised his hand again and brushed her lower lip with his thumb before trailing it down her neck toward the necklace. He ran a finger down it until he reached the edge of his jersey, grazing the skin just above her breasts. Draco felt her skin prickle with goosebumps at his touch, and she closed her eyes for a moment.

Draco felt himself harden as all the frustration he had been feeling for months now started to bubble to the surface.

"You've been trying to drive me mad, haven't you?" he said roughly. "You've been taunting me. Testing me. Pushing me. Giving me visions of you orgasming. Letting me see what you

look like in lingerie. Showing me how well you would suck me off with that pretty little mouth of yours..."

She shuddered, as he pulled her to him and brought his lips to her ears.

"You need to tell me right now if you're going to have second thoughts about this tomorrow," he ground out. "Because I want to fucking wreck you for every wizard who might ever come after me."

"I don't want any other wizards," she gasped, as he nuzzled her neck. "Surely you've seen that by now."

Draco groaned his approval at these words before pulling back for just a moment to look at her face. Her eyes widened just a fraction at the intensity she saw in him before they dropped to his lips. His heart was pounding as she leaned in just a little bit, and Draco felt all of his plans and self-restraint completely evaporate. He closed the distance between them and finally, *finally* kissed her.

Chapter End Notes

Note 1: For those who don't know, the Tudor Rose is a symbol of the House of Tudor, which formed when the House of York and House of Lancaster joined together after the War of the Roses. As you probably know, the Tudors included Henry VIII and his many wives. It's a very geometric form of a rose that lends itself well to jewelry and other metalwork. I think Hermione would be able to identify the symbol, as a well-educated muggleborn witch raised in England, and even Draco would recognize it since he's in line for a title.

Note: 2: Thank you for your patience with me as I slow burned! One of the things I wanted to do was give Hermione a means to escape before they finally kissed. I think it's important that she chooses Draco freely and not just because she's his captive. And now that they have found each other, buckle up.

Chapter 19: The Tattoo

Hermione

Hermione was kissing Draco Malfoy. Finally, after weeks — no, *months* — of waiting, he was here, and he was kissing her.

Or maybe she should really say that he was *consuming* her. Because that's what she felt like as his lips touched hers and then his tongue teased her mouth open. She felt like she was being consumed by his heat and his scent and something indescribable that he was practically pouring into this kiss.

Her kisses with Viktor had been pleasant but mostly chaste. Her one snog with Cormac had been less chaste, but rather awkward and not terribly enjoyable. But this...

For the first time in her life Hermione knew why some girls went mad for a snog. It felt like all of her senses were on fire, and she was getting dizzy from it. And then to her surprise he released her lips and started kissing her ear, and now she was truly lost.

How had she never known that the ear was such an erogenous zone? It was so sensitive, and it made that heat in her belly spread out and down between her legs. She found herself pressing toward him, inviting more from him, and as he moved from her ear to her neck a moan escaped her lips.

“*Fuck,*” he said between kisses. Then he pulled away for a moment to look at her. His eyes had gone so dark they were nearly black, and she could tell he was barely maintaining control.

“You need to tell me...” he rasped. “Your limits. Where to stop.”

“I don’t have any,” she said.

The words just slipped out, but she realized they were true. She *didn’t* have any, not with him. She trusted him implicitly. He had saved her, he had protected her, he had even given her the means to escape if she wanted to. And she had never planned to save her virginity for some future point in time, not really. She had been saving herself for a *person*, not an event. She used to think that person was Ron, but it had never happened. No, the person she was saving herself for had turned out to be Draco Malfoy.

So no, she didn’t have any limits. She wondered if she was going to lose her virginity tonight.

At her words his eyes closed, and his forehead dropped to meet hers. “So I can... anything?” he said, and she could hear the disbelief in his voice.

“Yes,” she whispered. “You’ll have to show me though. You know I’m not...”

“You’re perfect,” he cut her off. “It’s perfect. You have no idea how much it turns me on to know that you’ve never... that I’m the first who could... *fuck*, Hermione. I’ve been dying to touch you.”

Something warmed inside of her at these words. She had worried that her inexperience would be embarrassing — that she would somehow screw it up or make a fool of herself. But for the first time ever she realized her innocence was something that drew him to her.

He’s part dragon, she remembered. Dragons were possessive. He would want her all to himself. He wouldn’t want any other blokes even looking at her, let alone touching her. Her innocence was something he would be able to claim, and once he did he would never let go of it.

She shuddered with want as she thought about it.

She was pulled out of her thoughts as she felt his hand tugging the jersey up. She lifted her arms, and he swiftly pulled it over her head. He stared down at the lacy bra, cupping her breasts and pushing them up, as his fingers brushed over the exposed skin. She felt goosebumps erupt.

“So sensitive... and it’s not here...” he murmured to himself. She wasn’t sure what he was talking about, but he seemed to be studying her breasts intently as his hands wandered over them.

“I need to get you into bed,” he finally said, as he grabbed her hand and pulled her toward his bed on the other side of the room. She followed willingly, her heart starting to race a little bit as she climbed in and turned to look at him. He stared down at her as he shrugged out of his own robes and quickly unbuttoned his shirt and pulled down his pants so he was left only in his boxers.

Her breath hitched as she stared at him. Scars and tattoos. She nearly swooned. She reached for him, and he moved closer, letting her trace her fingers along a large scar that ran across his chest and abdomen.

“Was that...” she whispered.

“Your best pal Potter,” he said in a wry voice.

I didn’t realize it left a scar, she thought. She felt guilty about it even though she had had nothing to do with it. But she also couldn’t deny that it turned her on. She pulled his left arm toward her and traced the outline of the Dark Mark before looking up at him. Something lit inside of her, and she licked it.

“Salazar save me,” he groaned, as he moved toward her and reached behind her to unclasp her bra. She shrugged out of it, and now he stared at her breasts, and his mouth parted slightly, his hands running lightly around them until finally one thumb grazed her nipple. She felt it harden for him, and he shuddered. “Fucking perfection,” he said. “I knew you would

be perfect,” and Hermione felt a heat at his words, as she found herself impossibly wet in anticipation for him.

Then he pushed her back onto the bed, and he lowered himself over her. Hermione felt a shock of pleasure at feeling his skin against hers and the weight of him on top of her until she was distracted by his lips as he kissed toward her breasts. He took his time until he finally took one nipple in his mouth, as she arched and gasped at the sensation. It was so sensitive, so lovely. She had never known it could feel like that.

He lavished her breasts, kissing and licking and sucking and nipping, until she was twisting under him almost unconsciously.

“So good.... Tell me, beautiful... has any wizard ever tasted you here?”

“No,” she gasped. “No, just you... I...”

He didn’t respond, but she heard a rumble of approval as he caught the side of her breasts in his mouth and sucked, making Hermione moan for him.

Then he moved to the other breast. “I’m going to mark you right here,” he murmured. “So you know you’re mine.”

“Yes...” she gasped. She didn’t really understand what he was saying, but the sensations were so delicious she knew she would give him anything he wanted. And if he wanted to mark her, whatever that meant, she would let him do it.

She felt another suck, even harder this time, and she arched into him as he gripped her other breast with his hand.

“Gods... Malfoy...” she gasped.

He raised his head to look at her, and then she felt his hand creep down her stomach and toward the waistband of her yoga pants. He sat back on his knees and looked at her questioningly. She just nodded, and he closed his eyes for a moment and visibly swallowed as though composing himself before opening them again and deftly peeling the yoga pants off her legs. He tossed them aside and stared at her again, laying on his bed, naked now except for her knickers and the necklace he had given her, and she thought he looked like a man possessed.

“You’re sure I can...” he said as he placed both hands reverently on her stomach before sliding them down to linger at the top of her knickers.

“Yes...” she whispered. “Anything.”

He groaned, but then he hooked his fingers into them and pulled them down so she was finally naked for him.

She felt herself blushing just a little under his intent gaze, but she was relieved to find she wasn’t that embarrassed. He was staring at her openly like she was the most wonderful thing he had ever seen. It made her feel beautiful, powerful even.

"Found it," he said softly, as he traced the small tattoo in the dip of her hip. "You have no idea... this fucking tattoo... it drove me mad wondering where it was."

Then he settled back over her, and he kissed her lips as she felt his hand gently drift down between her legs. She shuddered as he gave a swipe and then dipped a finger in.

"Fuck me, you're so wet," he groaned. "I need to taste you."

Hermione inhaled in surprise. She had learned what fingers felt like down there, having explored herself with some frequency now. Draco's fingers felt different and somehow better than hers, but his *mouth*...

She had fantasized about it of course. She had read about it. Ginny said it was incredible, though Hermione had pointedly *not* thought about Harry being the one to do those things to her friend. But of course she had no idea what it was supposed to feel like. She was quivering in anticipation, as she watched him sit back on his knees again to spread her legs for him.

He moved down and started kissing up her inner thigh, and Hermione felt herself instinctively wriggling toward him. She heard him chuckle a little before moving to the other side, intentionally skipping over the place she wanted him most.

"Malfoy, please," she groaned.

He raised his head for a moment and smirked at her. "Call me by my name darling, and maybe I'll give you what you want," and then he lowered his head and resumed what he was doing.

"D...Draco!" she gasped.

He looked up at her again, and she knew she was giving him a pleading look. His eyes darkened at the sound of his name.

"Again..." he said.

"Draco!" she cried.

"Good girl," he said as he lowered himself to her core and gave her a long lick.

Hermione felt something light inside of her at that phrase, and her hips immediately bucked as he licked her. She looked at him in shock. She heard him give a wicked chuckle as he leaned back.

"You taste better than I ever imagined," he muttered, and then as he settled in and went in on her with his mouth *hard*.

Holy hell, she thought as she saw stars. This was so different than what she had been expecting. It was so sensitive, so much *better* than anything she had ever done to herself. Before she knew it, she was writhing, and she felt him holding her hips tightly in place.

There was something hard in his hand that he was pressing into the soft flesh around her hip bones, and it was slightly painful but immensely pleasurable at the same time.

His ring, she vaguely realized. He always wore his signet ring now, and she knew he must have spun it around in his hand to mark her with it too as he licked and sucked.

He raised his head and plunged the same finger with his ring inside of her, and she gasped at the intrusion.

“Come for me,” he said roughly. “Now.” Then he hooked his fingers up, and he stared at her hard as she exploded, orgasming more intensely than she could ever remember.

“Fuck...” he murmured. “Fucking yes. Keep going beautiful. Look at me when you do it.”

Then he lowered his head again, but he was still watching her face as he worked, and she felt another wave of her orgasm rock through her, her vision blurring and her limbs shaking. She thought she might be saying something to him, but she couldn’t think straight to know for sure.

He pulled his head back to get a better look, still working his fingers into her hard. “Say it,” he demanded, with a dark, almost fierce look on his face. “Say you’re mine.”

“Yes... all yours.... Draco...”

He nearly growled in approval as her orgasm finally tapered off. She floated back down to earth, and he moved up to kiss her hard again. Then she felt him take her hand and slide it down his stomach toward his boxers. Catching on to what he wanted she slipped her hand in, and she heard him hiss as she gripped his shaft. She was surprised by how firm it was, but the skin was also so soft.

“Show me,” she whispered, and he guided her, showing her the speed and the motion. It wasn’t long before he was shuddering, alternating between muttering curses and praise for her.

As soon as she was doing it right he removed his own hand and slid it over her hip and across her arse as he squeezed.

“Fuck, your arse is so perfect. I noticed it the first day you were here. I just... *gods* I’m so close. I....”

He gave a groan as he jerked, then she felt something hot and sticky coating her hand.

He grabbed her wand from the nightstand, and he muttered a cleansing spell. He pulled her to him, and they slipped under the covers together as she nestled close to him.

“Sleep now darling,” he said with a yawn.

“Malfoy, I’m naked,” she said.

“Mmm, these are the words I like to hear.”

She couldn't help herself. She chuckled and he gave her a little squeeze.

"Tippy..."

"Won't disturb us."

"You're not going to let me go back to my room are you?" she asked, torn between amusement and exasperation.

He gave her an incredulous look. "After that? You're mad to even consider it. You said it yourself. You're mine. That means you're supposed to be in here with me."

She felt herself blush at this, but she couldn't deny that she was pleased. She still had a few questions though.

"Malfoy..."

"Hmmm?"

"Didn't you want to... you know?"

He pulled back a minute to look down at her. She felt him tracing patterns on her back.

"More than anything. But in case you didn't notice, I was barely hanging on as it was. I would have made a fool of myself if we had."

This surprised her, and she looked at him askance. "Never."

He gave a small snort. "Granger, you have no idea what you do to me. I need a practice run or two to get used to it if I stand the slightest chance of lasting for you. Besides, there's plenty to do without going all the way just yet."

She couldn't help it. She smiled at this. They were quiet for another long moment.

"Granger," he said suddenly.

"Hmmm?"

"Are you going to stay with me? Here at the Manor I mean."

She saw he looked very nervous as he asked this, but also determined.

"Well I need to stick around a bit longer to finally lose my virginity don't you think?" she teased.

"Minx," he muttered, but she saw he had a broad grin on his face.

"I'm staying," she said seriously. "I'll have to join Harry once it's time to destroy the last horcruxes and end this thing. But until then..."

He reached up and stroked her face as she said this.

“And after the war?” he asked softly.

She felt herself falter a little.

“I... I want to be with you. If you’ll have me, I mean. I know I’m not a pureblood but...”

“That doesn’t matter,” he cut her off. “Bellatrix would care but she will be out of the way soon enough. I will make sure of it. And my father will just have to manage. Mother is in favor, and that’s my trump card. He will agree to anything she wants, even this.”

She felt something flutter in her heart at this. “I thought they wanted to...”

“Set me up with a pureblood witch? Yes. And I have to play along for now for appearances. But I’m not making it easy on them. Eventually they will either give up or try to arrange a marriage for me. If it’s the latter, I’ve decided I won’t cooperate.”

“Marriage?” she asked. “You’re only eighteen!”

“Wizards tend to start early. And I’m the heir of two old pureblood Houses and in the thick of the war. I have to produce my own legitimate heir at some point, and they’re concerned I might die in the war before I get around to it. They’re pushing me for it earlier than they normally would. But like I said, I’m not going to be coerced. And if we both survive this, then I want you to stay here. With me. You’re mine now, and... and I don’t think I could give you up. Sod them all if they try to make me.”

Hermione felt a swell of emotion at these words. She pulled him toward her for a deep kiss before pulling back.

“You really are a dragon aren’t you?”

“Yes. And you’re my treasure. I want to protect you. And I want you all for myself.”

Her heart warmed at this, and she nestled in.

“You have me.”

He gave her a long kiss at that. “Sleep now darling.”

Hermione finally closed her eyes and drifted off to sleep.

Draco

Draco woke up first, breathing in that scent of lavender, rosemary, and mint. It took him a split second to realize he was in bed, nearly naked, with Granger. His bed. Her body. And

after the previous night when they....

He couldn't help but smile as he opened his eyes and found her still asleep, facing him. A curl had fallen over her face, fluttering slightly as she breathed. He gently tucked it away, but it didn't wake her. He stared at her, thinking about everything that had happened the night before.

He knew he was in too deep with her. It would absolutely destroy him if she woke up this morning and told him it was a mistake. But he really hoped she meant what she said last night. She was here, she was his, and she wanted him once the war was over.

A very small part of him wished he hadn't caved because it made him so emotionally vulnerable now. Even if she wanted to be with him, he was sure his feelings were stronger than hers. But once he worked out that she was intentionally taunting him with her memories, he could no longer help himself. All of the things she had been showing him came flooding back, and he had to kiss her and finally make her his.

Merlin, if it hadn't been magic in itself. She was so responsive and lovely, and he quickly discovered their sexual preferences meshed perfectly. He liked to lead in bed, and she liked to follow. He liked to give praise, and she liked to receive it. Every time he told her she was beautiful or perfect she practically melted for him. It had almost thrown him off the first time it happened. She was so strong and feisty outside of the bedroom that he had never expected it. And yet, something about it fit. Hermione Granger had always wanted to be the very best and practically preened whenever teachers told her that she was. It probably shouldn't have surprised him that she had something of a praise kink. Not that he was complaining in the least. He felt compelled to tell her just how much he wanted her, and it was nothing short of wonderful seeing her like that, nearly desperate for him and totally willing to turn the reins over to his control. Once he saw her do it the first time he praised her, he couldn't bring himself to stop. It was so perfect it was positively addictive.

He was actually a bit shocked that their first time together had been that good. He had had enough sexual encounters to know that there was usually some negotiation that took place — some give and take as they figured each other out. But with Granger, they had instantly clicked without any hesitation. He supposed it had something to do with the fact that he had been in her head for so long, but there was no awkwardness as they came together for the first time.

It was even more surprising because he knew she had virtually no experience. Not that Draco was complaining about that, either — the fewer wizards the better, as far as he was concerned — but he still thought Weasley was an idiot for failing to appreciate Granger the way she deserved. She was stunning. She was perfect. Her sexuality was something that was meant to be savored, not saved. Draco was beyond thrilled that he would be the one to do the savoring, and now that he had had a taste he was truly all in. The only way he would ever turn her over to some other wizard would be if he was dead and rotting in the Malfoy mausoleum.

He studied the necklace she was wearing, still a bit conflicted about it. The last witch who wore it had done so because she was a muggleborn lover and deemed to be unworthy of the Malfoy title. Draco deeply disliked the obvious parallels to Granger, but the necklace was for

her safety. And in any event, Draco was now determined that it would be a temporary fix until he could truly make her his.

After the previous night Draco knew he would never be free of her. He was in love with her. Of course he was. And he had read about Septimus's pain and regret when he chose to follow the family tradition instead of following his heart and marrying Rose.

Something about falling for Granger in the middle of the war made Draco appreciate all the more how fleeting life could be. She could be wrenched from him at any moment, now or in the future. Blood status didn't matter. Family traditions didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was with her. Draco decided he would take Septimus's advice. He would find a way to be with her for as long as she would have him, matchmaking and arranged marriages be damned.

Knowing that he intended the necklace to be a temporary fix to their problem made Draco feel less guilty about giving it to her. And in fact, her reaction to receiving it had given Draco a sense of inexplicable pleasure. He remembered what she said about wanting to be wooed and how her dream wizard knew she was a witch and not just one of the boys. She might wear wizards' quidditch jerseys and have her nose buried in books, but Draco realized she also liked nice things, *feminine* things. She still had those roses in her sitting room. And she had nearly swooned when he gave her this necklace the night before. Draco wanted to see her do it again.

Draco thought she should wear Malfoy jewelry once the war was over and there was time again for that sort of thing. But many of the pieces they had in their vault were a bit too heavy for his tastes. She was tiny and had a delicate bone structure, and he thought the delicacy of the pendant on the necklace fit her well. He decided he would have something made for her. Maybe she could even model it for him whenever they were naked together. She could wear the jewelry he had given her and nothing else. He nodded to himself, very pleased with this plan.

His eyes roved over her naked body, and he saw the thin scar on her neck from Bellatrix's knife that he had grown accustomed to but that made him angry every time he thought about it. Then he saw a love bite forming on the inside of her left breast. In the morning light he also saw a thin scar near it, just over her heart. He frowned at this, wondering what had caused it. He hadn't seen this in her memories yet, so it must be from the past year.

Then he looked down a little further and saw the purple curse scar from Dolohov and then even further until he found the imprint of an intricate M on her hip. In the heat of the moment, he had branded her with his ring, just under her tattoo. He stroked the mark just a bit and considered healing it, but he decided he liked seeing it there. It satisfied something in him to know she had given her body over to him. It was like she was a part of his House already.

Speaking of her tattoo he moved the covers back just a bit and squinted to get a better look at it. It was simple, just two dots next to each other in a half-circle arc, with something that looked like a tiny necklace separating them.

What on earth?

The dates he saw were 31 October 1991 and 1 July 1997. He traced his finger on it and nearly jumped when he heard her voice.

“The first date is the day I became friends with Harry and Ron. The second date is when I obliterated my parents.”

His head whipped up to stare at her. She had woken up and had seen him looking at her tattoo.

“I hope it’s a work in progress,” she continued. “If we defeat You-Know-Who, and I find my parents again, those dates will complete the circle.”

“And this?” he asked, touching the tiny necklace that was between the two dates.

“It’s Slytherin’s locket,” she said. He looked up to stare at her again. “I snuck into muggle London one day just after it was destroyed and had it added. The diadem, the cup, and the snake will be added between the other dates once they’re gone too. They are the four horcruxes we’ve been tasked to find and destroy.”

“So it’s a representation of the war for you,” he said quietly, as he brushed it again.

“Yes,” she said. “Ron, and especially Harry, changed me. Harry’s the reason I’m at the center of the war. And this war will change my life forever, one way or another. I don’t ever want to forget what it cost me.”

“And will anything go in the middle of the circle?” he asked.

She looked down at the M that he had placed there and touched it. “It depends on how things go, but... I’ve been thinking. Maybe a dragon. A Hebridean black.”

Draco felt his heart pounding as he stared at her. *Him*. She was thinking of tattooing something about him onto her body. Something *permanent*. Something that would be larger than any of the other component parts of her tattoo. Then he realized she was looking at him nervously.

“Granger, if you did that, I would never... *fuck* that would be the hottest and most amazing... please. Yes, *please* do it.”

She smiled a little shyly at that and leaned in for a kiss. Draco immediately obliged, and all of his lingering fears about her waking up to say they had made a mistake evaporated on the spot. Her feelings must be strong if she would consider doing something like that. And even if his were stronger, he could be patient. He could wait for her to catch up.

She pulled away from him for a moment.

“You’ve been the biggest surprise of the war so far. But I owe you my life. And my feelings... and the things we did last night and may do... well, whatever else happens you ended up squarely in the middle of the war for me. My tattoo would be incomplete without you.”

“You’re going to complete it. I’ll make sure of it.”

They kissed for a few more long moments, and then she pulled back again and sighed.

“The cup though. Gringotts is impossible. The boys have started trying to break in on their own again, and they can’t even get through the doors to get to the carts. They need the goblins to let them in.”

“I know how to get the cup,” said Draco.

And he did. The answer had just come to him in that very moment, without any prompting, as though it had always been there in his mind.

She furrowed her brow, but looked cautiously optimistic. “What? How?”

“Bellatrix lets me in.”

She looked confused for a moment but her eyes widened. “You mean...”

“She takes me to her vault, and then I... improvise once I’m there.”

Granger exhaled as she thought about it.

“That’s incredibly dangerous. And she will know it’s you who took it once it disappears,” she said.

“You’re assuming she wakes up in the first place. And that if she does, she’s in any state to identify me,” he said.

He could see her biting her lip as she thought about it. Draco knew she was uncomfortable with it. He placed a hand under her chin and tilted it up so he could look at her squarely.

“Granger, I was always going to make sure she pays,” he said.

“Why?” she whispered.

“She hurt you,” said Draco without any hesitation. “I won’t tolerate it. I can’t tolerate it. I’ve been biding my time because she’s closer to the Dark Lord than Dolohov was. She’s more dangerous. And if we need to ensure that I get into her vault first then that means I have to do it at exactly the right time. But she’s going to pay for everything she did to you. I made that decision weeks ago.”

She looked a bit overwhelmed, but he could see her thinking hard. “Dolohov was killed by Bellatrix. But that night you said...”

“I was behind it,” he said bluntly. She stared hard at him. “He tried to kill you. He gave you a permanent curse. So when Bellatrix caught me coming out of the East Wing one night, I had the perfect opportunity. That wand of yours just reacted and stunned her for me. I obliterated her and planted an idea in her mind that Dolohov was looking for information to

discredit her. I made her paranoid. She's prone to paranoia anyway, I just directed it toward him. She did the rest all on her own."

"That's... I..."

Granger's eyes had darkened as he told her about Dolohov. He could tell she was torn by it. She was both appalled that he had followed through on his promise to her, but she was also intrigued by it. Something about it turned her on.

"I'll always protect you, Granger. And I'll get revenge on anybody who has ever harmed you."

She shuddered at his words, and his hand dropped from her waist, dancing to the place between her legs. Instinctively she started to open for him, and he pulled her closer to whisper in her ear.

"Does that excite you?"

"It shouldn't," she insisted, but she was starting to arch toward him, and he felt her breathing getting shallow.

"But it does," he said. "Admit it. Danger excites you. Darkness excites you. And you know I'll do those things for you. I already have. It makes you want me."

"I... I...yes..." she finally admitted, and he rewarded her confession by moving his fingers inside of her, making her gasp.

"I'll do anything for you," he said as he started to work his fingers into her. She was looking at him with desperate eyes as he found her clit with his thumb. She moaned for him.

"Anything at all. Except let you go. I'm never letting you go. And that means anybody who has ever hurt you... anybody who tries to stop me from having you... they'll pay."

She was pressing herself to him, starting to shake. He worked his fingers into her, rubbing her with hard, almost punishing strokes that he sensed were just beyond the edge of pleasure. But something told him she liked it this way, and maybe even craved it.

"Come on my beautiful girl. Show me what you can do. You're so perfect..." and at his words she shattered for him. Draco stared at the sight and memorized it. He started to slip his fingers back out as her eyes started to clear, but to his surprise he felt her hands down there with him.

She stared at him as he felt her fingers dip inside herself along with his own, and he was impossibly hard now. He slipped his hand out to cover hers, showing her what to do, helping her touch herself. After a few moments of this she pulled away but then slipped the same hand down his boxers.

Fucking hell, he thought, as he realized he could feel her own wetness on her fingers. She was using herself as lubrication as she started to stroke him.

Where the fuck has this come from? He wondered. How did she think of this? Does she have any idea how fucking hot this...

But then his thoughts were lost to the feeling of her hands and her slickness and the memory of how she had just come for him, nearly on command. All he had to do was get her close and tell her she was perfect, and then she would fall apart and give him exactly what he wanted to see. And before he knew it — and far too quickly — he felt his own pleasure wash over him as he came in his boxers for the second time in twelve hours. He grabbed her wand and cleaned them up before pulling her close again.

“You’re going to kill me,” he muttered. She just gave a chuckle before pulling back to look at him.

“You started it,” she said.

“It’s the best way to start the day,” he quipped.

“No doubt. A breakthrough about the horcruxes and an orgasm... no better way, I’d say.”

He just smirked at her. Then she turned serious. “I don’t love the idea of you doing this alone, Draco.”

“It’s the best way,” he said.

“Well yes. But it bothers me a lot. That and what you’ll have to do to keep her... quiet. I’ll not deny that she’s evil. She’s nearly as bad as You-Know-Who. But I still don’t like it.”

“It’s the best way to get into Gringotts,” he insisted. “You know it is. You and Potter and Weasley have been trying to find another way in for months. It won’t work though, they tightened security a lot after that break in just before we started at Hogwarts. We have to get that horcrux to defeat him, and that means she needs to take one of us in herself. As for keeping her quiet... she’s truly evil. She deserves whatever happens to her.”

She sighed as she thought about this. “You may be right. OK then, let me get dressed, and I’ll tell the boys.”

“My jersey is still clean,” he called to her as she rolled out of bed and made her way toward the connecting door. He admired her naked form as she walked across the room.

“Fine,” she laughed. “I’ll wear your jersey Malfoy.”

“Thank you, darling. It’s perfect on you.”

Dear Journal,

Fuck the pureblood traditions in my family. I finally kissed Granger last night and brought her to my bed. It was incredible, and I’m never going to let her go. I’ll marry her and

expose myself to the Dark Lord before going along with the schemes that my father and Aunt Bella are cooking up. I refuse to turn her into another Rose Atwater.

She's lovely. She's perfect. She's mine.

I probably don't have to tell you this, but I'm in love with her. Someday, when I'm sure she feels the same way, I'll tell her too.

Chapter 20: Gentle Hermione

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione

“Good morning Miss!” squeaked Tippy as Hermione stepped through the door to her room.

“Erm...” said Hermione, and she could feel herself turning scarlet.

“Tippy is pleased, Miss. Master Draco is very fond of Miss Hermione,” she said.

“Oh... well...” said Hermione.

“Master Draco has ordered Tippy to say nothing to my Mistress if Master opened the door and brought Miss to his room. Tippy will follow the order,” said the little elf.

Hermione furrowed her brow. “But I thought your magic was tied to Narcissa?”

“My magic is tied to Mistress’s line from the House of Black, Miss. Master Draco is part of her House, Miss.”

“I’m afraid I still don’t understand.”

“If Tippy gets conflicting orders from my Mistress or my Master, Tippy may choose which order to follow,” she said.

Hermione’s eyes widened.

“And you... approve of me and Draco then?”

“Oh yes, Miss. Tippy has been waiting and waiting. Tippy has been hoping that Miss would become one of her Mistresses.”

To Hermione’s disbelief the elf actually blushed as she said this. Hermione crouched down. “Tippy, I’m not terribly comfortable with House Elf magic, you know.”

“But Miss is kind,” insisted the elf solemnly. “Miss will always be kind to Tippy. ‘Tis not always so when a Master gets married. Tippy is lucky that it will be Miss.”

Hermione quirked an eyebrow. “I’m not marrying Draco anytime soon.”

Tippy gave her a knowing look. “Master Lucius and Ms. Bellatrix wish Master Draco to marry urgently to secure an heir. Tippy thinks Master Draco will wish to marry Miss before that happens. Master Draco has loved Miss for months.”

Hermione felt her heart start to pound.

He loved her? She knew he was deeply protective of her. It was his nature. And he was obviously very attracted to her. But *love*?

“I’m afraid I don’t know about that, Tippy. He’s never said anything to me about it.”

“Tippy is certain, Miss,” she said calmly.

“But how?” asked Hermione.

“The roses, Miss. The roses Master Draco sent to Miss Hermione. The garden elves told Tippy he ordered them planted not long after Miss arrived. They is in his section of the garden near Master Draco’s bench. The roses is called ‘Gentle Hermione.’ Tis a new breed and not ready for public sale yet, but Master Draco purchased them under the condition the name does not change once they is ready for sale. We is the only house in England that has them now Miss.”

Hermione felt her jaw drop, something inside of her almost aching now.

“But... but... how would he even know?” she finally asked.

“My Mistress likes flowers,” said Tippy simply. “She is knowing many of the breeders in England. She is telling Master Draco about them several years ago now, Miss. A new rose breed takes many years to cultivate for sale, Miss.”

“And he remembered they’re called ‘Gentle Hermione,’” she said, in disbelief at everything she had just learned.

“Yes. Master Draco remembers everything, Miss.”

Hermione wandered over to the roses now, still as fresh as the day Draco had given them to her. They had been an apology at the time, but now Hermione realized they symbolized something much more than that. He had gone to a lot of trouble to source them simply because they had the same name as her, and he had never even told her. In fact, she doubted he had told anybody except for the elves. What was it he said to her that day?

“They reminded me of you.”

Her heart warmed, as she realized her dragon had a streak of the hopeless romantic in him. He tried to hide it behind sex and sarcasm, but there was no other explanation.

Hermione smiled broadly as she turned to Tippy. “Thank you, Tippy. Thank you for telling me.”

“You is welcome, Miss. Master Draco cares about Miss. Master Draco would not breach the door to his room and allow Miss to sleep there if he did not care,” she said.

Hermione hesitated a bit at this. “We would... prefer to keep that between ourselves, Tippy,” she said.

"Yes, Miss. My Mistress does not know it can be done. Tippy is pleased Master Draco found a way to do it."

Now Hermione was puzzled again.

"Draco said the necklace was part of a family legend about this door. I'm not sure I understand it, but he implied it's well-known."

"Tippy is not knowing, Miss," she said. But Hermione couldn't help but notice Tippy tugging her ears as she said it. This was a clear sign that the little elf was not being entirely truthful. Still, Hermione decided to let it drop. She wouldn't ask the elf to violate a direct order. She would have to get the answer from Draco later.

"Very well," said Hermione, and Tippy then excused herself to collect breakfast while Hermione took one last fond look at the flowers as she played with the pendant on her necklace.

After pulling herself out of her thoughts, she walked over to her beaded bag and removed the galleon.

Harry are you there?

This is Ron.

Hermione paused, as she stared at it. Ron had been noticeably silent in the weeks since Malfoy had collected the diadem and then revealed himself to Harry. It didn't take a genius to figure out why. Ron was upset that Hermione was getting close to Malfoy. Hermione bit her lip.

Hi Ron, it's nice to hear from you.

Is it?

Don't be like that. Of course it is. I miss you both.

Not enough to leave Malfoy.

Hermione winced a little at this. Up until last night she *couldn't* have left Malfoy. But now that she had the means, she didn't have the desire.

I'm safe here. And I have access to his library. It's much larger than the library at Grimmauld Place.

It hasn't helped with Gringotts though. You're wasting your time there with him. You need to get out or let us come collect you.

I'm still training in occlumency, and we are brewing potions together. I'm not ready to leave.

You just don't want to leave.

Hermione hesitated now, but she decided there was nothing for it.

No, I don't.

There was a long pause before Hermione felt the galleon burn again.

This is Harry. Was that really necessary?

I'm being honest. I want to stay here until it's time for us to meet.

Hermione had insisted on finishing her occlumency training before meeting up to destroy the diadem. She felt it was too risky to leave the Manor before then. Of course, up until the previous night she didn't have a way to get out.

I know you do, but Ron...

Ron needs to accept that it's not happening, Harry.

You're really into Malfoy aren't you?

Hermione hesitated again. She had been dancing around this with Harry for ages now, but she knew it was finally time to come clean.

Yes. We're together now.

I really hope he actually cares about you.

Well he manipulated Bellatrix into murdering Dolohov for me. I would say he cares.

Fucking hell.

I know. He said it was revenge for the Department of Mysteries.

I won't lie, I'm not upset that Dolohov's gone. The Order will be thrilled. But that's dark.

Well he also planted roses named after me in their garden. So he has a light side too.

Merlin, he's in love with you isn't he?

That's what the House Elf says. But he hasn't told me yet.

And you feel the same way?

Hermione felt herself blush. It was a bit odd talking about this stuff with Harry, but he was her best friend. He was her brother.

I think so, yes. It's been awfully fast, but there's something about him that just draws me to him.

I'll keep working on Ron then. He knows he lost his chance. He's just bitter about it.

Thanks Harry. And speaking of Malfoy, he had a brainwave this morning about Gringotts.

He found something?

Not exactly. But he thinks he can get Bellatrix to let him in herself. She's become rather fond of him.

There was a long pause while Harry absorbed this on the other end.

That's really dangerous if we can't help.

I know, but he thinks it's the only way. I think he's right. And he's willing to do what he needs to do to incapacitate her.

Including killing her? Because it might take that.

Hermione inhaled at this. She and Draco had danced around this without explicitly saying it, but she knew the truth in her heart.

Yes. He's vowed revenge on her for what she did to me a few months ago.

He has multiple motives then. Alright. I'm willing to go along with it.

Good.

We also need to think about what will happen once he has it though. I don't see how he could do it without exposing himself.

Yes, I had that thought. I think we need to be prepared to go for Nagini and You-Know-Who as soon as he has it.

Where?

Hogwarts. Malfoy says he's been assigned to learn about Hogwarts' defenses and to fortify them.

So he can tell us what You-Know-Who is planning then?

Better than that. He could lie to You-Know-Who about the defenses so we have an advantage if we meet him there. He just needs some time so it's convincing.

So we need to lie low for a bit longer then.

Yes. We should prepare a plan for Hogwarts first. Once that's ready then Malfoy can ask for a tour of Bellatrix's vault. We need to be ready to draw You-Know-Who to Hogwarts once he has it.

Merlin, we have a lot to do.

Yes, but now we finally have a rough plan.

You're right. Tell Malfoy. I'll tell Ron, and we'll contact Remus to start building a battle plan for Hogwarts. Something we can trigger at a moment's notice.

Perfect, Harry. And tell Ron I'm sorry he's hurt.

I will. Stay safe.

You too.

Dear Reader,

Somehow, against all odds, Malfoy and I are together. He gave me a way to escape, but I want to stay. I want to be with him.

Our relationship may be doomed. There's no way his family will approve of me. But I'm not going to think about that now. The war is closing in, and we have a rough plan for You-Know-Who. I just need to enjoy whatever time I have with him until the end.

Draco

Dear Journal,

She's perfect. She's wonderful. She said she would be mine now and after the war. Now that I've gotten a taste I'm desperate for more. I feel myself becoming totally wrapped up in her. I want every part of her, always.

I understand my patronus now. She's mine, and I couldn't bear it if she left me for someone else. I want to keep her here with me, locked in our suite together forever. Fuck the rest of the world, as long as I can have her.

"The Order wants to build a battle plan for Hogwarts," said Draco. "Potter wants to meet the Dark Lord here once he's ready."

Snape gave him a wry look. "Let me guess. He wants us to lie to the Dark Lord about the defenses."

"Yes," acknowledged Draco.

Snape sat back and thought about this.

“On the whole, the idea is not.... terrible.”

“That’s because it was really Granger’s idea.”

Snape rolled his eyes. “I thought as much. But I’ll not deny it’s a workable plan. As I’m sure you know by now Minerva holds the keys to Hogwarts’ defenses.”

“Yes, and Granger is second in line and then Potter behind her before it reverts to the Headmaster.”

Snape just stared at him before closing his eyes and rubbing his temples. Then he turned to the portrait behind his desk and glared at it.

“Is there anything else you’ve failed to tell me Albus? Any more critical information that could be helpful to actually win this war?”

To Draco’s surprise the portrait of Dumbledore didn’t appear the least bit chastened. He just twinkled and said, “You know me, Severus. I find things come to fruition when secrets are discovered by those who seek.”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Snape. Draco had to agree with this sentiment. Didn’t Dumbledore *want* them to win? His secrecy was maddening.

Snape sighed and then thought about it. “I suppose it doesn’t create an enormous complication. She will need to be within the wards to hold them in case Minerva falls. But I imagine she will insist on being here anyway with Potter.”

Draco grimaced, but inclined his head in acknowledgment.

“You’re displeased,” said Snape.

Draco snorted. “Her memories are unbelievable, especially from this past year. It’s like she and Potter have a death wish.”

“I did warn you,” said Snape.

“Yes you did. And you were right about all of it.”

“It would be better for you if you could disengage from her.”

Draco just gave him an overwhelmed look.

“Don’t you think I’ve tried? But I can’t. She’s just... she’s...”

Snape sighed. “Say no more. I understand of course. But we will have to use her Draco. She’s part of the plan already, and she’s inordinately talented. She’s an asset.”

“I know, but... let’s try to keep her safe while we do it. Please.”

Snape nodded. "Very well. Let me show you what I know of the defenses, and then we'll turn to potions," and he pulled out a folio and passed it toward Draco as they bent their heads to review.

Draco made his way to his room, having spent most of the day with Snape. He was ready to spend a couple hours with Granger and *felix* before yet another pureblood dinner. He groaned when he thought about it, but he was determined not to allow it to ruin the afternoon with her.

The past week with her had been like a dream, and he caught himself grinning like an idiot whenever he thought about it. They were wrapped up in each other, and he relished his new freedom to kiss her, touch her, hold her. He was head over heels, and she seemed to be too.

"Hey beautiful," he said as he walked into her room.

She blushed prettily at this but rose to give him a kiss. "Hey," she said a little breathlessly.

He pulled her to him to deepen it until she pushed him back laughing.

"Occlumency, Malfoy. You said we were doing occlumency today."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Fine. But I expect you in my room tonight love."

She rolled her eyes. "I've slept in your room every night."

"Yes, and we can't break the streak," he said very seriously.

She just laughed and pulled him to the sofa with her. She sat down with him and swung her legs over his lap before curling into him.

"Occlumency," she said.

He automatically pulled her closer and started to trace patterns on her leg. "You're being awfully affectionate," he said.

She bit her lip and gave him a slightly pleading look. "Yes, well... you're probably not going to like this one. I'm trying to butter you up first."

Draco was torn between amusement and exasperation. Recently he had been watching memory after memory of the trio camping together, arguing with each other, struggling to find food, and Granger translating that mad book Dumbledore had left to her.

She had become adept at blocking references to the horcrux they carried with them. She slowly and systematically tucked away every memory she had of it between pages of the

books in her mental Hogwarts library until she could edit entire conversations to avoid it. The memories of the locket that they passed between them she modified to look like the necklace Draco had given to her, and Granger wore it all the time. It had taken time before she could do it consistently but now that she was able to do it, it seemed she was ready to move on. Draco was a bit relieved, despite what was to come. Listening to Weasley constantly complain had been driving him mad.

“It will be fine,” he said. “It’s impossible to be cross with you when you’re on top of me.”

“Yes well, I’m rather banking on that,” she said nervously.

Draco gave her an amused smile. “Alright then, get ready.”

She nodded and he thought, *Legilimens!* and he was in. He felt her leading him to a point at the end of autumn, as the weather was getting colder. Before long he found the memory she was trying to show him, and he watched as the trio heard the voices of Ted Tonks, Dean Thomas, Dirk Cresswell and a goblin nearby.

Draco felt a lurch. He knew Ted Tonks was dead now. He was Draco’s uncle, but Draco had never met him. As he watched they listened to the others talk about Potter and retell a story about Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and Neville Longbottom breaking into the Headmaster’s office to try to collect the Sword of Gryffindor.

As the group moved away, he watched the trio in a near panic as they pulled out the portrait of Phineas Nigellus from Granger’s bag to question him about the students and their punishment. Finally, just as Phineas was turning to leave Granger asked him about the last time he had seen the Sword, and Phineas informed her that he had seen Dumbledore break open a ring with it.

Granger and Potter gasped, looking thrilled with the discovery, but Draco noticed Weasley had a mulish look on his face. Potter and Granger were talking quickly now, getting more and more excited as the purpose of the Sword became clear to them, but Weasley was looking increasingly angry. Finally, the two turned to Weasley and asked him what he thought.

“Remembered me, have you?” asked Weasley in a foul tone.

Draco watched in slight disbelief as the trio fought about the Sword until eventually Weasley looked at Granger and asked her to come with him. When she said no, he said, “I get it, you choose him,” and he yanked off the horcrux and stormed out.

The memory followed Granger as she chased after Weasley pleading with him.

“Ron! Please! Don’t leave us! Don’t leave *me!*”

He turned and snarled at her. “You’ve made your choice. Now fuck off!”

She gasped, tears streaming down her face as Weasley disappeared away. Granger dropped to her knees and began to sob, and Draco felt a curious feeling come over him as he watched.

Weasley broke her heart.

He had known this of course. And she was firm that she no longer had feelings for him. But seeing how much she had cared about him felt like a punch in the gut.

He watched as Granger rose and went back to the tent to tell Potter he had really left them. Then she collapsed into tears again, and now Potter was trying to comfort her. Draco knew he had seen this before, and something twisted uncomfortably as he watched the scene play out again.

“He broke my heart!” she sniffed. “He just left us... he left *me*. What am I supposed to think, Harry?”

Potter hugged her. “It wasn’t you, Hermione. He’s angry with me.”

“But I thought he wanted to be with me! I thought... finally... and we’re all probably going to die! What if I die, and I’ve never gotten to...”

“I know, Hermione, I know.”

Draco recalled that the last time he had seen this memory, Granger pushed him out at this point. But this time she let him keep watching.

“I’m such an idiot. Just a stupid little girl believing in soulmates and happily ever afters.”

Soulmates. She had thought Weasley was her soulmate. Draco felt sick.

Potter sighed. “You’re about the last person anybody would accuse of being an idiot. And it’s not you, Hermione. It’s really not. You know he cares about you. Hell, he’s been in love with you for years.”

“But then why won’t he just *do* something about it, Harry? Surely he knows how I feel... how I’ve felt!”

“He thinks you’re too good for him,” said Potter. “You know he’s always been insecure about that.”

“I’m not, though,” she said in a quiet voice. “He has this huge, wonderful family. He was raised in the wizarding world. I mean, sure they never had much money but the Weasley’s never needed it. I would have traded all the money my parents had to be part of this world from birth... and that’s true even though I’m probably going to die really young because of it.”

Potter snorted. “Same. I would trade all the gold in my vault to have my parents back. But he’s never been able to see how lucky he really is.”

Draco felt an odd sensation as he listened to their conversation. He had been the person who had always harassed both of them for their backgrounds, but he had never thought they actually believed any of it. Hearing them talk, however, made Draco realize exactly how cruel he had been.

He continued to watch as Granger pulled herself out of Potter's arms and settled herself on the floor next to him. She laced her fingers through his and put her head on his shoulder. Potter closed his eyes and leaned his head back.

"It's just you and me now Harry. Both only children. Your parents gone, mine as good as. Maybe this is how it's supposed to be. He has a family to go back to. We... don't."

"You're my family, Hermione," he said, with his eyes still closed. "You're my sister."

He saw Granger give a watery smile at this. "And you're my brother."

Draco watched for a few more minutes, but they both just sat there in silence, and eventually he released her.

She stared up at him and bit her lip nervously. Draco didn't say anything. He felt a combination of searing jealousy and anger toward Weasley and deep shame about his own actions. She stayed quiet, waiting for him to collect his thoughts.

"You were in love with him," he finally said. He saw her flinch a little at the coldness in his voice, but he couldn't help it. He was barely holding it together.

"I... don't think I was," she said.

He shot a skeptical look at her, but couldn't help feeling the tiniest burst of hope.

"You said you thought he was your soulmate."

"And I also said I was an idiot," she countered.

"But if you believed..." he started, but she cut him off.

"If I was in love with anything, it was the *idea* of me and Ron. Ginny and I had it all planned out, you know. She would end up with Harry and I would end up with Ron. We would be sisters, Harry would be my brother, and I would finally have a large family where I actually fit in, just like I've always wanted. But Ron and I aren't good for each other, Draco. You heard Harry. Ron is incredibly insecure. And when we argue – which we do all the time – we hurt each other. Over and over again, we hurt each other. He's not my soulmate. He never was. I was being emotional when I said that."

Draco swallowed. He still wasn't sure.

"He broke your heart," he said.

"No," she said. "He didn't, not really. The moment he left us my feelings for him died, and it was like I finally saw him for what he was. I finally saw how incompatible we are. But losing him also meant I lost my dream of joining the Weasleys for real – not just as a friend of the family. That's the thing that really broke my heart."

Draco bit his lip. "You love the Weasleys then?"

She got a small smile on her face. “Yes, I really do. They’re this very large, very mad, very loving family. I’ve always wanted a big family, but my parents didn’t have any kids after me because of my magic. They loved me, but it was a lot for them, and by the time I was gone to Hogwarts my mum thought she was too old to have more. I always wanted to be part of the Weasleys from the first time I ever visited. Harry feels the same way. But I’ve also realized that whether I’m with Ron or not they will always welcome me. And I do have my own family in the wizarding world now. Harry’s my brother.”

Draco felt something inside of him unclench as he listened to her. She must have seen it on his face because a look of relief crossed hers for a split second before she sat up and flung a leg across his lap to straddle him. Draco felt some heat start, but there was one more thing he had to say.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “For all the shit I said over the years about your family and Potter’s. And for being such a prick to you in general. It was... well, it was cruel. And being muggleborn doesn’t make you any less of a witch. I hope you know that.”

She gave him a small smile. “I do know that. I’ve never been ashamed of it. But it was really scary to join the wizarding world at eleven. Harry and I both grew up as lonely children, isolated from other kids. I think that’s the reason why I’m closer to Harry than to Ron. He really is like my brother. We have shared experiences Ron has never had or even tried to understand. As for you... well, I forgave you a long time ago. Obviously.”

She leaned down to kiss him, and he sank back into the sofa, enjoying the sensation of her in his lap, trying to purge the memory of her sobbing over Weasley out of his mind.

She kissed him deeply for a long moment before she peppered kisses across his cheek and toward his ear as she started to whisper to him.

“I want you so much more than I ever wanted Ron. I never touched myself when thinking about him, not once... did you know that? I’ve only ever thought of you.”

Deep pleasure shot through him at these words. Draco could practically feel his inner patronus roaring with approval. He knew she was trying to make him feel better, but he also didn’t think she would lie to him about something like that.

“Just me?” he confirmed. “No others?”

“No others,” she said softly, still kissing him. “You’re the only wizard who’s ever driven me to an orgasm. I never even thought to have one until I arrived here and you started to drive me mad.”

Draco groaned his approval at this and caught her lips.

“Good,” he said roughly, breaking away for a moment. “I want that part of you all for myself.”

“You have it,” she said simply. “Can I show you?”

Draco just nodded, not sure what she had in mind, but unwilling to stop whatever it was.

She leaned back from him for a moment and yanked her shirt off before pulling his off as well. Draco sat back and surveyed her, hardening as always at the sight of her. She reached behind her and unhooked her bra, and instinctively he raised his hands to touch her breasts.

She's so beautiful, he thought. Her nipples were a dusty pink, pebbling for him as he touched them, just begging to be sucked. As though she knew what he wanted, she arched toward him, and he caught one nipple in his mouth, groaning simultaneously with her.

After several long moments she pulled back and began kissing down his neck again, toward his scar from Potter. To his surprise, she started to trail kisses down it, and he caught her murmuring, "I hate that you were hurt, but God this turns me on."

Draco felt a bit bemused, but he wasn't displeased. If his scar got her hot, he wouldn't complain about it. He knew she had a thing for them, and his was large.

She continued to kiss down his scar until she got lower and lower on his torso and was forced to slide off his lap and onto the floor to continue. His heart started to pound as she moved ever lower, thinking that surely she wasn't going to do what it looked like she was going to do. He couldn't possibly be that lucky. But her hands moved to the button and zipper of his pants, and she quickly unfastened them and started to pull them down, along with his boxers.

Draco lifted himself a bit to help her, and before he knew it he was naked in front of her, and she was on her knees before him. He watched in slight disbelief as she looked at his cock for a moment and then looked up at him and *smirked*.

"May I?" she asked.

Draco couldn't even speak. He just gaped at her and nodded slightly.

"Good," she said. "I've fantasized about this, you know."

Draco inhaled at these words. He didn't know that witches *ever* fantasized about doing this. Sure, he fantasized about doing it to her, but he felt that was different. Watching her achieve climax and tasting her while she did it was truly an exquisite pleasure for him. Doing it to him, though... it was harder. It was more work. And every witch who had ever done this for him in the past had always approached it more as a chore than a joy.

But looking at Granger's face, she appeared keen on it, even eager. He watched in anticipation as she moved her head down and gave him one long lick before grasping his lower shaft in her hands. Immediately Draco groaned and leaned back with his eyes closed, before she did it again and then took him into her mouth.

Draco was truly lost. He was sure this was the first time she had ever done this, but it was better than he ever remembered with any other witch. She was keeping up a steady rhythm with her mouth and hand, while also doing Salazar-knows-what with her tongue. He had no idea what she was doing, but it was incredible, and he felt himself getting closer alarmingly fast.

“Fuck, beautiful...” he murmured. “You’re so perfect, did you know that? So fucking good...”

He sensed her pleasure at these words, and she rewarded him by moving his cock even deeper into her throat. His eyes flew open at this, and he stared down at her between his legs. The picture she made for him – topless, breathless, as she sucked him off – was so exceptional he felt his balls tighten involuntarily.

“Fuck, I’m gonna...” he said, and then she immediately released him with a pop. He groaned and closed his eyes.

“Not quite yet,” she said. “A little break, yes?”

He just grunted at her, but then he opened his eyes again when he felt something different brush his cock. He saw her lifting herself off the ground, making sure her tits touched his cock on the way up.

“Fuck it all...” he breathed, as he watched, and she climbed back onto his lap and ground herself onto him as she kissed him hard.

She was still wearing her yoga pants so there was no risk of penetration like this. But the friction she was creating was getting him close again.

“Darling, you’re too good,” he said, in between kisses. “I’m gonna come all over you if you keep doing that.”

She pulled back and gave him a teasing smile. “It will be less messy if you do it in my mouth, don’t you think?”

His eyes widened, and he just groaned and nodded. Gods but he wanted her to do that. He was desperate to see it, to feel it.

She smiled again and moved back down to the floor, studying him for one last long moment before opening her mouth and plunging him into it as she started to move. Instinctively he grabbed her hair and tangled his fingers in it, while she bobbed up and down, faster and faster.

“Fuck...” he gasped. “You’re fucking me with that pretty mouth aren’t you? Goddammit... everything I imagined... I’m gonna...”

He tried to warn her, but she didn’t let him go. She kept her mouth locked firmly around his cock, until he took a shuddering gasp and pumped himself into her. He forced his eyes to stay open so he could watch, and when he was done she sat back and swallowed.

“Salazar save me...” he muttered, as he collapsed back on the sofa, in disbelief at what she had just done for him.

She slowly rose to join him, and he pulled her close to him.

“I should return the favor,” he muttered, but she just shook her head.

“Not now. You’re due for dinner soon, and you said you had a step with *felix* tonight.”

“I’ll do *felix*, but sod dinner,” he said firmly, but she just smiled and shook her head.

“No, we can’t have anybody suspect. And I don’t fancy your mum coming in to find you while you’re getting me off. Later.”

He huffed at this a little, but didn’t object. He pulled her to him even tighter though.

After a moment she asked in a hesitant voice, “So… did I do it right?”

He looked at her incredulously. “What do you mean did you do it right? Didn’t you notice that I nearly came twice before you actually let me go? Fuck, that was the best head I’ve ever gotten.”

She gave him a wry look at this. “Lots of experience with it then?”

He just quirked an eyebrow at her. “It’s never meant anything to me before now. But yes, I’ve had enough experience to tell you that was good. Exceptionally good. Outstanding, in fact. I’d definitely grade it as an O.”

She rolled her eyes, but he saw a smile playing about her lips as she settled in again.

“Good,” she finally said. “Because it’s just stuff I’ve picked up on from reading magazines and trashy romance novels.”

He chuckled at this. “Somehow I can’t envision you reading trashy romance novels love, but you’ve always been an excellent student.”

She giggled at this before sitting up and shoving his shirt into his hands.

“Here, you need to get dressed. It’s time.”

He groaned, but did as she said before pulling her up off the sofa with him. He wrapped his arms around her.

“We never did finish our occlumency,” he said quietly.

She shrugged. “I had more important things to do. There’s always tomorrow.”

He grinned at this and kissed her before heading back toward the potions room.

“I expect to see you in my bed tonight, love. I owe you an orgasm.”

She laughed and nodded, as he gave her one last swift smile and strode to the cauldron to work on the next step.

Gods she’s incredible, he thought, once again grinning like an idiot. Her first time giving head blew all of his previous encounters out of the water. It defied all rationality, and if he hadn’t been on the receiving end of it he never would have believed it. He couldn’t wait to

get back to her tonight to make her come too. He was sure dinner would last long enough that he would be recovered and ready to go again himself as well.

His mind was lost in this happy thought as he finished what he needed to do for *felix* and walked to the dining room. He came to an abrupt halt as he saw the guest his father and Bellatrix had invited tonight.

He felt like he had been doused in water as she rose to greet him. “Good evening Draco,” she said.

Draco struggled to stay composed as he said, “Good evening Astoria.”

Chapter End Notes

Gentle Hermione is a real breed of beautiful light pink roses, developed by English breeder David Austin. Look them up online if you want to see what Draco gave to her - imagine an enormous bouquet of them.

Gentle Hermione was first introduced for sale in 2005, but as Tippy notes, developing a new breed of roses for sale takes years (over a decade). Gentle Hermione would have been in the field trials that first summer Hermione and Draco were together, and in my head Draco reached out to the breeder to bring a few of their experimental plants to the Manor.

Or knowing Draco, maybe he just visited the breeder himself and confounded them. ;)

Chapter 21: Old Flames and New Beginnings

Chapter Notes

TW: Brief discussions of infertility. Solidarity with those who have dealt with that heartbreak.

Hermione

Dear Reader,

I'm sure you don't want to hear this, and it really doesn't have much to do with occlumency, but Operation Seduce Draco Malfoy has been highly successful. I tried something with him earlier that was... new. He looked at me like I was perfect.

I'm learning that giving pleasure can be just as good as taking it.

Hermione was getting ready for bed, still silently congratulating herself on her performance earlier that afternoon. She had been a little nervous to try something like that with Malfoy, but the look on his face as she did it made her fears melt away. He had looked at her in disbelief, and the sounds he had made while she was doing it... well, she realized she may have been the one on her knees, but she held all the power when she had him like that. It was intoxicating, and she had loved every minute of it.

It also served to get her very worked up, and she made sure to select her nightwear carefully. She wanted him to make good on his promises to her.

She was heading toward the door connecting their rooms when she heard voices out in the hall. She had grown more accustomed to this in the previous weeks, but it still caused a nervous lurch every time it happened.

She stilled to listen.

“Your room is at the end of the corridor,” said Malfoy’s voice.

“I would prefer to be next to you,” said a coy feminine voice that Hermione didn’t immediately recognize.

“That’s not possible,” said Malfoy coldly. “That chamber is reserved for my wife.”

Hermione felt an odd sensation pass over her.

"But it's only a matter of time, Draco," said the feminine voice. "You heard them at dinner. Your father was thrilled to hear we used to be together. He'll be owling your solicitor tomorrow to begin the arrangements. We will be engaged very soon."

"I won't marry you Astoria," he said.

Hermione suddenly felt sick. It was Astoria Greengrass just on the other side of the door. She was Malfoy's previous girlfriend. He had dated her, slept with her, done God knows what else with her.

"Of course you will," said Astoria with confidence. "I'm perfect for you. I'm a pureblood. I am in support of the Dark Lord's regime. I've been raised to become the lady of a manor like this."

"You're seventeen," said Malfoy. "And I'm not in love with you. Surely you don't wish to throw your life away into a loveless marriage just for the sake of a title."

"Do you really think I'm that naive?" asked Astoria with a little laugh. "I've been raised to expect some dalliances. My father dallied often enough. He's always had a string of mudblood whores he kept on the side. But he always comes back to mother in the end. She's his wife, and she's the only one of his lovers who is truly worthy of his affections. He knows it. I would expect nothing less from you. I miscalculated when I tried to follow you that night. I'm sure you were off to see some witch you have squirreled away. She's surely a mudblood or maybe a halfblood... you would never dishonor a pureblood that way. I should have let you go to her. And in the future, I will. I can be content in my role, as long as I am your wife."

Hermione felt a sob start to well up at these words.

I'm his Mudblood whore he's squirreled away.

The truth of Astoria's words gutted her, and Hermione felt her heart breaking. She didn't want to hear any more but she couldn't help herself.

"You're being ridiculous Astoria."

"I'm not. I'll be your wife in due time. You might as well get used to the idea Draco. Our families wish for it. Now then, I wish you would let me into the adjoining chamber."

"And I've told you, that's not possible. It's reserved for my wife."

"Your room then," she purred. "We should become reacquainted."

"No," he said coldly. "It's warded by centuries of magic. The only people who can enter are the lords of the Manor and their wives. The Manor will not permit you entry, as you are neither."

This news was sufficiently distracting that Hermione was pulled out of her morose thoughts. She touched her necklace curiously.

“Very well,” said Astoria, and Hermione heard dissatisfaction in her voice. “I can tell you’re wrapped up in whatever witch you’re hiding away at the moment. But it’s no matter. She will never be worthy of your title. You and I both know it’s going to be me in the end. I’ll give you some time to… adjust. In the meantime, I plan on taking your father up on his offer for an extended stay.”

Hermione felt her heart breaking all over again at this. It was somehow worse to hear these words spoken to Malfoy than it would have been if Astoria had said these things directly to her. Astoria didn’t know that Malfoy’s lover was Hermione. She wasn’t targeting Hermione personally. She was just stating it as though it was a fact that Malfoy would turn from Hermione when it was time for him to get married. And based on the conversation she just heard, that unfortunate event would happen much sooner than either of them wished.

Of course he will. He may care for me, but it won’t be enough.

Hermione heard Astoria move off, and before she could second guess herself she moved to her connecting door with Malfoy and placed her hand on it, muttering a complicated locking spell. She saw it glow, and she breathed a sigh of relief that it had worked.

She moved to her door in the hall and did the same thing.

Good. She didn’t want to see him tonight. She just wanted space to feel her heartbreak and sort her feelings.

She had been stupid. The past week with him had been so wonderful she had entirely lost her head about the situation they were in. She was here in his home because of the war. One or both of them might die. And if they both managed to survive it then their relationship was doomed. *Of course* he would turn to a pureblood eventually. He might care for her. He might even think he was in love with her. But Narcissa had told her he had over 900 years of pureblood history behind him, and the previous lords who fell in love with somebody unacceptable got married anyway and kept their lover on the side.

Malfoy would want to do the same thing, but she had too much self respect to be his mistress. It would be intolerable watching him get married, have children, and create a life with somebody “acceptable,” while she was kept in a gilded cage for him, available for sex and perhaps conversation, but never anything more than that — never anything *legitimate*. She would never be able to get married or have her own children and build the large family she had always wanted. She would never be able to move on from him if she committed herself to that sort of life.

No, she wouldn’t do it. And it was better for them to accept that now before she got in so deep she couldn’t break from him.

“Granger, let me in,” she heard Malfoy’s outraged voice on the other side of their shared door. She ignored him.

Yes, she really was an idiot when it came to boys. First Ron, then Malfoy. Neither of them were good for her. But the situation with Malfoy hurt worse than Ron because she had really given her heart away this time. It wasn't just the *idea* of him, it was the real him. And yes, it had happened fast, but she recalled what Mrs. Weasley said about the last war. There were people eloping left and right. Everyone hurried their plans in case they would be targeted next. Even Harry's parents had done that. The Potters got married at nineteen and had Harry at twenty. They were both dead by twenty-one.

Without even realizing it, Hermione had fallen into the same trap. The threat of the war was so overwhelming that she felt herself falling in love with a wizard faster than she had ever thought possible. And unbidden, she had created dreams and plans in her mind that during a peaceful time she probably wouldn't have considered for many more years.

Hermione distantly heard Malfoy muttering spells on the other side of the door, but she continued to ignore him. The locking spell she had used was rather archaic. He'd never figure it out.

She thought about Harry's parents again. She knew from Sirius and Remus that they had gotten together during their seventh year at Hogwarts. Lily had despised James before then. But somehow they came together during their final year and then were married a year after that. Hermione was uncomfortably aware that she was turning nineteen in a few weeks, the same age as both of the Potters when they got married. And just like Lily, she was a muggleborn witch who had fallen for a pureblood she previously despised in the middle of a war. The parallels were uncomfortable, but then again... she now understood where the Potters and so many others had come from.

"Granger, I'm serious! I will blast this door in if I have to!"

Again, she said nothing.

The key differences between James Potter and Draco Malfoy were their families and their views on blood purity. As she and Harry learned more about the Potters over the years, Hermione had eventually concluded that James Potter was a pureblood based on sheer dumb luck. There had been one or two marriages with half-bloods in much earlier generations that precluded them from that precious "Sacred 28" status, but for the most part the Potters married other purebloods. However, they had also married for love and hadn't considered blood status when they did it. James Potter had been a pureblood by happenstance, and the Potters had never objected to Lily when she broke the trend. James had been enamored with her for years and her dislike of him stemmed from his arrogance more than anything else. With Malfoy, however, blood status was one of the top considerations and always had been. It had shaped nearly everything between them for the first six and a half years that they knew each other. And Hermione would never be deemed acceptable. Not ever.

She was suddenly pulled out of her thoughts by the sound of the door slamming open. She spun around to see Tippy with her hand stretched out, standing next to a fuming Malfoy.

"Thank you Tippy, that will be all," said Malfoy tightly as he strode into the room.

Hermione mentally groaned. *Of course Tippy could still get in.* In her distress she had completely forgotten about House Elf magic.

She steeled herself as she turned her back to him. She heard Tippy disapparate behind her.

“What the fuck was that about?” demanded Malfoy.

Hermione stayed silent with her back to him as she felt her resolve wobble and tears filled her eyes.

“Granger,” he said, as he grabbed her arm.

She yanked it out of his grip and said, “Not now, Malfoy.” To her horror, her voice broke.

“Hey,” he said, walking around so he could see her properly. Now his voice was quieter and filled with concern.

She turned her head away and dipped her chin, but he cupped it and pulled her face up toward his. She felt her lip trembling as she looked over his shoulder and a few tears leaked out.

“What’s wrong? What’s happened love?”

Now Hermione broke.

“Don’t call me that!” she sobbed. “Don’t ever call me that!”

“Why not? What’s wrong with it? What did I do?”

She could hear confusion and hurt and something that sounded a bit like panic creeping into his voice now.

“I can’t be your mudblood lover, Malfoy! I can’t do it! I’m not going to be your dirty little secret you get to keep squirreled away!”

There was ringing silence at this, and she thought she saw a resigned look flit across his face before it turned stony.

“You heard Astoria,” he said.

Hermione sniffed. “Yes. And it clarified quite a few things for me. Things I’ve been ignoring because I’m a lovesick idiot.”

Something stirred in his eyes at these words. “You’re not an idiot. Astoria’s the idiot.”

Hermione felt tears of frustration well again. “How can you say that? She’s right! Your mother told me you have over 900 years of pure blood behind you. And when the Malfoy heir falls for somebody unsuitable she’s kept to the side. I won’t do it, Malfoy! I won’t.”

He stepped toward her, and pulled her to him. She really wished he wouldn’t. It was making her defenses crumble already.

"Hermione," he said, and the novelty of hearing her first name made her look at him instinctively. When she saw his eyes, her breath caught. He was looking at her with a seriousness she had never seen before.

"I promise you I am not going to marry anybody else. I'm not going to turn you into another Rose Atwater. I'll make an unbreakable vow if you need me to."

"I... who?" she asked.

Malfoy grimaced a bit and touched her necklace. "Rose Atwater. She was the muggleborn witch my ancestor Septimus Malfoy fell in love with. He married a pureblood named Charlotte to keep his father happy, and the minute his father was gone he moved Charlotte to a different property and installed Rose in the lady's suite. He managed to enchant this necklace to bypass the wards so she would be recognized as the lady of the Manor."

Hermione felt her heart sink at this, and suddenly she wished he had never given her this necklace.

"Then it was just like your mother said..."

"I just told you I'm not turning you into another Rose," said Malfoy firmly. "I gave you the necklace because we're not married, and the wards in my room would only let you pass if we were. It's the only thing I could find that would get around them without asking for my father's help in dismantling them. He controls the Manor's wards, and Septimus enchanted the necklace after he had gained control of the wards too. Septimus decided to bypass them instead of remove them so they would stay intact for future Malfoys. The necklace is a safety measure, that's all."

"Oh," she said. "Of course."

The necklace didn't mean anything then. Not that she *wanted* to be like poor Rose Atwater, whoever she was... but Hermione had hoped it meant something to him when he gave it to her.

She heard him still talking to her, but it wasn't registering. She was too preoccupied.

"Hermione!" she finally heard, and she snapped out of it to look at him.

"Did you hear me?"

"I... no," she said.

He sighed. "I said the necklace is just a temporary fix until you can pass the wards in my room for real."

"For real," she repeated.

"For real," he confirmed.

"But then we would have to be..." she trailed off.

“Married? Yes,” he said.

“But I’m a muggleborn,” she said. There was no way he could be saying what it sounded like he was saying.

“So? You’re beautiful and brave and the brightest witch of our age. And my feelings, they’re... strong. Really strong.”

“But it would break the pureblood tradition in your family.”

He actually rolled his eyes at this and pulled his left sleeve up so she could see his Dark Mark. He stepped back just a bit so she could look at it clearly.

“Granger, if this is what it means to be pureblood these days, I want nothing to do with it. And I don’t want to raise my children in that world either.”

“Really?” she breathed.

“Really,” he said. “And besides, the Malfoys would have turned half-blood a few generations ago if Septimus had gotten his way. When Rose died he followed her two weeks later. The last thing he wrote in his journal was that his marriage to Charlotte was his greatest regret in life. He wanted his children to be from Rose, not Charlotte. He even had Rose buried on his right side, where Charlotte should have been. She’s still there, in the family mausoleum. He urged anyone who came after him who found themselves in a similar position to just fucking do it. I think it was very good advice.”

He pulled her to him and cupped her chin again so she was looking at him.

“It’s been fast. I know that. But we’re in a war. Odds are good one or both of us won’t make it. I’m not going to spend the time I have left married to somebody else, I can assure you of that. I’m playing these games because it maintains my cover in the Death Eaters, and I need to stay in Bellatrix’s good graces so I can talk her into letting me into her vault. That’s the clearest path to the horcrux. But the minute we have it and my true loyalties can come to light, I’m going to throw over any witch who’s not you.”

Hermione felt a surreal sense of wonder settle over her at his words. But she forced herself to focus and ask the questions she needed answered.

“Astoria said your family is going to work on getting an agreement in place so you two can become engaged.”

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “She’s probably correct. And I’m not inclined to stop it just yet.”

“But you said...” she started, and he raised a hand to stop her.

“There is a zero percent chance my family would allow me to marry Astoria if they knew everything about her. But as it stands, they don’t. They think she’s a young, but perfectly acceptable pureblood match. Getting the settlements in place will take some time, and if we do get that far and I end up engaged to her, then mother can drag things out for several more months using wedding planning as an excuse. We have a rough plan in place for the Dark

Lord, and I think we'll be able to finish him before I'm walking down the aisle. But if for some reason we don't, then I'll pull out my trump card on Astoria, and my family will break the engagement for me before the marriage actually happens. Then they will have to start all over."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "What's the trump card then?"

"Astoria is afflicted with an incurable blood curse placed on her family line. It means she's likely to be barren and die rather young. If by some miracle she were able to have a child, the blood curse would pass into my family and could affect future Malfoys."

Hermione inhaled.

Likely to be barren.

"So she..."

"Could never bear me an heir," he said simply. "And that means she's less eligible to be my wife than even a muggleborn, by my father's and aunt's standards."

Hermione bit her lip. "How on earth do you know this?"

Malfoy shrugged. "Daphne told me once. She was drunk so she doesn't remember telling me. But she went on and on about it. The Greengrasses have tried for years to break the curse, but they can't. So instead, they keep it very quiet for obvious reasons. I don't wish to expose Astoria. It's not her fault, and there's nothing she can do about it. But if she won't come to her senses and insists on pushing me into a marriage with her, then I'll play the game, and I'll win. I've already warned her that I won't marry her. I intend to stand by my word."

Hermione pulled him down for a kiss, and he obliged eagerly. But then she pushed him back as she thought of one more thing.

"Malfoy... I have no idea if I can have kids," she said. "That's not something I've ever... investigated."

To her surprise he just smiled and rolled his eyes. "You probably can. But if you can't, that's fine too. I don't care about that Granger," he said.

"But you said..."

"I said Astoria's affliction makes her ineligible by my father's and aunt's standards. If I cared about what they thought then you would be ineligible too. But I don't care what they think. I want you. I don't want Astoria. I'm just not above using the blood curse to get out of an engagement with her if things move quickly, and it becomes necessary."

At this Hermione felt her heart swell, and she reached up on her tiptoes to kiss him again. He immediately deepened it as he slowly maneuvered her toward her bed.

"Am I allowed to call you 'love' now?" he asked between kisses.

"Yes," she gasped, as he moved to her ear.

"Thank you, love. Now I think I owe you something, don't I?"

Hermione just nodded as he kissed his way down her neck.

"Malfoy," she said.

"Mmmmm?" he replied.

"Will you... I want..."

He lifted his head to look at her. "Tell me what you want, darling. You know I'll give you anything."

Hermione felt dizzy at his words. She opened her mouth to tell him, and a sudden shyness came over her.

"I want... you know," she whispered.

His eyes darkened, and he pulled her closer to him and then slipped a hand under the silky top of her pajamas. They drifted up toward her breasts.

"No bra..." he murmured, and she shook her head.

She felt the same hand caress her stomach and then slip into the waistband of the matching shorts.

"And no knickers..." he said. She shook her head again.

She was nearly wrung out from the emotional whiplash she felt that evening. But she had also been aching for him all night as she waited for him to return. And hearing the promises he made to her and the heat in his voice now made her unbearably excited. She wanted this more than anything.

"You were ready for me tonight, weren't you?" he asked, as his hand drifted to her bum and squeezed. "You wanted to give me easy access."

"Yes," she breathed, and he made an approving sound and returned to kissing her neck, up toward her ear.

"I think I know what you want..." he whispered in between kisses. "Showing up braless and knickerless and ready for me... you want me to fuck you, don't you darling?"

"Yes," she groaned, and at this word she felt him latch down on her neck and suck hard as he pulled her shorts down. Hermione herself quickly unbuttoned her pajama top and shrugged out of it, making Malfoy groan. His hands were moving from her arse back to her stomach and up to cup her breasts and flick her nipples roughly. She felt his erection through his clothes and instinctively rubbed against it as her knees shook and her breath started coming in pants.

He released her and gently pushed her back. “Get on the bed,” he said roughly. “On your back so I can see every part of you.”

Hermione felt a bit exposed, walking to the bed naked. But she glanced back at him as she climbed on top and laid down, and she saw an almost feral expression on his face. He was openly staring at her as he quickly undressed himself. She couldn’t help but look at his cock as it sprang free. He was ready for her.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” he muttered.

Hermione didn’t know if this was true, but she could see he thought so. A shot of pleasure washed over her at his words, and almost unconsciously she opened her legs for him, as though presenting herself to him.

“Gods...” he muttered as he walked to her. He stood next to the bed and ran a firm hand down her body, starting with her neck, down over her breasts and stomach, and finally in between her legs where he dipped a finger in for a moment. She tried to press her hips toward him, but he pulled back and pressed the metal of his ring into that same place on her hip, right underneath her tattoo.

“I’m going to keep doing this until your tattoo is complete. I always want to see my mark on you.”

She nodded, feeling hazy as he pressed it harder, and she groaned. When he was done he replaced his ring with his lips and kissed it gently before giving it a lick.

“Malfoy, please...” she begged.

“Say my name darling,” he crooned at her, as he moved his lips down from her hip bone toward her core.

“Draco,” she breathed.

“Again, love.”

“Draco...”

He opened her legs and crouched in front of her to start sucking her clit. Hermione spasmed, and pressed her hips toward him.

“Just like that,” he muttered. The vibrations from his words made her moan.

He lifted his hands to watch and replaced his mouth with his hands. “I want you to come one time like this first,” he said. “You need to be ready for me.”

“I am...” she moaned, but he didn’t let up until she was reaching that now-familiar peak.

“Come on, beautiful...” he coaxed. “Come for me like this, and then I’ll give you what you want.” Suddenly she felt him hook his fingers up, and she burst with a groan.

“So perfect...” he said as he watched, still stroking her gently.

When Hermione finally opened her eyes he said, “Are you really going to give me this, darling?” She could hear the ache in his voice. He wanted this too, so badly. But he wanted to make sure she was certain first.

“Yes...” she said. “Please. I want it to be you. Take it.”

“I’ll cherish it,” he said.

“I know,” she whispered, and then suddenly he removed his hand and sat up. He grabbed her wand to mutter a familiar spell over her, and then he was on top of her, kissing her deeply while his hand moved back down between her legs, touching her gently to make sure she was still wet for him.

“It might hurt at first,” he whispered, between kisses.

“That’s OK,” she said back.

“Slow to start, but then once the pain is gone...”

“Yes,” she said. “*Please* yes. I want you Draco.”

She felt his hand slip away, and then something larger, harder was at her entrance. Instinctively she opened her legs wider, and she felt him push in slowly, filling her completely.

“Fuck, you’re so tight,” he gasped into her shoulder. She knew he was holding back, trying to be gentle this first time. She felt him moving further and further in, until he lifted his head to look at her. “Ready, love?”

She just nodded, and he maintained eye contact as he pushed forward hard, and a burst of pain came from just below her navel. She gasped, and he kissed her deeply before pulling away and peppering kisses over her cheeks and nose and chin and lips while he moved slowly to let her adjust.

“So sorry darling. I never want to hurt you....”

“It’s OK,” she whispered. “It... it doesn’t hurt so much anymore. It’s getting better... Oh God.”

Because just then he adjusted the angle and hit a spot inside of her she had never felt before. The lingering pain dulled as pleasure took over, and he started to pick up the speed.

“Good?” he asked her.

“Yes,” she gasped as she arched. “Yes... Oh... Draco please. Make me come, *please*.”

These words seemed to make something in him snap, because suddenly he was moving fast, hard, and Hermione felt herself on the precipice of another orgasm. It was building, stronger

and stronger, and Hermione felt herself losing her grip as she approached that moment.

“Come for me,” he said. “Do it, darling, let it go,” and then he reached a hand down to flick her clit, and then Hermione shattered all around him.

“Fucking hell,” he growled as he watched her face with wide eyes, and then a moment later she heard him groan, and something warm and wet seeped into her just as she was coming back down to earth.

He collapsed on top of her, and Hermione wrapped her arms around him, breathing in the scent of him and the thing they had just done together.

After a moment he rolled off of her and pulled her close to him with one hand while grabbing her wand with the other. Before he vanished their mess, however, he looked down, and Hermione followed his gaze. There, smeared on her thighs were the vestiges of him, turned pink from her blood that had mixed with it.

He didn’t say anything, but she watched a darkly possessive look cross his face as he saw it, before he waved her wand, and the mess disappeared. She looked back up at him and saw concern on his face. “Sore?” he asked.

She bit her lip and nodded. He shifted around to pull the comforter over both of them. Once they were settled he said, “Tippy!”

At the telltale *CRACK!* of apparition, Hermione instinctively nestled herself closer to him, absolutely mortified that the elf might see them together. She heard a slight chuckle in his voice as he said, “Tippy, can you bring some pain relief potion please? And next time you see Hermione can you talk to her about getting on a contraceptive potion?”

“Oh God,” she muttered quietly, and she felt Draco trying to contain his laughter.

“Yes Master Draco! Tippy is pleased that you and Miss Hermione is... you know.”

“Yes, thank you Tippy,” he said as Hermione’s face burned under the covers. “That pain potion then, if you please.”

Tippy disappeared for the briefest moment before returning with the potion. Malfoy thanked her and she left again, as he pulled the covers back.

“Here you go, bottoms up,” he said.

Hermione just gave him a pained look. He grinned at her. “What? Tippy approves. And she’s seen both of us naked before.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at him, but she couldn’t help the small smile that crossed her face at this, as she took the pain relief potion from him and drank it. Instantly the soreness eased, and she gave a sigh of relief.

He vanished the vial and then settled back into bed with her, studying her with a supremely satisfied look.

"Thank you," he finally said. "For giving me that. It's... well, it's the best thing anyone has ever given me."

She gave him a shy smile. "It wouldn't have been right with anybody else, Draco."

His eyes warmed at her words, and he kissed her slowly, languidly. "You're never getting rid of me now," he said. "Now that I've had you like this.... I won't let you go. And I don't share. So I'm afraid you're stuck with me."

Hermione couldn't help it, she beamed at this. "Good. Because you're what I want."

Dear Reader,

Draco and I finally... Ahem.

On the off chance I'm your mother, I'll spare you the details because that might scar you for life. But suffice to say it was wonderful. Magical. I think I'm in love with him. At some point I'll find a way to tell him.

Chapter 22: Hermione's Brother

Chapter Notes

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

Draco

Dear Journal,

She gave me her virginity. It's mine now and will never belong to anybody else. It was more wonderful than I could have hoped for, and I'm still in shock she let me have it.

The situation with Astoria is precarious, but I won't allow it to go past an engagement. My hope is Astoria comes to her senses about it before I have to expose her secret. But we'll just have to see, won't we?

In any event, I'm never marrying Astoria. Not ever. Granger's it for me.

“Here,” said Granger, handing him a drink a week later. “This next memory is probably going to piss you off.”

“Hell of an opening,” he said, raising his eyebrow. “What is it this time? Risking your life? Ridiculous acts of heroism? Poor life decisions?”

“All of the above,” she said. Draco felt his stomach lurch at this and drank.

“I’ve considered occluding part of it from you, but I want to be honest with you. I think it’s important for you to know given our... relationship.”

Draco narrowed his eyes, and his stomach clenched. He was almost certain this had to do with Potter because so far Weasley hadn’t reappeared in her memories. Ever since he watched Weasley leave them her memories had been comprised of her translating the *Tale of the Three Brothers* and dwelling on an odd symbol she found, along with quite a bit of useless speculation about the location of the Sword. But Weasley hadn’t returned.

Had she and Potter had a romantic encounter one night? Maybe the stress of the search had caused them to crack?

Draco swallowed and forced himself to stay calm.

“OK,” he said. “I’ll try not to overreact to whatever it is.”

“Thank you,” said Granger. “I’m ready.”

Draco entered her mind, and she pulled him to a brief conversation about visiting Godric's Hollow before pulling him again to a memory of cobblestoned streets at Christmas. He saw Granger and Potter had both polyjuiced into an older couple, and they spent some time visiting the Potters' graves before making their way to the house where Potter used to live.

Draco just stared at it, in slight disbelief it had been left that way. Though Godric's Hollow was a wizarding village, his parents had never taken him there, and he suspected this monument was why. As they stood there and looked at it a tiny old woman who looked practically ancient approached them. He felt Granger's fear and nerves as they sized her up, and then Potter asked if she was Bathilda Bagshot.

The woman nodded and led them to a small cottage nearby. Draco could sense Granger getting more and more uncomfortable as she surveyed the dark and musty space. It looked like it hadn't been cleaned in months, and it smelled of something rotting. He could tell Granger thought something was off about it, but she couldn't pinpoint it. Draco mentally agreed with her. The whole situation was bizarre. Bathilda refused to talk and communicated by gesturing and pointing. Eventually she made it clear that she wanted to separate them and take Potter upstairs alone.

Granger protested, but Potter insisted and followed her upstairs. As they left, Granger drew her wand and started pacing. Draco could feel her anxiety starting to peak as she waited for them to come back downstairs when suddenly Potter started screaming.

Granger sprinted up the stairs two at time and burst into the room. He felt her horror as she saw the body of Bathilda Bagshot on the floor with a gaping hole in her neck and Nagini in the process of squeezing Potter to death.

"*REDUCTO!*" she bellowed, aiming at the snake. There was a flash of red light, and the snake released Potter for a moment, but then rose up again to attack. Potter collapsed, screaming and clutching his scar, and he felt Granger's mind flood with terror.

Voldemort's coming, she thought. Draco's stomach rolled as he watched.

Suddenly her attention was drawn back to the snake, which reared back to bite Potter, and Granger shouted, "*CONFRINGO!*"

The spell distracted the snake but hit a mirror just behind it, which exploded and ricocheted right back at them. She ducked, and it grazed the snake which then turned to her.

"*STUPEFY! REDUCTO!*" she shouted again, but the spells seemed to have no effect on the snake, as it started to slither toward her.

Because it's a horcux, Draco realized with mounting horror. It was harder to kill than a regular snake.

Granger must have realized this too, because she changed tactics and lunged for Potter, grabbing him by the ankle just as she looked out of the window and saw the Dark Lord flying toward them.

“MINE!” he shouted, with his hand outstretched. She screamed and twisted and apparated them both away to a clearing.

“Harry! HARRY!” she shouted, as she looked down at Potter. He was bleeding profusely and thrashing, muttering words that were intelligible.

“Harry, wake up!” said Granger, and she was starting to sob. She grabbed his shirt to shake him and then pulled her hands back as though they had been burned. Draco saw she had a stunned look on her face, and her tears stopped as she stared down at Potter. She then moved to rip Potter’s shirt open, and Draco was horrified to see the locket was stuck on Potter’s chest, and it was pulsing.

Granger tried to touch it again, but she quickly drew her hand away and reached for her bag.

“Come on, come on...” she was muttering. “Oh bugger. *Accio* dragonhide gloves!”

The requested gloves came flying out of the bag, and Granger pulled them on and tried touching the locket now. She was able to touch it, but as she tugged on it, it appeared to be adhered to Potter’s chest.

“Oh my God,” she muttered, and Draco watched as she bit her lip until she finally swallowed hard and seemed to be stealing herself for something. She cast one last look at Potter before turning to her bag again. “*Accio* bandages! *Accio* dittany! *Accio* burn ointment! *Accio* knife!”

All of the requested items came flying out of the bag, and Draco felt a thrill of dread as Granger turned to Potter with the knife and began to slice through his skin just below the horcrux.

She was crying and talking to him as she did it, but Potter was still out of it. “Come on Harry. God I’m so sorry... come on... just a little more now.”

She finally severed the last piece of flesh, and the horcrux came free. She flung it to the side as the skin still attached to it started to burn. Then she turned back to Potter, and she paled as she took in the sight of him.

There was a large wound on Potter’s chest that was bleeding freely. Granger gathered the bandages and dittany and tried to dress the wound, but it wouldn’t close. On and on she worked, muttering as many countercurses as she could think of, including the one Draco had used on her neck. Nothing was helping, and as Draco watched Potter started to become paler and paler.

“Shit, shit, shit,” she was muttering. Potter was white as a sheet and looked dangerously close to death now, and Granger paused to think for a moment before turning back to her bag and shouting, “*Accio Darkest of Arts!*”

Draco felt a strong sense of foreboding as he watched Granger frantically open the small black book. He could feel her revulsion and trepidation at what she was about to do, but a sense of desperation eventually took over, and then she was quickly flipping through the

book until she found the page she wanted. She pointed her wand to herself and began to chant.

“Virtus mea et magica per me fluit. De sorore ad fratrem. Vita mea tua est et tua mea est.”

She kept her wand pointed to herself, and she started to glow. With her other hand she quickly unbuttoned her shirt and grabbed the knife to slice across her heart. She didn't even flinch.

Granger then dipped a finger in her blood and put it to Potter's lips.

“Sanguinem vitae bibendum a sorore tua.”

Then she dipped a finger into Potter's blood and raised it to her own lips.

“Et a fratre meo bibam.”

There was a flash of light as she gasped and fell forward onto her hands. When she looked up, the wound on Potter's chest had closed, and the color was returning to Potter's cheeks.

Draco watched for a few more moments as Granger cleaned them both up and then sat vigil by Potter, though he barely registered it. He finally released her.

She was looking at him nervously, biting her lip. He didn't say anything to her, he just stared at her in horror.

“I'll obviously occlude that last bit,” she finally said.

“Occlumency...” said Draco quietly. “You think I'm worried about occlumency?”

“You promised you wouldn't overreact...” she started, but Draco exploded.

“I DON'T THINK IT'S AN OVERREACTION TO BE UPSET ABOUT THE FACT THAT YOU PERFORMED A BLOOD RITUAL WITH SOMEONE WHO HAS A DEATH WISH!”

“HE WAS DYING!” she shouted back. “IT WAS THE ONLY WAY TO SAVE HIM! I DIDN'T HAVE MUCH CHOICE!”

“Didn't have much choice,” muttered Draco as he stood and started to pace. “DIDN'T HAVE MUCH CHOICE? OF COURSE YOU HAD A CHOICE!”

“I'M NOT LETTING HARRY DIE!”

Draco suddenly strode to her and pulled her up by the arms. “How am I supposed to protect you Granger? Tell me. How? Because if that's what I think it was, you saved him by tying your lives together! Dark magic always requires an exchange! You saved him in that moment by offering your life in the future, didn't you? So if he dies, you die and vice versa. Am I right? That's why you're always worrying about Potter dying whenever something dangerous happens to you!”

She seemed to deflate at his words. “I... perhaps,” she said. “The book uses quite a few euphemisms so I can’t be certain. And I used the sibling version of the spell even though Harry and I aren’t related by blood. It was a shot in the dark because it’s really only supposed to work for blood relatives, but it obviously saved him. So I’m not positive what the outcome would be if he died, but...”

“But you think you’ll die too,” he finished.

She just nodded.

Draco felt an overwhelming crush of anxiety as he just looked at her and remembered Snape’s words.

“There is something about an enormously talented, Gryffindor-minded, muggleborn witch that is impossibly irresistible. But they will throw themselves headfirst into war. They will fight when they should hide. And they will sacrifice themselves for their family, even when they don’t have to.”

He cupped her face with both hands and stared down at her. “Let me be very clear about something, Granger,” he said. “If you die because Potter does, I’ll never, ever forgive you. You can’t leave me like that, do you understand?”

“Malfoy, I...”

“Draco.”

“Fine. Draco, I could die anyway.”

“I know,” he said, that familiar sick feeling unfurling in his stomach as he said it. “But this... Granger, this increases your odds of that happening rather significantly.”

“I don’t plan on dying,” she said firmly. “Nor does Harry.”

Draco just shook his head and tried to suppress the fear he felt for her. He cast around for something else to say and then realized he hadn’t asked an obvious question.

“Does Potter know you did this?”

She sighed again and shook her head. “No. He has enough to be worrying about. He would feel incredibly guilty about it if he knew, even though he had no say in the matter. And I don’t want him to second guess himself when it’s time for him to go after You-Know-Who.”

“Fuck,” said Draco, closing his eyes now. “And you told me because...”

“I care about you. And this is... well, this thing between us is serious for me. And I think it’s serious for you. And I thought you deserved to know in case you wanted to... to give me up.”

She choked on these last words, and Draco’s anger evaporated. He pulled her in for a deep kiss before breaking away. “I told you I’m never giving you up. Not ever.”

He felt her relax a little at these words, and he pulled her back to the sofa and held her to him. She snuggled in and started to speak.

“I’m not sure if you noticed this in the chaos from that memory, but I broke Harry’s wand with that last spell at Bathilda’s house. His wand shares a twin core with You-Know-Who’s. Their wands have never worked properly against each other because of the twin cores.”

At this Draco sat up a little straighter.

“No, I didn’t see that part. Though I did know about the twin cores. The Dark Lord has been obsessed with finding a different wand to get around it.”

She gave him an odd look. “Well we’re getting there in my memories, but suffice to say that Harry’s aware of You-Know-Who’s obsession. Harry himself is also a little obsessed, though I personally think it’s a distraction. A wand is just a wand.”

He gave her a skeptical look. “How can you say that when your wand is as powerful as it is? And it’s a bit mad too. Just like you.”

She wrinkled her nose at him. “My wand is perfectly normal. If it doesn’t always work properly for you it’s just because of a slight incompatibility between your magic and the wood species or the core. That’s all.”

“Bullshit,” he said. “When it doesn’t work properly I can practically feel you glaring at me. Your wand likes to judge me.”

She just rolled her eyes. “Well either way, the point is Harry’s wand is broken. So he’s lost that minor protection from the twin cores regardless of what happens with You-Know-Who. And after that day in Godric’s Hollow, Harry shared my wand until we came here, and he took yours. He still has the pieces from his old one, but Ollivander apparently told him it’s damaged beyond repair when they were at Shell Cottage together.”

Draco felt a curious sensation creep over him at this information.

“I think I’ve felt his power before when I use your wand... Potter’s I mean. I mostly feel your power and mine when I use it, but every now and then I feel a third person’s. I’ve never been able to identify it though.”

She gave him a thoughtful look. “If that’s really true it must be Harry. He’s the only person other than you and me who has ever used my wand. But I still say you’re imagining things.”

Draco gave her an annoyed look. “I’m not. And tell you what, the library has a whole section on wandlore. Why don’t you ask Tippy for some books and read up on it?”

She frowned. “I really don’t think that wands are the right thing to focus on here.”

He shrugged. “You won’t know that unless you look into it. You’ve reached the end of your research on the horcruxes. It’s just battle planning and potions from here. You have time to read up on wands. See if I’m right.”

She rolled her eyes. "Fine, I'll ask Tippy for some books on wands tomorrow."

"Good," he said, kissing her forehead. "Now come to bed with me, love. After that memory I saw tonight I've decided I'm never sleeping alone again. I want all the time with you that I can get before Potter faces that snake-faced bastard."

She gave him a gentle smile at this and let him lead her to his bedroom where they slipped under the covers together.

They turned to face each other. "Please don't die, Hermione," he whispered.

"I'll try not to Draco."

Dear Journal,

I'm terrified I'm going to lose her. All the protection in the world doesn't mean shit if Potter really has to face him in the end.

I can't stop it. I know that. But fuck, why did it have to be this way?

The first of September dawned bright and clear, and Draco had never been happier to see the date come and go. After two weeks of having to avoid Astoria in the halls of Malfoy Manor she was finally back on the train to Hogwarts.

Peace at last, he thought.

Not that avoiding her had been terribly difficult. He had simply split his time between Hogwarts and his chambers with Granger. He was only forced to socialize with Astoria at dinner, upon his father's insistence. But the one time he tried to leave the Manor to go to Knockturn Alley again for *felix*, she had seen him and tried to follow. After that, he resolved to wait until she was finally gone to emerge.

He had left Granger with some more books on wandlore. To his amusement and her consternation, Draco had been correct about her wand being more powerful than average. Granger had been annoyed by this at first, but soon became totally sucked into the topic, and she was now spending hours buried in books about wands and their powers.

"Son," said Lucius, as Draco made his way to the drawing room for the first time in two weeks for drinks before dinner.

"Father," said Draco, a bit coldly. "Mother," he said in a much warmer voice, nodding to Narcissa.

Lucius heard the differences in tone and gave Draco a sharp look.

"There's no need to be like that, Draco," said Lucius. "Miss Greengrass is perfectly acceptable."

"She's horrid," said Draco. "But that does not seem to matter to you any longer."

Lucius raised an eyebrow at him. "Evidently you didn't find her that horrid several months ago when you slept with her."

Draco just grimaced but didn't say anything. Narcissa gave Lucius a scolding look.

"Lucius, really. I'm sure Draco regrets his... choices with Astoria."

Draco snorted at this. Regret was putting it mildly.

"Be that as it may," said Lucius, "we must get Draco settled. Miss Greengrass will do just as well as anybody else, and he clearly has no serious objection to her if he was willing to bed her mere months ago."

Draco just shut his eyes and rubbed his temples.

"But what about his feelings, Lucius?" pleaded Narcissa. "He's not in love with her."

"No," said Lucius, "though now that you mention it, Miss Greengrass is under the impression that there *is* some witch who has captured Draco's interest. I assume that this other witch is not a pureblood or else he would have presented her himself."

Draco opened his eyes at this, suddenly at attention. He saw his mother tense out of the corner of his eye.

"Is that true, Draco?" asked Lucius.

Draco forced a sardonic smile across his face. "If it were, I wouldn't be likely to tell you, would I?"

Lucius's lips thinned. "You know I can't condone that behavior," said Lucius.

"You're trying to force me into a loveless marriage, Father. I don't think it's any of your business what I do outside of that marriage or who I do it with."

Lucius looked at him for a long time and then sighed. "Very well. Salazar knows this has happened before with the Lords Malfoy. But I would encourage discretion, especially in the current climate. It would not do for... certain parties to be aware of your true feelings, especially before you are wed and Astoria is pregnant."

Draco grimaced at this. "You're the one who brought it up, Father, not me."

Lucius gave him an annoyed look. "We will not speak of it again, then."

“Excellent plan,” said Draco. “And I take it our silence will extend to any unusual purchases you may hear about through the grapevine or discover from my Gringotts’ account statements. We wouldn’t want to acknowledge the existence of my unacceptable behavior in any way, would we?”

Lucius’s eyes flashed. “Purchases? I did notice you have been pulling out more gold than usual over the last several months, but never say you’re buying gifts for your whore?”

Now Draco looked his father in the eye, and some part of the rage he was feeling must have shown on his face because Lucius’s own eyes widened. It was the first time ever that Draco could recall seeing his father look intimidated by Draco.

“As you have said, *Father*, it is best if we do not speak of it. And if you must, you will refrain from using that offensive word. What I choose to do with my life and my share of the Malfoy fortune is my business. You of all people must know that I would not stray from our family’s traditions for anything less than perfection.”

Lucius frowned. “She’s not perfect if she’s...”

“She’s perfect,” said Draco hotly. “She shines brighter than diamonds. She has a heart of gold. Her brilliance is a force of nature, and her power is indescribable. If you absolutely insist that the Malfoy line continues through somebody as insipid and idiotic as Astoria Greengrass, then so be it. But then you owe me this chance at happiness.”

Lucius looked stunned and Narcissa stricken by Draco’s speech. Draco stared at his father, refusing to break eye contact, until finally Lucius gave a curt nod, and Draco relaxed.

“Very well,” said Lucius. “You will become engaged to Astoria. You will marry her, bed her, and then send her away to a safe location once she is confirmed pregnant. As for your... friend... whoever she is... your mother and I will look the other way.”

“Fine,” said Draco, curtly.

“I would like to announce your engagement on the nineteenth of September,” said Lucius. “That’s a Saturday. It gives us a couple of weeks to plan a party.”

Granger’s birthday, thought Draco with a grimace.

He opened his mouth to protest, but his mother jumped in. “Lucius, that’s not enough time to plan. Surely we can push it to the following weekend or even the first weekend in October. This union should be used to solidify Draco’s social position. His engagement party shouldn’t be a casual get together.”

Draco exchanged a quick look with his mother, and he could tell that she also knew it was Granger’s birthday.

Lucius looked like he was going to object, but then Narcissa said the magic words. “I want a ball, Lucius. Dress robes, family jewels, an orchestra, the works. I want it to be the event of the year, eclipsed only by the wedding itself. That takes *time*.”

Lucius sighed. "Very well. The last weekend in September then. I'll let the Greengrasses know that the engagement will take place that evening. Narcissa, my dear, you may have your party. Draco, you should go to a jeweler and have a ring made for Astoria."

Draco just raised his eyebrows at that. He had no intention of having a ring made for Astoria. He would find something from their vault she could borrow temporarily to maintain the charade. Still, his father's suggestion gave him an excuse to leave. He was feeling suffocated by their conversation.

"In that case, Father, I'll go visit a jeweler now," he said, standing up.

"But dinner..." he started, and Draco just gave him a look.

"You wish for me to get engaged to that bint in three weeks, yes?"

"Draco..." warned Lucius.

Draco just raised an eyebrow.

Lucius sighed. "Fine. Yes, I do."

"Well then there are arrangements that must be made. I'll be off. We can have dinner tomorrow night."

Draco stood and strode out of the sitting room, through the front door and down to the lane. He apparated to Diagon Alley, a plan forming in his mind as he made his way toward Gringotts. He waited at the security checkpoint and then presented Granger's wand, which he had registered in his name with the Ministry soon after her arrival at the Manor. He was admitted entry and began to approach the counter to request a cart to their vault when he felt goosebumps erupt on the back of his neck. He had the strangest feeling he was being watched. He stopped and looked around cautiously but didn't see anything amiss. He shrugged it off and started to head toward the counter again when a disembodied voice whispered, "Malfoy."

Draco thought he was having a heart attack, but he forced himself not to react. He came to an abrupt halt in the middle of the marble lobby and made a show of checking his watch.

"It's Harry and Ron," the voice whispered.

"Who is staying with me?" Draco asked in a quiet voice without moving his lips.

"Hermione," said the whisper.

Draco nodded.

"Take us to your vault," said the voice. "We want to see if we can get in this way."

"It won't work," he muttered back.

"But we're here. Try anyway," said the voice.

Draco nodded once, as though to himself and then moved toward the goblins at the counter.

"I'd like to visit the Malfoy vault please," he said in a drawling voice. "One of your large carts if you will. I find they are smoother than the small ones."

"Yes sir," said the goblin, who waved toward one of his colleagues. "Bogrod will assist."

Draco made his way slowly toward the doors that led to the carts. This was the part of Gringotts that had stymied Potter and Weasley for months now. All of Granger's research indicated that visitors had to present themselves to the goblins first. Piggybacking in with an invisibility cloak didn't work.

Still, Draco moved slowly to give them time to follow. But sure enough as he crossed the threshold to the carts he heard a muttered curse behind him. He rolled his eyes and continued on with Bogrod along the familiar journey down to the lower levels where the Malfoy vaults were located. When he arrived at the main vault he stepped back to allow Bogrod to stroke the door, which melted away for Draco. He gave only a cursory glance at the piles of galleons, sickles, and knuts. Instead, he headed straight for the Malfoy jewelry, and he started opening box after box to remind himself of what they had.

As he remembered, most of the pieces were very old fashioned and somewhat gaudy. Only a few were delicate enough for Granger. She was so petite she would look ridiculous in many of the pieces he found. Fine then, he would start from scratch.

Satisfied that he hadn't missed anything he rose and started to exit before he remembered Astoria. He glanced back at the boxes and pulled out his least favorite ring — it was a ruby set in yellow gold that Draco thought was rather poorly cut. He smirked at the Gryffindor colors. Draco privately considered the ring a loan, but he also wouldn't miss it if he had trouble getting it back from Astoria after the fallout. He stuck it in his pocket before joining Bogrod for the journey back up to the surface.

When he exited into the marble foyer he paused to check his watch again and sure enough the same disembodied voice whispered, "Harry Potter's address is 12 Grimmauld Place London. Can you meet us?"

"Later," whispered Draco, without moving his lips.

He moved along through the lobby and exited into the crisp evening air, half expecting Potter to grab him and just apparate him straight to Grimmauld Place, but Draco was left alone.

He hurried down the steps of Gringotts and turned into an attached shop with armor, jewelry, plated cups, and cutlery in the window. Draco knew these goblins were actually affiliated with Gringotts. Goblins cared about objects just as much, if not more so, than gold, so Gringotts had always been in the business of making and selling goblin made objects that then became entrusted to their care in wizarding vaults. The Malfoy's had always gone to the Gringotts goblins for goblin made jewelry and objects instead of one of the independent goblin shops. Gringotts hired only the best. A bell tinkled when he entered.

"Sir we are closing in thirty minutes," said a nasal voice.

“That will be sufficient,” he said. “I wish to place an order for a commission.”

The goblin raised his eyebrows, but motioned Draco over. Draco described what he wanted, and soon the goblin was making a sketch for him, which Draco approved after a few minor tweaks.

“It will be ready in one week,” said the goblin, and Draco thanked him as he rose to leave. He paused as he was about to exit the shop.

“There will be more orders like it if I am satisfied.”

The goblin gave him a toothy smile. “I am certain you will be, Mr. Malfoy. And if I may say, it’s a very different piece than those that are in your vault. There will be much work to do if your witch is pleased with this style.”

Draco raised his eyebrows at the fact the goblin seemed to know what the Malfoys already had, but he supposed it wasn’t terribly surprising. Many of the things in his vault were centuries old and many of the pieces were goblin made, with a few notable exceptions. One of those exceptions included the ring he was currently carrying in his pocket. Draco would never risk giving Astoria something as valuable as goblin made jewelry in case he couldn’t get it back.

“You may wish to search your records for a necklace that was commissioned by Septimus Malfoy in the late 1700’s. I’m not sure if he commissioned it from Gringotts or another shop, but I’ve always been led to believe that the Malfoy’s have patronized Gringotts for centuries. In any event, the necklace he commissioned gave me the idea for this. I believe my witch prefers items like that compared to what we have in our vault, though I’ll have her come by one day so she can tell you herself.”

The goblin gave him an intrigued look and said, “We will check, Mr. Malfoy. We would be most obliged to have the opportunity to create a unique collection for your witch. It’s rather unusual for purebloods to disregard the pieces that are already in their vaults, you know.”

“Yes, well, she’s a rather unusual witch,” he said, and the goblin bowed him out of the shop.

A moment after he crossed the threshold he felt a hand grip his arm. Before Draco could even think to panic, it pulled him through the darkness and deposited him in front of a familiar townhome.

“I haven’t seen this place in years,” he said wryly.

“Inside,” said the disembodied voice.

Draco sighed but walked up the steps to the front door and let himself in. A moment later he watched as Potter and Weasley appeared as if from thin air. Potter was giving him a calculating look. Weasley looked distinctly disgruntled. Draco just raised an eyebrow at them both. His feelings about them – and Potter in particular – had shifted quite a bit over the past several months, but they still weren’t friends. He wasn’t going to help them with this.

“What were you doing in Gringotts?” Potter finally asked.

“I could ask you the same thing,” said Draco. “Seeing as how you both promised Granger you would stop trying to break in on your own.”

They both had the grace to look a bit ashamed at that, and Draco smirked.

“Yes, well, while we’re waiting for you to go in with Bellatrix, we figured we could keep trying,” said Potter.

“You’re wasting your time and taking unnecessary risks while you do it,” said Draco shortly. “You have to present yourself to the goblins. Unless you’re willing to reveal yourselves to them, you’ll never get past the doors.”

They both grimaced at this. “What were you doing then?” asked Potter. “If you weren’t doing your own recon?”

Draco gave them an incredulous look.

“Potter, I’m a Death Eater. I don’t have to hide my face in public. I can go to Gringotts for things like gold to buy *felix* ingredients and... engagement rings.”

Draco struggled not to laugh at the appalled looks that crossed both of their faces.

“Engagement rings?” Weasley choked. “What, are you proposing to Hermione now?” Weasley looked sick.

Draco rolled his eyes. “Don’t tell me she hasn’t shared this with you?”

They both gave him looks that said she clearly hadn’t. Draco wrinkled his nose.

“It’s not for Granger. My father and aunt are insisting I get engaged to Astoria Greengrass in a few weeks.”

They both gaped at him. Then they looked outraged. “But Hermione...” started Potter.

“Knows about it,” said Draco, rolling his eyes again. “Honestly, do you really think I’d be able to keep something like that quiet? It’s going to be all over the papers as soon as it’s announced. Astoria’s an absolute nightmare, and I’m not going to marry her. But I have to play along for now to butter up Bellatrix so she’ll let me into her vault. She and my father have gotten it into their heads that I need to produce an heir before the Dark Lord decides to off me, and they’ve chosen Astoria.”

They both looked horrified now. “But that’s...” started Potter.

“Fucked up? I agree. But it’s temporary. And anyway, I selected the ugliest ring in our vault that I could find. Gryffindor colors, naturally. I’m hoping it’s bad enough that Astoria will cry off once she sees it.”

Draco thought he saw Potter's mouth twitch at this. Weasley still looked gobsmacked by the whole thing. "Blimey..." Draco heard him mutter.

"Anyway if that's all, I need to be getting back to Granger," said Draco. "She's going to wonder where I am. And I'm due for a step on *felix* in thirty minutes."

"Wait," said Potter. "There's something else."

Draco gave him an impatient look.

"We want you to let Hermione go," said Weasley. "She's been with you for too long."

Draco rolled his eyes again. "She's been able to leave for days now."

Potter frowned. "But she said she's blood warded in."

"And she is," said Draco. "There are blood wards on the doors to keep her safe. Nobody who would harm her can cross them. But she also has an exit to a secure location. I gave it to her days ago and told her she could leave whenever she wanted to. She's opted to stay. With me," he added unnecessarily.

They both looked stunned at this. Draco just smirked.

"You'd best get used to it," he added. "We're together, and it's serious. It's not going to end with the war."

Potter gave him a look that told Draco he was already aware of this. Weasley, however, protested.

"But you can't possibly be that serious! I mean, sure you've been stuck together for months so you're finally getting along I guess, but to say that you'll stay together once the war is over..."

"We will, and I'm going to break things with Astoria and go public with Granger the minute war is over," Draco said. Weasley's jaw dropped. "I'd do it now, except it would blow my cover with the Death Eaters and ruin our plan to get the horcrux."

"You... you..." stuttered Weasley.

"In case you haven't noticed, we're in a war, Weasley," said Draco. "Taking your sweet time to sort out your feelings and then act on them is pointless. We could all be dead tomorrow. It's given me a lot of clarity about what I want, and I want Granger. She wants me too. Like I said, you'd best get used to it."

"But..." started Weasley, but to Draco's surprise Potter cut in.

"Drop it, Ron. He's right."

Weasley got a mulish look on his face, but fell silent.

"I need to go," said Draco. "Next time, you should just send Granger a message on the galleon. It's a lot less work than kidnapping me."

Draco turned to leave but was stopped by Potter's voice. "Malfoy," he said.

Draco turned around again. "Take care of her," said Potter.

Draco just raised his eyebrows. "I always take care of what's mine," he retorted. Then he looked at Potter and remembered the blood ritual Granger had performed to save his life. "You can help take care of her too by taking care of yourself first. Going to Gringotts today was pointless and needlessly risky. Don't do it again."

Draco turned and strode out of the door then turned on the spot to apparate home. It was time to get back to Granger.

Dear Journal,

Fucking Harry Potter. It always comes back to him, doesn't it? The only saving grace — which was truly a surprise — is he seems to realize Granger and I are inevitable. Weasley's still in denial, but that was always going to happen until it hit him over the head like a bludger.

In other news, I'm getting engaged. Joy. And Snape has assigned an absolute mountain of reading to do.

I'll be lucky if I get through the engagement without Granger killing me wandlessley or Snape killing me with work. Ah well, if it's Granger, at least she'll have a nice gift to remember me by. And it wouldn't be the worst way to go.

Chapter End Notes

Note: I deviated from canon a little with Gringotts because way the trio broke into Gringotts in the book is not realistic IMO. I know that in the book Harry and Griphook get in with the invisibility cloak, but this type of security breach is so easy to foresee I really believe the goblins would never have allowed it. Invisibility cloaks are rare, but wizards do have them. Mad-Eye had at least two. If you could really get into Gringotts by piggybacking in with an invisibility cloak, there would have been robberies all the time. That just doesn't jive with everything else you read about Gringotts or the reputation that it is supposed to be impossible to rob.

In my mind, Gringotts is secure enough that a witch or wizard would need to present themselves to the goblins at the front desk for identification purposes before the wards let them through the door to the carts. I also think that cheap identification tricks like polyjuice (which Hermione used in the book) wouldn't work because it's way too

foreseeable. The witch or wizard would need to present their wand, and there would be some type of magic to recognize whether or not you are telling the truth about who you are.

Rant over lol.

Chapter 23: A Very Happy Birthday

Hermione

Dear Reader,

My new least favorite person in the world might be Astoria Greengrass. I know it's petty, and this is harsh, but fuck her. Malfoy's getting engaged soon, and even though it's just a ruse I don't like it.

The only saving grace is that he's been awfully affectionate recently. Even when he's just studying he's doing it with me. I think he dislikes the engagement almost as much as I do. Ugh. The things we do for this war.

But I'm going to do my best to ignore it. I have to or I'll go mad. And anyway, it's my birthday tomorrow so I'm not going to let it ruin my day. Happy birthday to me. I'll be nineteen. If I were Lily Potter I would be married in the next six months.

Hermione woke up on her nineteenth birthday to the feeling of a warm body pressed against her back and a firm hand slipping under her pajamas to cup her breasts. For a split second she was confused. She had been having a rather delicious dream involving Malfoy on top of her, and now here he was behind her. It was amazing he moved so quickly. But then she realized that one was a dream and the other was real.

I definitely prefer real, she thought.

She smiled to herself, her eyes fluttering open to see the dim morning light peeking through the curtains in Malfoy's room. Instinctively she stretched and pressed her bum into Malfoy's lap. She felt something very hard pressing back.

“Fuck,” said a gravely voice in her ear as he pinched one nipple. “I was going to take my time with you, but if you keep that up I’m just going to take you.”

Excitement started to unfurl inside of her. She was already rather worked up from the dream he had interrupted. But she had also been curious about that kind of sex. She was still inexperienced, but she got the impression that Malfoy had been holding back from her during sex, just a little bit. He didn’t want to hurt her or scare her. He always made sure she came, but other than their first time he had always taken it slow with her, and he hadn’t pushed her for anything harder. She had wondered why until she remembered that their first time had been rough enough that she took a pain potion for it, and it must have made him hesitant to

be that rough with her again. She didn't really know how to *tell* him she wanted to try it like that. She was still a bit shy when it came to that sort of thing.

She suddenly and rather forcefully, knew what she wanted for her birthday, or at least some idea of it. And he had just given her an opening. She pressed her bum back into his lap.

"Granger..." he warned. She smiled to herself. If she had known this was all it took to get him worked up she would have done it ages ago.

"It's my birthday Malfoy," she said.

"I know that love. And I want you to have the best birthday. But you're fucking with my self control when you do that."

She did it one more time.

"Fuck..." he said, and the hand that had been playing with her breasts moved into her shorts and knickers.

"Goddammit how are you already this wet?" he asked, and she was pleased to hear the strain in his voice.

"I was having a rather lovely dream involving you and me... and then you woke me up in the middle of it you great prat," she said in a teasing voice.

"A dream..." he said roughly, and Hermione wished she could see his face. He sounded amazed, like the notion had never occurred to him before.

"I do dream about you," she confirmed. "And it gets me..." she paused, wondering if she dared to say it. She mustered her courage to finish. "Wet. It gets me really wet. Like this."

He groaned and pressed his fingers inside of her. She felt her breath coming in shorter gasps now as he started to stroke her.

"Tell me," he said suddenly, and Hermione was pleased to hear that dark desperation in his voice that she hadn't heard since their first time together. "Tell what I was doing to you to get you this wet."

And there it was. Her chance to tell him exactly what she wanted. She just needed the courage to say it. She had a flash of insight.

"It's hazy," she murmured. "But I know you were hard. A little rough. You were... instructing me."

She felt him give a shuddering breath.

"Instructing you?" he confirmed.

"Yes," she said. "You know how much I like to be taught. You were... telling me what to do."

“Did it excite you?” he whispered in that same, dangerous voice he once used to ask her if his darkness excited her. “Did you like being told what to do? Even when I was rough with you?”

“I loved it.” she said. “It got me like this, didn’t it? All for you.”

“Fuck,” he breathed. Then he removed his hands from her pants and she almost whimpered at the lack of contact.

“You’re going to wait,” he said. “Until I want you to come.”

Heat flooded her. He was going to do it then, this thing she has been fantasizing about. She wasn’t even sure *why* she wanted it like this. But there was a side to him that was so dark and dangerous, and she was aching to draw it out during sex. She trusted him implicitly now, and she knew he would never truly hurt her. But the Gryffindor in her wanted to bring out the dragon in him, even if it was reckless, even if he might burn her a little while she did it.

He flung the covers off of them.

“Stand up,” he said. “Just over there. Turn to face me so I can see you.”

She did as he asked and then turned to look at him for the first time that morning. His blonde hair was tousled from sleep, and his gray eyes were a shade darker than usual as he watched her. To her surprise she saw he was already naked and very erect. He must have vanished his own clothes before he woke her up.

He was laying on his side, his head propped up with one hand while the other hovered near his cock.

“Unbutton your shirt for me, darling. One button at a time. All the way down. But don’t take it off yet.”

Her heart was pounding as she did as he asked. Her pajama top was now hanging open, barely covering her breasts.

“Now take it off slowly for me. And touch those perfect tits while you do it.”

He wants me to strip for him, she realized. She had never done something like this before but she decided to lean into it. She started by touching her own neck before moving a hand lightly down to cup one breast. She moved the fabric of her shirt aside just a bit so he could see.

“Yes... Just like that darling,” he said as she shrugged one shoulder out of her top and then moved to the other side. She kneaded her breasts as the other shoulder fell too, and then she slowly released her hands so the top slid down to the floor. She saw Malfoy’s own hand had moved to his cock to stroke himself while he watched her.

“Your shorts now. But keep your knickers on.”

This surprised her a bit, but she did as he requested. Soon she was standing there in the necklace he had given her and a pair of sheer knickers. A couple weeks ago Malfoy had ordered Tippy to replace all of her practical underwear with lace and gauze. She had rolled her eyes, but couldn't help but be amused by it, and now she was rather pleased he had done it.

"Turn around and walk toward my desk," he said, and she saw he looked unbearably excited now. Whatever he wanted her to do next was clearly part of his own fantasy.

She did it slowly, and he groaned. "Bend over," he said roughly. "Arse out, hands on the desk."

She did it and stayed that way for a moment before she heard a noise and discovered he was already behind her.

"Fuck, Granger, your arse," he said, running a hand over it. "It's so perfect. So pert. And all I want to do when I see it is bury my cock in you just like this."

She gasped at his words and instinctively arched for him.

"You want it, don't you? You want me to take you like this."

She didn't respond at first, she just arched harder.

"Tell me," he ordered. "I want to hear you say it."

"Yes..." she said. "Please... Draco. Take me like this."

"Good girl," he murmured, and for some reason Hermione felt like her insides were melting. She gasped as she felt her knees go weak.

Malfoy immediately noticed, of course. His hand brushed her bum as he said. "You like that, don't you? You want to be my good girl. Just mine. All for me."

"Yes... sir," she gasped, and Malfoy's hand stilled.

"Fuck..." he whispered. "Fuck..."

Then before she knew what was happening, she felt him yanking her knickers down.

"Legs apart. Now," he growled, and Hermione obeyed, as she felt his fingers dipping into her. He groaned.

"Gods you're so ready..."

She felt his hardness press into her, and they both groaned at the feeling.

"So fucking *tight* like this," he said. "I knew you would be..."

Then he started to move, and Hermione thought her insides were liquifying with pleasure. The angle was harder, deeper, and he was penetrating some spot he had never reached before. She moaned and started to shake, and something about it made Malfoy snap.

“Go... go...” he urged. “Come apart around my cock, darling...just like this...”

She felt herself breaking at his words, and she heard him grunt in approval as he slipped his hands under her body to grip her breasts while she did it. It was so much deeper and harder than she had ever experienced before, and she felt her vision blurring.

“Fuck,” he whispered, and then he pulled himself out, spun her around and lifted her onto the desk in a seated position before ramming himself back into her and pounding hard. In some distant part of her brain Hermione knew that all of Malfoy’s self-control had finally disappeared. He wasn’t holding back any longer, and she reveled in it.

“I want to see you,” he gasped. “I want to see your face when you come again...”

She felt molten like this, under his control and following his lead. She widened her legs for him and placed her hands behind her for support.

“Gods your tits,” he said as he slowed for a moment to lick them. “I wish you were naked all the time so I could always have you like this...”

She opened a bleary eye to look at him, and his face was focused on her breasts, his entire attention absorbed by what he was doing to her as he started to lick them.

“Malfoy...” she started, and he bit her, just a touch too hard. She gasped.

“My name, darling...” he corrected her.

“Draco,” she breathed, and he hummed his approval.

“Better. Tell me birthday girl... what do you want?”

“I want to come again... like this.”

“Anything you want, beautiful,” then he leaned back and picked up the pace. She felt her orgasm approaching again, her breathing becoming labored as she felt the slap of his skin against hers.

“Open your eyes and look at me,” he said, and automatically she did as he said. His eyes burned as he stared at her, and she knew he was studying her, watching every twitch and gasp, memorizing the sounds she made and automatically cataloging the things he did that she liked.

“I’m close,” she gasped.

“Fucking go....” he said.

“*Draco*,” she keened, and with one last hard thrust he pushed her over that precipice again, stars exploding in her eyes and her skin vibrating with overstimulation. She was watching him as it happened, and she saw his face transform with something that looked like wonder as he stared at her. It made her feel beautiful, powerful, and a moment later his jaw dropped, and he was spilling himself into her with a few more shuddering thrusts.

He gathered her to him and leaned against the table as they caught their breath. Hermione reached out a hand and summoned her wand to them to clean them up.

He just chuckled. “What?” she asked.

“Your magic,” he said. “You really don’t need a wand at all.”

“Well I’ve never tried *scourgify* before,” she said a bit primly.

He leaned back and suddenly grinned. “That’s your next assignment then, love. Salazar knows it would be convenient if you could just wave your hand and *poof*.”

She rolled her eyes but smiled at him as he grabbed her hand and led her back to bed with him.

“Happy birthday,” he said as they snuggled in. “I don’t think I said that yet.”

She gave him a smile. “So far it’s shaping up to be an excellent one.”

“You liked that, did you? It wasn’t… too rough?”

For the first time he looked a little nervous. She smiled broadly, and he relaxed just a smidge. “It was hot, Malfoy. And you don’t have to worry about that. You’re not going to break me.”

He grimaced at this. “Maybe not, but I don’t have to break you to hurt you. You’re tiny.”

She just raised an eyebrow. “I’m finding there is a fine line between pleasure and pain. And honestly… I liked it. I liked it a lot. If it’s ever too much I’ll tell you, but I don’t think it will be.”

He groaned at this, but she could see him smiling widely now, his eyes closed for a moment as he imagined it. Then he opened them and looked at her again.

“You’re too good for me, you know that?” he said. “I don’t deserve you.”

She reached up and placed her hand on his cheek. “We’re good for each other. And you do deserve me. Just like I deserve you. We’ve earned this, Malfoy.”

He placed his hand on top of hers and leaned in for a deep kiss.

When he broke away he looked down at her. “Are you ready for your present then?”

She gave him a skeptical look. “I rather thought you already gave it to me, just a few minutes ago.”

He grinned at this, but shook his head. “No, I have something else for you,” and he reached behind him to pull a small box out of the drawer in his nightstand. He handed it to her. She felt her heart speed up as she opened it to find earrings in the shape of a Tudor rose. They each had a diamond in the center with inner petals made of silver and outer petals made of gold. They matched the necklace he had given to her perfectly.

She looked up at him, and found him studying her necklace with a thoughtful look. He touched it.

“When I gave this to you, I was in two minds about it,” he said slowly. “It was a safety measure so the decision was made for me. But I didn’t like what it symbolized. Rose Atwater should have been Septimus’s wife, and I didn’t like the obvious parallels to you. But after I gave it to you and we got together… well, I know my decisions are going to be different from his. So now I look at it, and I think about the fact that I learned a lesson from Septimus. I’ll have the balls to break tradition, in part because of his journals and the way he wrote about Rose.”

Hermione felt her heart swell at this, but he wasn’t done yet.

“This necklace belongs to Rose. Septimus buried it with her in the family mausoleum where Lady Malfoy’s ring is always placed. I’m sure he would be happy for you to borrow it for now since it’s protecting you, but if we make it through this war I’m going to return it to her and give you a piece that’s just yours to replace it.”

She inhaled as she thought about this, and now he touched the earrings.

“These, however, are yours. They’re not Rose’s. I had the goblins make them to match the necklace you’re wearing now, but they’ll also match the thing I replace it with in the future. Like I said, these roses symbolize lessons learned. If we make it through this fucking war then our story will have a different ending than theirs did. Consider the earrings a promise that I will make different choices than Septimus.”

“Draco, it’s just…”

She felt so emotional at his words. She didn’t know what to say and tried to compose herself. “They’re beautiful. I love roses, you know.”

He smiled a little at this. “Well they’re like you. Both very beautiful and a little dangerous.”

She smiled at that. “They’ve always been my favorite flower.” She looked at him hesitantly. “Tippy told me about the ones you planted in the garden. The name, I mean.”

He bit his lip. “I couldn’t resist. I had them planted while I was still with Astoria.”

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Back then?”

He nodded. "I told myself it was just a moment of weakness, but I was already head over heels for you. I just hadn't admitted it to myself yet."

She pulled him in for another kiss before sitting up and touching the earrings one more time. She unclasped them and placed one in each ear.

She smiled at him, but he was frowning just a bit.

"What?" she asked in confusion.

"Those earrings in your second piercing. They look dull compared to the roses."

She gave him an amused smile. "I'm sure they do. They're just glass."

Malfoy gave her an appalled look. "Glass? Why the fuck are you wearing glass? Even muggle diamonds would be better than that."

She just rolled her eyes. "I had them pierced right after I obliterated my parents, at the same time I got my tattoo. I took out all of the money they saved for me for the three of us to live on if we ended up hiding in the muggle world. I wasn't going to take any of *their* money after what I did to them, and I didn't have the budget for diamonds. I had no idea how long I would have to make my money last us."

He narrowed his eyes at this. "Your family has money, though. I can tell from your memories. Surely your parents gave you a few nice things?"

She sighed. "Yes, but my mother took all of her jewelry with her when they moved to Australia. And I put my nice things in her jewelry box just before I obliterated her. I just... I wanted her to have something of me, even if she wouldn't remember me. I just left with the earrings I was wearing, and that's all I've had for the past year and a bit. I bought the glass ones at the shop when they did the piercing for me."

His eyes softened as she told him this. "I did wonder..." he said quietly. Then he looked at her ears critically again and said, "Very well. I'm going to get something that looks better than what you have for the second hole."

Hermione was appalled by this suggestion. "Malfoy, that's not necessary. The roses... well they're too much already. I don't need more."

He just rolled his eyes at her. "Get used to it, Granger. I'm a Malfoy. I'm going to spoil you until I'm dead and rotting in that mausoleum. Besides, the roses will look better with something that actually compliments them."

Hermione just shook her head, but didn't bother to protest again. She knew he would do it regardless of what she said.

"You're too much sometimes," she muttered. He just grinned and kissed her on the nose.

"Breakfast, love. I have an extra errand to run on the way back from Hogwarts today."

She just rolled her eyes at him but couldn't help the smile that crossed her face as she left bed to get dressed. He really was a hopeless romantic. She never would have believed it based on his behavior at Hogwarts, but then again, they had been sworn enemies then. Now that she knew him, she could see that everything he did for her had some deeper meaning.

After a truly decadent birthday breakfast, Malfoy left Hermione to her studies on wandlore, returning several hours later with another box that she opened to reveal diamond studs. They sparkled more brilliantly than anything she had ever seen in the muggle world. She knew they must be goblin made as well.

"Malfoy, honestly," she said with some exasperation, but he just gave her a stern look, and she sighed with a small smile. "Fine. Thank you. They're also beautiful."

She replaced her glass earrings with them, and Malfoy surveyed the overall effect, giving a satisfied nod of approval. "That's much better," he said.

"Impossible... you're impossible," she muttered.

"No, I'm particular," he retorted. "And you like it, admit it."

"Fine..." she ground out as she rolled her eyes, though she couldn't help a small smile as she said it. "I do like it. I enjoy those sorts of things more than I let on. And I'm very happy you didn't get me yet another bloody book. Harry and Ron messaged me that they both got books for my birthday."

To her surprise he pulled out two packages.

"I know, I stopped by Grimmauld Place and picked them up."

She furrowed her brow. "How did you..."

"It's a long story," he said. "But suffice to say I've been there once before and thought they might want to give you something."

Hermione could tell he wasn't willing to say more, so she let it drop as she took the packages and opened them. Ron had gotten her a book on magical creatures that was truly baffling. Harry's was about wandlore.

"Well I'll read Harry's at least," she muttered.

"He's probably trying to prove a point about the Elder Wand," said Malfoy. He had watched the memory from Xenophilius Lovegood's house the day before during their occlumency lesson.

"I'll admit he might be right about it," said Hermione. "But we don't know who had it last, and I don't think we should waste time trying to trace it."

"Even if the Dark Lord might find it first?"

"Yes, even so," she said. "The work you're doing at Hogwarts will help tremendously, and we know where the final horcrux is. We can wait for *felix* but then we should just go for it. Once we have the last horcrux, we should just finish it. The Elder Wand is very powerful, but it's not unbeatable. Quite the opposite, actually. There's a long, bloody history of wizards taking it from each other through force."

He narrowed his eyes to consider this. "Potter won't like sitting still."

She sighed. "No, but searching for the Elder Wand will take God-knows-how-long, and we can finish this thing without it. Besides, there is still more to do. As soon as I'm through occlumency we should destroy the diadem. I just have a feeling about it. Of course, that means I'll need to leave the Manor for a brief period of time to meet Harry and Ron." She saw the disgruntled look on his face. "With you!" she added. "You'll come with me. We just need to go to Grimmauld Place so we can do it together. Sneaking me out of the Manor will be easier than sneaking both of them in."

She watched Malfoy chew on his lip as he considered it. "I can just take it to Potter and Weasley myself."

Hermione shook her head. "No, I want to be part of it. I didn't get to see them do the last one, but it tried to kill them. The more people we have to help the better."

He got a pained look on his face at this. "Fine," he finally said. "But I'm going to want you to go polyjuiced. That or I'll need to get Potter's cloak from him. You're supposed to be dead. You can't be seen."

"Polyjuice, then," she said. "I'm nearly done with it. I don't want to separate Harry from that cloak in case he needs to make an escape. And I doubt he would give it up to you. I really think Xenophilius was being ridiculous about the Deathly Hallows being real, but Harry is convinced he has the cloak and the resurrection stone." She rolled her eyes at this.

Malfoy nodded and then rose. "Alright, we can go as soon as you're done with the polyjuice and occlumency. Though we probably won't be able to finish it until..." he trailed off.

"After the engagement," she supplied, a bit stiffly.

"Right," he said tightly. "The last stage of occlumency is going to take a little time."

She nodded, trying to ignore the jolt in her stomach as she thought about Malfoy's faux engagement that was coming up in a week.

"That's fine," she said. "We shouldn't rush this."

"You're coming around to the Slytherin way of thinking, love," he said. She gave him a smile at that. "Very well, then I'm off to return to Hogwarts. Mother has claimed you for tea and informed me that I'm not invited."

Hermione felt a jolt of anxiety at this news, but she tried not to let it show on her face. He seemed to sense it anyway.

"It will be fine. And I'll be back for dinner with you tonight."

She nodded as he walked over to give her a kiss before slipping back through the connecting door and to his room.

Hermione read for several more minutes, trying to distract herself, until she heard a quiet knock on the door.

"Come in!" she said, and Narcissa opened it with a slightly furtive look on her face that relaxed as she walked in and closed the door behind her.

"Hermione dear, it's been far too long since we've visited. Opening the East Wing has given Draco every excuse to be here now, but we also made it much harder for me to just drop in. The others would wonder what on earth I'm doing in Draco's chambers if they saw me, so I've made a point to stay away. But I just had to make an exception on your birthday."

Hermione smiled at Narcissa, some of her anxiety easing at her warm words. It was true – Narcissa had been by to see her only a handful of times since opening the East Wing, and she had never explained her sudden absence until now. Hermione felt a bit better to know it wasn't anything personal.

Tippy arrived a moment later to set out tea, as Hermione and Narcissa sat at the small table to eat. Hermione's new earrings must have caught the light because Narcissa suddenly gasped.

"Hermione dear, those earrings are stunning."

Hermione felt her face turn crimson.

"Thank you, they were... erm... a gift from Draco."

Narcissa gave her a knowing look, but to Hermione's relief she was smiling.

"Well they're lovely. And I must say they suit you."

Hermione smiled at this. "I told him they're really too much, but he insisted."

"You must let him do it," said Narcissa loftily. "It's the greatest pleasure of Malfoy men to spoil their witches."

Hermione bit her lip at this, but she knew it was true. Malfoy had seemed inordinately satisfied to give her that gift.

"I'll try," she said. "It's not in my nature though."

"Well you'll need to adjust, I'm afraid, because I doubt Draco will. He's awfully determined when he wants something, and he's made it very clear he wants you."

Hermione felt herself blush again, and she debated with herself about whether to ask Narcissa a burning question she had. She decided she had to know.

"Does that bother you, Narcissa? Obviously I'm not a pureblood. I know that goes very much against tradition."

Narcissa sighed and lowered her tea cup.

"Hermione, dear, you must know that I've grown very fond of you. I think you're brilliant and beautiful, and I believe you're going to end up on the right side of history with the Dark Lord. Most importantly, you make Draco happy, and that's enough for me."

Hermione frowned a bit. "But the whole muggleborn thing..." she started, and Narcissa held up a hand to stop her.

"I'll admit that in years past I may not have looked fondly on the match. I tell you this to be honest with you. But over the past few years my perspective has... shifted. Blood politics no longer concern me, other than the facade I must presently maintain to keep my family safe."

Hermione was relieved to hear it, but there was something about this that still bothered her.

"Narcissa..." she said slowly. "If I may ask... why is it different this time? Lucius was a Death Eater during You-Know-Who's first rise. He was in the inner circle then too and very trusted. Why has your perspective changed now instead of back then?"

Narcissa gave her a sad look. "I'll admit, Hermione dear, that it should have changed back then. But all I can tell you is that things were different in the first war. The Dark Lord rose slowly over a matter of many years last time. For the most part, life continued as normal for purebloods. We still had balls and gatherings and holidays. None of our family members were targeted or dying. Albus Dumbledore was a major deterrent last time, and the Dark Lord never made the kinds of inroads then that he's made now. Muggleborns still worked at the Ministry and attended Hogwarts. In fact the Ministry was very anti-Dark Lord. The aurors were eventually given the power to kill Death Eaters without a trial first. The Ministry went too far with it, but they were officially on the side of the light. Most of the violence against muggleborns was kept in the shadows until the last couple of years before he fell, and I wasn't in England to experience it firsthand."

Hermione furrowed her brow. Narcissa caught her look and elaborated.

"The moment I knew I was pregnant with Draco, Lucius arranged to send me to our home in France. He visited often, but I never came back to England. And after Draco was born, I stayed in France until the Dark Lord fell. I ended up living in France for a couple of years. I was... in a bubble. I didn't see how bad it had gotten here. All of my news was filtered through Lucius or Bellatrix. And I failed to ask the obvious questions. Lucius insisted I stay in France for my and Draco's safety from the Order of the Phoenix and the Ministry. But as soon as the Dark Lord fell Lucius claimed to be imperiused, and then he whisked me back home."

"I never thought to ask *why* it was suddenly safe for me to return to England if the "wrong" side had won. In retrospect, I now know that the Order and the Ministry had nothing to do with it. They would never have come after me. Lucius was afraid of the Dark Lord as he

gained enough power to move into the open. Lucius was afraid he would fail on a mission, and the Dark Lord would punish him by targeting me or Draco. But I didn't realize this at the time. I was naive and stupid. I simply trusted that my husband knew best, so I followed his orders and didn't question them. And in the years after that, I believed him when he said the Dark Lord's version of the world was superior. I believed him when he said that it was better for us and for Draco if we kept our pureblood traditions and purged the muggleborns from Hogwarts and the Ministry of Magic. After all, that's how I was raised. I never thought differently before the first war, and I didn't see anything during the first war to change my mind about it. It was... confirmation bias at its very worst. This time though... Well, I've finally seen the violence first-hand. It has affected my home, my marriage, and my child. I know it's wrong, and it has changed my views on everything. I only wish I had understood this years ago."

Hermione realized her mouth was hanging open, and she shut it. Narcissa gave her a small smile at this. Hermione hesitated but then said, "Do you think Lucius's views have changed?"

Narcissa furrowed her brow a bit.

"Not as much as I wish, my dear. He still values pure blood far more than Draco or I do. But I do think he regrets his decision to join the Dark Lord in the first place. When the Dark Lord fell the last time, Lucius thought he was gone for good and would never rise again. And when he did, Lucius had no choice except to answer his call in that graveyard. It would have meant death for all of us if he had refused."

"Like Karkaraoff," Hermione whispered.

Narcissa nodded. "Yes, precisely. But as I said, the violence is worse this time, especially since Dumbledore died. And this time Lucius also failed in a mission, which never happened during the first war. When he failed to retrieve the prophecy from the Department of Mysteries, I was tortured for it. Draco was Marked in retaliation and has been forced to do things no child should do. Lucius loves both of us very much. The night I was tortured was the first time I have seen Lucius cry since his father died over a decade ago. The night Draco was Marked, Lucius was nearly inconsolable."

Hermione felt an odd twisting in her gut at this. It was odd to feel any sympathy for Lucius Malfoy. But she couldn't deny that she felt it, just the slightest bit. There was no question Lucius had been stupid, and his fascination with blood purity and the dark arts had led him to make exceedingly poor choices. But it sounded like he was finally realizing that, at least a little bit.

"Well..." she said slowly. "If there is a silver lining to all of this it's that progress has been made. I'm sure you and Draco and even Lucius to some degree aren't the only ones whose views have changed."

Narcissa smiled at this. "I dare say you're right, though of course it's not safe to say so these days. But it's impossible for many of us to look around and feel like this world the Dark Lord is building is superior to the old one."

Hermione smiled at her, and then moved to lighter subjects, which they stayed on until tea was over. It was only later that night, as she was getting ready for bed after a wonderful birthday dinner with Malfoy that Tippy handed her a package from Narcissa.

She opened it to find a beautiful box made of glass, with etchings of constellations on it. She turned it around to study it and found Draco in one corner. She opened the box and saw it was lined with velvet that looked very old and was slightly worn. She tore open the note that accompanied it.

This box was mine when I was a girl, an heirloom from the House of Black. I used to keep my jewelry in it, and I always intended to give it to my daughter one day. Happy birthday, my dear.

Hermione smiled broadly. Narcissa really had changed.

Dear Reader,

I had a wonderful birthday. Malfoy truly went above and beyond. He gave me a pair of stunning earrings in the shape of a rose and then came back later with diamond studs to compliment them. I told him it was too much, but he insisted.

Someday you should read Septimus Malfoy's journal. He seems to have given your father the courage to break the chain of pure blood. He wants it to be with me, and Merlin help me, but I want it too.

Evidently your grandmother's views on muggleborns has changed as well. Will wonders never cease?

I'm becoming more and more convinced that you're Draco's, but you're also mine. It's an odd feeling, writing to you. Then again, maybe if I knew your name it would feel more real. And if you're a girl, I think I'd like to name you Rose. That's how I'll think of you for now. I hope I get to meet you someday.

Chapter 24: The Engagement

Draco

Draco was surveying the Malfoy ballroom with boredom, making no effort to hide his annoyance at being there. This mad plan for an engagement was certainly not *his* idea, and the only reason he was still going along with it was to make Bellatrix happy so she would let him into her vault.

Astoria, he knew, was torn between pleasure at the engagement and anger with Draco. He had pointedly ignored her since she arrived at the Manor the evening before, and he hadn't even bothered to actually propose. He just sent that ugly ring to her room with an elf, figuring she would probably wear it to the engagement party.

Draco couldn't find it in himself to get worked up about Astoria's feelings. He thought he was being rather charitable by hiding her secret from his family. And Granger's reaction to the whole thing made him care even less about Astoria than he otherwise would. He had left Granger in her suite trying to put on a brave face, but looking utterly forlorn in a way that went straight to his heart. Draco had no interest in coddling Astoria when her greed and ambition was partially to blame for Granger's heartbreak.

"Draco," Astoria purred, as she sidled up to him.

Draco ignored her.

"Draco, you should at least *pretend* to be happy to be here," she huffed.

"That would be entirely dishonest," he said. "I take no pleasure in this."

She scowled. "If this is about your other witch..."

At this Draco spun around and gripped her arm so quickly that Astoria flinched.

"Do not mention her to me or to anyone else ever again," he said in a dangerous voice. "You're not fit to lick the filth off of her shoes, and if you ever make a comment about her to anyone else — especially anybody in my family — then not only will I break this fucking engagement, but I will make sure you pay for it."

Astoria's eyes were wide.

"But she..." Astoria started, but Draco cut her off.

"I'm aware you spoke to my father about her, and it caused complications for me. I am not in the mood to entertain your little temper tantrums or discuss this further. Henceforth, you will maintain your silence about her with me and everyone else, do you understand?"

Astoria just nodded. Draco considered her and decided to go in for the kill. He desperately wanted her to come to her senses about this whole fiasco of an engagement.

“Good. If you wish to be my wife, then you had best get used to following my orders. I am uncompromising, and I will not be disobeyed on matters such as this.”

It wasn’t a lie, strictly speaking. If the witch had been Granger he would compromise in a heartbeat and give her the world. But for Astoria? He was telling the truth. He *wouldn’t* risk Granger’s safety or his own by allowing Astoria to run her mouth to Bellatrix or anybody else.

He heard a sniff, but he ignored her as she moved off. Maybe she was finally getting a clearer picture of what marriage to him would be like.

“Draco,” he heard a voice say, and he steeled himself as he turned to find his aunt behind him.

Fuck, how much had she heard?

“Aunt Bella,” he said cordially, trying to inject a note of boredom in his voice so she wouldn’t sense his panic.

“I am well-pleased with you, Draco,” said Bellatrix, and Draco felt something inside of him unclench.

“I always aim to please you, Aunt,” he said automatically.

She surveyed him with some satisfaction.

“I’m aware you do not care for the chit. But I did observe your exchange just now, and I could tell you are willing to exert the necessary control over her to bring her to heel. That is admirable in a marriage such as yours.”

“Mmm,” said Draco. He could think of nothing else to say.

“Yes, I have often said that the types of unions my sisters sought led to weakness. Andromeda, of course, is a blood traitor and is dead to me. She turned on our very House because of her supposed great love. I had high hopes for Narcissa when she married Lucius, but it soon became clear that they were besotted with each other. That made them both weak. I had some concern that you would seek a marriage like your parents, but I can see that you have followed in my footsteps. You are marrying for blood and lineage, and there can be no higher purpose than that. You will bed her to secure yourself an heir and as many spares as she will give you, but then you will have no further need of her. That is how it should be.”

Draco tried not to grimace at this. “Astoria will serve her purpose,” he said.

“Indeed she will,” said Bellatrix. “She will do her duty by you, I am sure of it. Although...” and here Bellatrix trailed off. Draco looked at her curiously.

"She may be more docile for you if you give her something of what she wants. It would not do for her to... stray after your heir is born. It is important that she give you other children as well in case the first proves to be a disappointment."

For fuck's sake, thought Draco. Bellatrix was trying to give him relationship advice? It was so absurd he almost laughed.

"She's getting the title and the protection and wealth of my House," he said coldly. "I cannot think what else she would expect to receive from me. I'm certainly not foolish enough to claim to be in love with her."

Bellatrix smiled at this. "Of course not. But witches such as Astoria are shallow and easy to placate with pretty baubles. You can buy her loyalty to you while you are securing your line."

Draco was quiet for a moment as an idea suddenly struck him. He chose his next words very carefully.

"You may be right, Aunt. Although I have gotten the impression that Astoria is oddly sentimental. She prefers heirlooms over new things, and she has made no secret about her dislike of the jewelry I presented to her from the Malfoy vault."

Bellatrix raised her eyebrows at this, and Draco made a show of rolling his eyes.

"She is not fond of her ring, but I explained to her that it was similar to everything else I can offer from the House of Malfoy."

"Perhaps you should offer her something from the House of Black then," said Bellatrix.

Draco was so close he could practically taste it.

Careful... he told himself. *Don't rush it.*

"That does bear some consideration, though as you surely know, the pieces my mother brought from the House of Black are very reminiscent of that of the Malfoys'. I daresay it's impossible to tell them apart anymore."

Bellatrix frowned at this a little, but didn't contradict him. Then her expression cleared. "You must select something from my vault then," she announced.

Got you.

"Oh I couldn't possibly..." said Draco, in an effort to hide his eagerness.

"Nonsense," said Bellatrix firmly. "You are just as much my heir as your parents' heir. You may select something from my vault to give to your bride."

Draco gave her a gratified smile. "Very well. But we will wait a bit, yes? It would not do for Astoria to assume she can get anything she wants from me the moment she complains. She needs to cool her heels first."

Bellatrix gave him a cold smile. “You are learning well, Draco. You may reach out to me to arrange it whenever you are ready.”

With that, she drifted away, and Draco struggled to keep the smile off of his face. This entire fake engagement would be worth it if he could get the horcrux and his revenge.

I need to tell Granger.

Draco was forced to wait for two more hours before he was able to leave the party. He managed to limit the rest of his interactions with Astoria to a few brief words and a perfunctory kiss on the back of the hand when it was time to leave.

Theo and Pansy had both been there, the latter giving him a slightly hurt look that he was engaged to Astoria and not her. Draco forced himself to ignore her innuendos. Pansy was a friend. Draco didn’t have those feelings for her, and he would never have been able to use her like this. Still, it wasn’t like he could explain that to her, and he tried to avoid both her and Theo for the rest of the evening.

Finally, at long last, his mother gave him a look that said he had done enough, and he pulled her aside to tell her he was returning to Granger.

“She’s trying to act like she doesn’t care, but this is really hurting her. I need to get back to her.”

Narcissa’s eyes flashed with concern. “Yes, of course. There is no need for you to stay until the last guest departs. I’ll tell everyone who asks that you have a very early appointment tomorrow morning.”

Draco nodded in relief, before looking at his mother one last time. “Will you do your best to drag out the engagement? At least a few months. I know Father and Aunt Bella would prefer I elope, but I need a little time first. I would like to break the engagement at the right moment.”

Narcissa eyed him warily. “What are you planning, Draco? You’ve maintained you won’t marry her, and I do believe you, but…

“Trust me, you don’t want to know,” he said grimly. “But I need at least a few more months. Please promise me you’ll push for a big society wedding. Something that takes a lot of planning to buy me that time.”

“Consider it done,” she said. “I should be able to push it to the holidays without too much objection from your father and aunt.”

Draco exhaled. "Good. That should be enough time. And Mother, I want you to promise me one more thing."

He paused as she looked at him with some trepidation. "If Granger ever comes to you and tells you it's time to hide, I want you to promise me you'll do it, and you won't wait for Father first."

"Draco, I..." but he gave her a fierce look.

"It's better if you don't know. Suffice to say my loyalties are likely to be exposed at some point within the coming months. If she tells you to do anything like that, you must listen to her. Promise me."

Narcissa sighed. "Fine."

"Thank you," he said with relief. "I'm going to see her now."

Draco sent one final grimace toward Astoria on the other side of the room before he slipped away, back to the East Wing.

As he stepped into the familiar hallway he quickened his step, very eager to be back with Granger, but also a bit worried about her mood. He wouldn't blame her if she cold-shouldered him for this. She knew it was all a ploy. He had reassured her of that a dozen times. But still, the fact of the matter was, he was engaged to another witch. He felt wretched about it, but he was sure she felt even worse.

He let himself into his room and glanced around, seeing that his bed was empty. He felt a bit deflated. He had hoped she would be there. They occasionally slept in her bed, but they usually ended up in his.

He approached their connecting door and hesitated a moment, but decided he had to see her. He had to know if she was OK or if she was feeling hurt.

He slowly opened the door and came to an abrupt halt. Granger's room was filled with floating candles, and as he glanced around he saw several more bouquets of the roses he had planted, giving off a strong fragrance.

He glanced toward the bed and saw it was also empty.

"Granger?" he asked hesitantly.

And her name, she stood up from a chair in the shadows. For a moment all he could see was the sparkle of the earrings and necklace he had given her in the dim light. As she approached him with a glass of firewhiskey, he felt his mouth go dry. She had moved into the light, and he saw she was wearing his quidditch jersey, but she wasn't wearing any pants. It barely covered her bum, and as she turned to walk around the chair she had been sitting in, he caught the slightest glimpse of black lace knickers. Draco immediately felt himself harden as he accepted the glass of firewhiskey from her.

"You're overdressed," she said.

Draco set the firewhiskey down and started to undress unconsciously, shrugging out of his formal robes, kicking off his shoes, and loosening his tie. He still hadn't said a word to her, he was just staring. Her skin and eyes seemed to glow in the candlelight.

She raised an eyebrow as she turned around and bent over to light a few candles behind her. Draco watched as the jersey with his name on her back rode up perilously high, giving him a better view of those knickers and her perfect arse.

"Goddammit," he muttered, shucking his clothes off faster as he continued to watch her, until he was down to his boxers.

She lingered in that position a bit longer than was strictly necessary, and she turned to look back at him over her shoulder, or at least he thought she did. His eyes were still glued to her arse.

"Drink," she said, turning around and downing her firewhiskey in a single gulp.

"You're not angry then..." he said, as he picked up his glass and raised it to his lips.

"Oh, I am," she said lightly. "I'm furious, actually. You're engaged."

At the word 'engaged,' he felt the slightest crackle of her magic, and all the candles flickered simultaneously. He took a tentative sip, as he watched her warily now. Nothing was adding up. She had created an incredibly romantic setting in her room. She had dressed herself as though she wanted Draco to fuck her. She had calmly offered him firewhiskey and even given him the first glimpse of what he suddenly hoped would be a fantastic end to an otherwise terrible evening. But now she was telling him she was angry, and he knew she was telling him the truth. He felt it in her magic. She wasn't just angry, she was enraged.

"You know it's a sham," he said carefully.

She gave him a stony look back. "You keep saying that, but it's actually not a sham. You're really engaged. The solicitors have confirmed it. You'll have to break the contract to get out of it."

"The contract is already broken, as far as I'm concerned," he said. "Astoria didn't disclose her condition."

Granger just raised an eyebrow. "You're engaged," she said.

"Fine," he retorted, as he started to get frustrated. "I'm engaged. But it's very temporary. You know that."

She snorted, and he was alarmed to see the candles flicker again with her magic. He forced himself to set aside his own frustration and calm down. She was powerful – far more powerful than he was. If he caused her to lose control of her magic there was no telling what she would do.

"Hermione," he said as gently as he could. She looked at him, and her magic crackled again.

Shit, he thought. Think.

“I don’t care about her at all. I’m going to break it off as soon as I can. I hardly spoke to her tonight except to tell her to fuck off. I left early so I could come back and see you. You’re the only thing I’ve been thinking about all evening.”

She didn’t say anything to this, but something in the air seemed to stabilize at his words. He wondered if he dared breathe a sigh of relief yet.

“Darling,” he said in a soothing voice. “Can you tell me… the candles? And the roses? Were these for me?”

She gave him a baleful look and huffed. “I was going to seduce you. I had it all planned out. I was going to make it so memorable that you would never think of that bitch Astoria again until it was finally time to break it off with her. But then I sat here, and it got later and later… and now… well I don’t know if I want to shag you or slap you.”

Then she turned her back on him and actually stomped her foot in frustration. Draco felt a burst of love for her, and he couldn’t help but smile a little. She was truly adorable when she was in a snit, and he couldn’t blame her for it. Yes, he had had a hellish evening too, but he knew it must have been even worse for her. Besides, she was angry because she cared and wanted him all for herself. It was heartwarming.

He walked toward her slowly and reached out to touch her. She stiffened a little as he traced his name on her back, but she didn’t stop him. He stepped a little closer and moved her hair to the side before kissing her neck. He smiled a bit when she automatically leaned into him just a little.

“I know I deserve to be slapped,” he murmured, as he slipped an arm around her waist. “It must be awful for you. If the situation were reversed and you were engaged to some other bloke…” he unconsciously gripped her hip and dug his fingers into that soft flesh near her tattoo. “I’d be going fucking insane.”

She made a little noise of agreement at this.

“I’m sure it’s poor consolation,” he added as he moved the neckline of the jersey to the side so he could kiss her shoulder, “but I hate her too. I hate everything about this. There wasn’t a single moment that I enjoyed. Even when I was with her months ago, I thought of you the whole time. She was never more than a distraction, and she was a piss-poor one at that.”

He felt her turn in his arms so she was finally facing him, and when she looked up at him he could still see some lingering resentment, but also heat in her gaze.

Seduction over slapping then, he thought with a bit of a thrill.

Then she placed her hands on his chest and pushed him back hard so he stumbled a bit.

“Sit,” she said curtly.

He did as she asked, wondering if he had just gotten ahead of himself, but his mind went totally blank as she slowly lifted the jersey and pulled it over her head.

She was wearing a black strapless bra that looked a bit like a corset, though it didn't come down past her rib cage so her stomach was still exposed. It was made of delicate lace, and Draco thought he could see a hint of her nipples through the fabric, though he couldn't be certain. It was a shade tight on her, and it caused her breasts to mound up and over the top, nearly spilling out. Draco gaped at her, both wishing she would stay clad just like that and longing to allow her breasts to spring free.

Her knickers, he saw, were even better than he had imagined when he caught a flash of them earlier. They were low-slung in matching black lace, and as she turned slowly for him, he saw they rode up on her arse, exposing half of each cheek to him fully.

He saw her glance down with a smirk, and he followed her gaze to see his boxers tented from his erection. He was very obviously turned on. He just raised an eyebrow back at her, refusing to be embarrassed by it. She was the one seducing him, not that she needed to give it much effort. He was semi-hard around her most of the time, and when she was dressed like this... well he never stood a chance. That was a foregone conclusion.

He waited for her to approach him, but to his surprise she moved to sit on the sofa opposite from him, the same place he usually sat when they did their occlumency lessons. He had the briefest thought that it was strange seeing her there in *his* chair, until the blood rushed from his brain to his cock as he realized what she was about to do.

One hand was running lightly along her decolletage and the edge of her corset while she stuck two fingers in her mouth with her other hand and touched her stomach. Draco watched in disbelief as she spread her legs, and the hand that was on her stomach crept down to touch the edge of her knickers before sliding in.

It was incredible and maddening all at once. She was nearly naked, open wide before him and touching herself, but that tiny scrap of lace that was so tantalizing was also blocking his view of her fingers. He could see their shape under it. He could see them moving, and as she started to gasp he thought she was touching her clit, but he couldn't be certain because he couldn't *see* properly. Fuck it all, he needed to see.

"Granger, take off those fucking knickers," he groaned.

She halted what she was doing and opened her eyes to look at him. She saw his own hand was in his boxers, around his cock, and she said, "No touching yourself. If you want me to take them off, you can only watch."

Draco stilled, debating this for a moment. Could he? Could he stand to watch her bare and open and not give himself pleasure at the same time? It would be torturous, he knew. But those were her terms. Did he want to see her do this that badly? Yes. Yes, he absolutely did, even if it killed him.

He slowly removed his own hand from his boxers, and he laced his fingers behind his head and leaned back. He was trying to give off a casual air, but really he was giving his hands

something else to do, because he was sure that if she caught him cheating she would stop entirely. He saw her glance at his Dark Mark, and her eyes heated just a little bit. Draco felt the dynamic between them shift ever so slightly as it happened. She was turned on by it, and that gave him the edge. He decided to press his advantage.

"I'm holding up my end of the bargain," he said. "Now be a good girl and show me that pretty cunt."

He watched in delight as a rosy flush spread from her cheeks all the way down her neck and chest. His words had the desired effect though, because she got that look on her face that he had recently come to recognize — that look that told him she wanted to be instructed. She wanted to please him, as long as he also pleased her.

Sure enough, she waved her hand and vanished her knickers. He allowed himself to groan in appreciation as he looked at her, his cock straining his boxers. "Lick your fingers and touch yourself again for me. Now that I can see you clearly."

She did as he said, closing her eyes for a moment as her fingers went into her mouth, and then he stared as she began to touch herself in earnest. He was right to think she was focusing on her clit, even more than he usually did. But then again, she was tiny and her hands were small. Draco was sure she couldn't penetrate herself the way he could. Despite their differences in technique, her own ministrations were working because before long she was gasping, and Draco could tell she was getting close.

"Harder love. Faster. Pinch it for me and let me see you come," he said. Draco felt his cock twitching violently as she did exactly what he told her to do, and his nails were digging into his scalp so he wouldn't touch himself and cause her to stop. He was barely hanging on, but he had to see this. He had to see her come.

A split second later, she convulsed as she gasped, and Draco had to bite his lip to keep his own pleasure at bay. She slid off the chair and onto the floor, now kneeling before she scooted over to him.

My turn, Draco thought with relief, and sure enough she used his legs as support as she pulled herself back up to standing. She hooked her fingers in the elastic of his boxers and pulled down. Draco lifted his hips to help her, and soon he was naked, his cock nearly pulsing with a mixture of pleasure and pain. She reached for his hands and guided them to her breasts as she straddled his lap and then finally sank down directly on his cock.

Draco nearly seized at the feeling of contact, her channel hot and tight and so perfect around him. She stilled for a moment as she leaned forward and whispered in his ear.

"You're not allowed to come yet, but otherwise you can have me. Whatever you want, however you want."

"I want to fuck you like this until you scream my name," he grunted.

"Yes sir," she said, and Draco snapped at those words and felt her become supple and pliant for him. He surged his hips up roughly, all sense of self control abandoning him, and he

watched as she arched in pleasure at the hard slaps of skin, pressing those beautiful breasts toward him.

“Salazar help me, I fucking love your tits Granger,” he said, as he buried his face in those luscious mounds while he continued pound her. They were being held up at exactly the right height for him by that corset, which Draco now decided deserved a gold star. He inhaled her scent and licked them all over before finally biting down with one deep thrust.

She moaned in surprise, and he did it again. “Say my fucking name,” he demanded, “Draco,” she gasped.

“Say it when you come,” he said, and he shifted his hips slightly to bury his cock even deeper into her, to reach that spot at the very back that was exceptionally sensitive for her.

“Yes... sir... yes... *Draco!*” she gasped, and Draco felt her walls convulsing for a moment, before suddenly she tightened them, and she nearly took him along with her as he felt it around his cock.

“*Fuck,*” he said, pulling her roughly off of him. She had told him he couldn’t come yet. He didn’t know what else she had planned, but he wasn’t going to let it end if there was more.

She came up for air and then slid down off his lap, and before he knew it she was kneeling in front of him, her breasts still heaving from the orgasm she had just had. Then she opened her eyes, and he knew exactly what was coming next.

Fucking yes, thought Draco, unable to believe she had the wherewithal to do this coming off of two orgasms, but he didn’t stop to question it as her mouth closed around his cock.

“Lick it all off,” he said to her eagerly. “You were so beautiful and wet for me just now. Taste it.”

She moaned, and her eyes fluttered closed at his words, as she brought him deeper into her throat. Gods but Draco thought she was perfect. She was this unbelievable blend of fiery temper, sharp mind, and beautiful supplication which only came out during sex. Draco threaded his hands through her hair, as he leaned back to enjoy it.

She gave a throaty moan, and Draco suddenly realized she was *still* turned on.

“Are you still nice and wet for me darling?” he gasped, as she sent his cock deeper into the back of her throat. She just nodded.

“Then I want you to fuck yourself with your hands while you fuck me with your perfect little mouth. Don’t hold back, beautiful. Let me hear you enjoy it.”

She shifted her weight and spread her legs, and Draco leaned forward to watch her hand creep down once more. *Her coordination is truly remarkable*, he thought as she managed to do exactly what he said. She was holding onto his cock with one hand and using her mouth on him, while her other hand was pressing her clit again.

"Harder," he urged. "Fucking go..."

She did as he said, and a moment later moaned. He felt her orgasm through her mouth and hand this time, as her movements became jerky, and now Draco was truly lost. He had held it together as long as he could.

"So good..." he groaned. "Darling, I'm gonna..."

The hand that was around his cock suddenly tightened, as the hand that had just been touching herself came up to cup his balls. He gasped, and he felt her mouth pop off a split second before he started to come. She raised herself up on her knees and caught it all on those tits. On and on it went as he came all over her chest. Draco just stared as a stray drip made its way down her cleavage, disappearing into her corset.

He knew his mouth was hanging open, but he couldn't help it. He had never once thought about doing this to her, but now that he was seeing it... he knew he would have to do it again and again and again. Seeing his cum all over her like that ignited something inside of him. It made him feel like he had finally and fully possessed her in the way he had been dreaming of for months.

Then to his utter shock, she took one finger and slowly traced M-A-L-F-O-Y in it before raising her finger to her mouth to lick it off.

Draco felt his brain misfire.

"Granger, I need you to promise me you'll marry me someday," he heard himself say.

Draco knew he should probably be mortified by what he had just said, but he didn't have it in him to feel embarrassed. He was too fixated on that memory of watching her spell his name. In his cum. Which he had just deposited on her moments ago after an unbelievable shag. Fuck, that surely qualified as a marriage proposal to *him*, didn't it?

She looked surprised, but then an amused smile crossed her face. "What about her?" she asked.

"Who?" asked Draco. He was genuinely confused. What other 'her' was there except for Hermione Granger?

Now a triumphant smile flashed across her face, as she slowly stood and waved her hand to vanish the mess. He watched it disappear with some regret.

"Nevermind," she said lightly, as she walked over to her knickers to pull them back on before settling herself on Draco's lap. "Let's get through the war, and then you can ask me properly. OK?"

"Fine," he said, pulling her in for a deep kiss. "But I won't take no for an answer when I do."

"I wouldn't expect you to," she laughed.

Draco felt a deep sense of contentment settle over him and then exhaustion hit him as the night caught up to him. Realizing they were on the other side of the room from the bed, he gathered her in his arms and stood up, as she squealed. He just chuckled and carried her over to the bed before tossing her on it and yanking the covers back for them.

“In you get,” he said, and he watched with amusement as she summoned her wand from the other side of the room and transfigured her corset and knickers into comfy pajamas.

“I could never sleep in that,” she muttered.

“Shame,” he said. “I was a huge fan. But at least...” he slid his hands under her pajamas to check on something. “Braless and knickerless, just like I thought. I’ll take it.”

She laughed and nestled herself into him, as he pulled her close. He soon felt her breathing even out, and a sense of peace stole over him. Things had been precarious earlier in the evening, but all was right between them again and as it should be. It was only in the moments before he fell asleep too that he remembered he had never told her that Bellatrix invited him to her vault.

Dear Journal,

I'll spare you the details but I am, without a doubt, the luckiest bloke alive. Fuck Astoria. How could I ever love anybody else like this?

Chapter 25: Imperio

Chapter Notes

TW: THIS ENTIRE CHAPTER BLURS THE LINES OF CONSENT FOR SEX (it's questionable for both of them).

This chapter is very gray. Please mind the tags and warnings.

Summary of the chapter at the end for readers who are uncomfortable.

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

Hermione

“The last thing you need to learn to occlude is occlumency itself,” said Malfoy. “Well, that and my mother,” he added.

Hermione was curled up on the sofa in the sitting room, sipping a cup of coffee. Malfoy usually left after breakfast but had informed her he was taking the day off to work on occlumency. They both knew she needed to finish it before meeting with Harry and Ron, and they had to destroy the diadem before Malfoy went to Bellatrix’s vault.

“Do I need to occlude you too?” she asked.

“No,” he said simply. “You can show me and Tippy.”

She just stared at him. “But it will blow your cover! And it will endanger Tippy!”

“Granger, my cover will be blown soon anyway. And if you’re captured before the others know about me I will blow it myself to help you. As for Tippy, she’s under orders to apparate to a secure location the moment you’re no longer in this room and stay there until Mother or I call for her. There’s no need to occlude us. I only want you to occlude Mother.”

She nodded slowly. “OK, I think I can do that. I should be able to block her. I don’t see her that often.”

He gave her a quick nod. “Good.”

“How do I change the occlumency lessons though?”

“You’ll have to block them too. But there are so many of them it’s easier if you push me toward other things we’ve done together.” He smirked a little at this.

"So I take it the story is you've kept me a prisoner for sex?" She rolled her eyes a bit at this.

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm not going to love it if some other bloke sees memories of you naked, but if that's what you have to do to block the occlumency lessons, then yes. It's more important that they not know you're an occlumens."

Hermione wrinkled her nose at this, but then actually thought about it.

"The thing is," she said slowly, "it's an angle that could work but the memories aren't that convincing with the way we've acted together. You obviously care about me. I mean, I could show some of the fights we've had but the sex... It would never work."

"What are you on about?" he asked her curiously.

She shrugged. "I'm saying you could maintain your cover if I'm caught before you reveal yourself. You would be punished for not turning me in, but if we made it convincing that you just kept me here for sex they wouldn't necessarily think you're a traitor."

He was looking at her uncomfortably. "Other than our jaunt to see Potter, you're not going to leave this room until I have the horcrux, and we're about to lure him to Hogwarts anyway. It's not necessary."

"I thought you were the one who wanted me to fight like a Slytherin. You told me you wanted us to have every advantage."

She wasn't exactly sure why she was pushing for this. Malfoy was right that she wasn't supposed to come forward until he had already exposed his loyalties. But something told her they needed to do this. She had a lot of experience with plans going awry with Harry, and she was certain Malfoy would be executed if the Death Eaters learned he cared about her and had been helping her before they were ready for it.

Malfoy grimaced a bit but finally said, "What exactly do you have in mind then? I'm not going to torture you, and I'm not going to beat you. So don't even suggest it."

He gave her a fierce look at this, and she bit her lip and thought about it.

"You don't have to do those things," she said slowly. "You could just... imperius me. And obviously you would need to insult me while you do it. You would have to be in character."

He gaped at her now. "You want me to imperius you? Are you mad?"

She rolled her eyes. "I can throw off the imperius curse, Malfoy. I made sure I could do it before going on the run with Harry. But..." she trailed off.

"But..." he echoed.

"But I probably wouldn't. It would make it more convincing if I didn't."

She was watching him carefully, and she could see he was torn about it. One the one hand, she knew he didn't want to cast an unforgivable curse on her. On the other hand...

“You want to do it, don’t you?” she asked quietly.

Malfoy shifted uncomfortably. “No,” he said.

“Liar,” she said with a smirk, as she rose and walked over to him. “You like it when I turn over control to you. You like to tell me what to do during sex.”

His nostrils flared a bit. *Good*, she thought. She was annoying him. Maybe if she goaded him a little he would spill the truth.

“You’re the one who told me you like to be... instructed,” he said.

“And I do,” said Hermione evenly. “I’m not sure how this would be much different, other than the fact that you’ll have to insult me while you do it.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched. “It’s... well, it’s a form of submission we haven’t tried yet, Granger. Imperiused sex is something that’s occasionally.... done in certain circles. But it’s supposed to be a lot more intense than me giving you instructions and you following them. You always have the choice to say no when you’re not under the curse.”

She slid onto his lap, and ran her hands over his chest and through his hair. She could feel his heart beating rapidly and his breathing go shallow.

He wants to try it, she realized. He loved directing her, just like she loved being directed. *He wants to try it, but he feels ashamed by it.*

“It’s OK to want it, Malfoy,” she said softly. “It’s OK to admit that you’ve fantasized about it. I know you like being in control. And sex is the only time I really let you be in control.”

“I just...” he squeezed his eyes shut. “I shouldn’t want...”

“But you do,” she said. “And like I said, I can throw off the curse. You can’t actually make me do anything I don’t want to do. At most it will just make me more... compliant. And responsive.”

“Fuck,” he whispered. He still looked very torn about it.

“Tell you what,” she said fairly. “We can see if I can fabricate those memories first. I’ll try to manipulate them that way to tell that story. But if it’s not convincing, promise me you’ll consider it so I have some real memories to pull from. We know curating memories works. I’ve done it before with those eruptions, and trying to block months of you isn’t going to work.”

“But Granger...” he said.

“I’m serious, Malfoy. What if I walk into Death Eaters the minute I get to the castle? What if you’re surrounded when I’m captured? I don’t want you to blow your cover for me, not until it’s time for you to do it. This could buy you time.”

He was quiet for a long while as he thought about what she said.

"Fine," he said. "I'll do it if I have to. But try to tell the story without it first. And I want you to show me that you can throw it off before we do anything else with it."

She nodded, and in a moment he was in her head, looking for memories of how she was still alive.

She focused on their first meeting, when they fought about being Head Boy. To Hermione's relief, she managed to block Narcissa, despite him pushing hard to see if anybody else was there. Hermione instead focused on Tippy.

He pushed her for memories of what they did together, and she pulled him to the memory where they fought over her wand. She saw him as she exited the bathroom and rage enveloped her as she realized he had her wand. She walked up to him and smacked before he shoved her against the wall and pinned her in place, and now she tried to change the memory.

"You really think I'm going to let a little mudblood whore like you touch me?" he spat.

"Why am I here Malfoy?" she retorted. "Tell me why!"

"I would think that's obvious," he said, and she tried to envision him opening her robe and running his hand down her neck and breasts as she struggled.

"I find myself in need of some... entertainment. And since nobody but me knows you're alive, I think you will do nicely."

"I will *never*," she started.

But then she made him whisper, "*Imperio*," and Hermione tried to force her mind to go blank as she stilled and allowed him to feel her up.

Malfoy released her.

"Well?" she asked.

He bit his lip. "It was believable until you made me imperius you. Your mind wasn't blank enough. I could tell it wasn't real."

She gave him a knowing look. "That's why I think we need to do it for real a few times."

Another muscle in his jaw twitched and then he said, "Fine. Show me you can throw it off. I'm not doing this unless you really can get yourself out of it. And I won't do anything to you under the curse that we haven't already done in real life. Even if you can throw the curse, I'm afraid you won't be able to in the middle of sex. So nothing brand new. That's a line I'm not willing to cross."

She nodded.

"And you will need to imperius me first," he added.

"What? Why?" she asked, suddenly feeling more than a little nervous.

“Because there’s no way your wand will do it for me unless you have done it before,” he said simply.

“Can you throw it?” she asked cautiously.

Malfoy just looked her in the eye. “No.”

Hermione felt her heart pounding. “So you have to trust me to...”

He just raised an eyebrow. “Trust goes both ways, Granger.”

She nodded slowly, knowing he was right. “What does it... feel like? When you cast it I mean?” She knew he had done it before. He had held Rosmerta under the imperius curse for months during sixth year at Hogwarts.

“Like the other unforgivables it’s cumulative. The longer you hold it the more it gets inside of you. Short stints with the curse don’t do much, though there’s still a small exchange of course. It can be... addictive... exerting that much power over somebody else. There’s actually a kind of dark euphoria that hits when you first cast it. The really damaging stuff builds when you hold it for days or weeks though.”

Hermione remembered how wan he looked during sixth year. She had always assumed it was the stress from his mission, and she was sure that was part of it. But now she wondered if he had held the imperius curse on somebody else for far too long.

“Ok,” she said slowly. “I’ll do it. Just for a few minutes though.”

He handed her the wand and waited. She took a deep breath and said, “*Imperio*,” and she felt an odd rush of power and dark excitement roll through her as the curse connected and Malfoy went blank.

She decided to test it to give her wand a real feel for it.

“You will do as I say,” she said tentatively.

“Yes,” he muttered.

“You will answer when I call you.”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “Now go to your room and wait.”

He rose and walked through the door to his room.

“Malfoy, come back,” she said, and then he appeared a moment later.

She decided that was surely enough for her wand. She released the curse, and his eyes cleared. He didn’t say anything but just reached out, and she handed the wand back to him.

“Alright, then I want to see you throw the curse before I do it,” he said. “Hopefully your wand will cooperate now.”

She nodded as he raised his wand to her. “*Imperio!*” he cried.

She felt her mind still, a sense of dim awareness enveloping her.

“Stand on one foot,” said Malfoy.

She looked at him, and the tiny voice in her head that was still her remembered she didn’t want to do this. She just looked at him.

“Stand on one foot,” said Malfoy again.

She followed that tiny voice again and thought, *No, no, no*, “NO!” she finally shouted, and then the curse cleared.

He was studying her, his eyes a little wide. Slowly he nodded. “OK. The wand worked and you can throw it. Go put on that fucking robe then, and we’ll act out that scene.”

Hermione’s eyebrows shot up in surprise. “Now?”

“Yes, now. I’m annoyed enough to fight with you for real. If you really want to do this, then we’re going to do this the right way.”

Hermione felt relief and, to her surprise, excitement. She slipped into the bathroom, filled the tub and dunked herself to make it appear like she had just bathed. As she towed off and put on the robe, she thought to herself, *do I want Malfoy to imperius me?*

Yes, said a small voice. It was the same voice that got louder every time he ordered her around.

She knew this would be different. He would degrade her. He would have to in order to stay in character. But she got so turned on whenever he took control from her that she couldn’t help the dampness that started between her legs. *What will he make me do?*

Feeling more eager than she cared to admit, she opened the door to find Malfoy lounging there, a lascivious smile on his face as he looked her up and down.

“You giant prat!” she screeched as she strode toward him. “You took my wand!”

She reared back, and he allowed her to smack him, but then he grabbed her hand and shoved her against the wall, pinning her in place with her arms above her head and his knee between her legs.

“You dare touch me, you filthy little mudblood?” he snarled.

Hermione felt a shiver of something wash over her. He was being convincing. She forced herself to play along.

“When you take my wand, yes! You complete arse! What am I even doing here anyway?”

“Ah, you see, your blood traitor friend Weasley rescued you so gallantly. I was absolutely sure you were dead. But my elf had the foresight to follow and bring you back to me when his back was turned. It turns out you weren’t dead after all, and she healed you and then surprised me with you. I sent her back for Potter and Weasley of course, but they had already disappeared. So it’s just you I’m afraid. Now that you’re here... well I should probably turn you in. I will eventually. But first... I find myself in need of some... entertainment.”

He gripped her throat and pressed her head back to the wall before running his hands down her body and squeezing her breast hard.

Hermione gasped. “How would your elf know...?” she asked in what she hoped was a scared voice.

“Ah, she’s heard all about Potter’s mudblood,” he said. “And she knows I’ve been... stressed. She’s an excellent servant and thought this might relieve some tension. Have you enjoyed getting to know her?”

“Malfoy, I...”

“I suggest you call me ‘sir,’ or ‘my Lord,’ unless you want to make this harder on yourself.”

“Never,” she snarled, and he raised his hand back to her throat and held it there.

“That’s a shame, Mudblood. I like my women compliant. And I can be benevolent when I get what I want.”

At this, Hermione spit in his face. She saw a look of shock and then real anger cross his eyes, and she suddenly wondered if she had gone too far.

“Have it your way then,” he snarled, “*Imperio!*”

Hermione felt her mind go blissfully blank. She could still hear Malfoy’s words, but they caused no emotion, no reaction. She ignored the little voice in her head that was still herself.

“You will only address me as ‘sir’ or ‘my Lord,’ he said.

“Yes sir.”

“You will not struggle. You will not protest.”

“Yes sir.”

“You will try to please me. You will *want* to please me.”

“Yes sir,” and for the first time she felt something. She felt the urge to please him.

“You will answer my questions honestly.”

“Yes sir,” she said eagerly.

“Very good. Now tell me. Are you a virgin?”

“No sir,” she said, hoping that he was pleased by this.

She saw that he smirked at her, and she felt relief. He seemed pleased. “I thought not. It will be Potter then or perhaps Weasley. I admit I’m curious to see what you’ve learned from them. Now then, take your robe off.”

Her fingers moved of their own accord as she did what he said. She felt no shame, no embarrassment as she disrobed in front of him. All she felt was a sense of wanting to do as he said. “Does this please you, sir?” she asked.

“Very much,” he said cordially. “Now get on your knees, legs apart.”

She kneeled in front of him and spread her legs.

“Unbutton my trousers for me,” he ordered. “Take out my cock.”

She reached up and did as he requested. “Am I giving you pleasure sir?” she asked.

“You will be in a moment. You’ll have to try very hard if I’m going to get pleasure from that mudblood mouth of yours.”

“Yes sir. I will do my best, sir.”

“Now suck me off as well as you can. And swallow when I come.”

“Yes sir,” she said, and she took him in her mouth, and somehow she knew what to do. She licked and sucked and teased his cock, and she looked up to see that he was enjoying it. She hoped she was doing it right.

“I want to fuck your mouth Mudblood. Open wide.”

She did, and he started thrusting into her mouth.

“Take my balls,” he gasped. She did, and soon he was coming in her mouth. She swallowed as he directed.

He stepped back and looked at her. She was still on her knees, with her legs apart, exactly as he had told her to be at the beginning.

“Did I give you pleasure sir?” she asked in a small voice.

“You did,” he said with a smirk. “And as I told you, I’m benevolent when my women follow orders. You may not touch yourself. But you will have an orgasm. Now.”

And then, the most curious thing happened. With no external stimulation at all, Hermione felt that familiar heat and snap, and she moaned loudly as an orgasm washed over her. She

saw Malfoy's eyes widen a little in amazement that it had actually worked, but she felt nothing except for a dull throbbing from the aftereffects and the hope that she had pleased him.

"Is that what you wanted sir?" she asked.

"Let's find out, shall we? Put your fingers in your cunt and then show me," he ordered. She swiped between her legs and then raised her fingers for his inspection.

"Remarkable," he said, with one eyebrow raised. "You're very wet. Well that will come in handy next time. I won't have to stimulate you at all. Very well," and then Hermione felt the imperius curse lift, and she stared at him in amazement.

"I'm not going to keep you under it all the time, Mudblood," he said. "I want you to know what you did to me."

Then he gave her one last evil smile as he turned and strode out of her room.

Hermione collapsed.

Draco

Draco walked next door to his room. He couldn't decide if he was excited or disgusted by what they had just done. *Probably both*, he thought. He decided to give her a few moments to compose herself before checking on her, especially if she was finishing any part of the scene herself.

He couldn't believe they had just done that. They had both been acting, but they had also been... convincing. Almost too convincing. His stomach rolled as he remembered calling her a mudblood and her spitting on him. That had shocked him and actually made him angry, but it pushed him enough to actually cast the curse on her.

When he had imperiused her the change had been nothing short of remarkable. She went calm, docile, and vacant until he ordered her to have the desire to please him. Then something shifted, and she practically presented herself to him, with no embarrassment or hesitation. It was one of the most erotic things he had ever seen, and he couldn't help but be really turned on by it.

Then at the end he told her to have an orgasm without touching herself, and he was shocked that it actually worked. He had heard whispers of this phenomenon from other Death Eaters and one or two Slytherins he knew who enjoyed intense dominant/submissive sex, but he hadn't really believed it was possible until he saw it with his own eyes. Fuck, if it wasn't incredible.

He just wished he didn't have to be so cruel to her while he did it.

He sighed and walked toward their connecting door, opening it cautiously. He saw Granger had put her clothes back on and had settled back onto the sofa. She gave him a tight smile as he walked in.

"Come here," he said, walking toward her and pulling her up to hug her hard. He felt the tension drain out of her.

"You know I didn't mean any of it."

She nodded, but didn't say anything. He felt terrible now.

"And we don't have to do it again," he added.

She pulled back. "Yes we do. At least a few more times. You set it up well. I can pretend to be scared of you. I'll resist less next time. And then less and less until finally I don't."

He cupped her chin. "Granger, I don't like saying those things to you."

She gave him a wry smile. "Just make sure you keep telling me that OK? I think it's important we continue. I just... I don't know, I have a feeling we may need it."

His chest tightened at this, but he nodded. They were silent for a moment as he pulled her onto the couch with him. "How was the imperius for you? What was it like?" he asked hesitantly.

She furrowed her brow at this. "I knew what you were saying. And I do remember it. The whole thing was odd though. I didn't feel anything at all until you told me to desire something. And then that was the only thing I felt. Even at the end, when I... you know. It was just a physical sensation. I didn't feel any pleasure from it though."

Draco felt jarred by this news. *She had felt nothing?* She had looked at him like he was the most desirable thing in the world. It was almost impossible to believe she hadn't enjoyed it too. *But it was all because I ordered her to please me.*

"So you didn't enjoy it at all then," he clarified.

She wrinkled her nose. "That wasn't the point."

"I don't like that Granger."

She sighed. "I'm sure if you ordered me to feel pleasure I would. Probably more than I ever have before."

Something in Draco stirred at this news.

"But I don't think you should order it," she added. "That's not the point. You're not supposed to care about me or what I feel."

Draco felt his bubble pop at this.

“Fine,” he sighed. “We’ll do it a few more times until you have enough to pull from. Let’s keep practicing occlumency.”

And so they did. They worked the rest of the morning, and he was pleased to find that Granger’s blocking was good enough to keep his mother out of it entirely. And when he watched the memory they had staged earlier that morning he had to admit she had a point. He could sense the passiveness the imperius curse caused in her mind, yet he could still see and hear everything he had said and made her do. It was entirely convincing because it was real.

As they were finishing lunch she said, “Let’s do another then, if you can go again.”

He just stared at her.

“You need to change clothes though,” she added. “It needs to look like a different day.”

“Hermione, are you sure?”

She seemed surprised by the use of her first name, but she just nodded. “Yes. I want to finish occlumency. I want to create this story. I’m going to plead with you this time. I’m going to tell you no. You have to do it anyway.”

He swallowed but nodded, and then he rose to head into his room to change.

He took a deep breath and tried to sort his feelings. He was nauseous by the words he was about to use against her. But to see her like that again so soon... he shuddered and felt his cock twitch.

“Salazar help me,” he muttered.

He quickly changed and then opened the door. Granger spun around with a wary look on her face.

“Malfoy,” she said, and he stalked toward her.

“What did I tell you to call me Mudblood?” he said.

She backed away from him until she hit the bed, and he gave her his most evil smile, trying to ignore the feelings of distaste for what they were doing. He placed his hand around her throat again and pushed her back on the bed.

“Address me properly,” he snarled.

“My lord,” she breathed. Something in him lurched at this.

He started to stroke her neck.

“There now, that wasn’t so hard was it?”

She just swallowed, but didn't say anything.

"Answer me, Mudblood."

"No... sir," she said, but she glared at him as she did it.

"You always were a quick learner," he said carelessly, as he removed his hand. "Now let's see what else you've learned. Strip for me."

"No," she said.

He sneered at her and raised his wand.

"Malfoy, please.... Don't..." she started.

"I said *STRIP!*" he shouted. "*Imperio!*"

Draco felt that familiar rush of dark magic as the curse connected, and she immediately went still and expressionless. Draco tried to suppress his excitement. He felt dirty for wanting this, for enjoying it. He forced himself to focus on the narrative they were creating.

"You will address me as 'sir' or 'my lord.'"

"Yes sir."

"You will not protest. You will not struggle."

"Yes sir."

"Your greatest desire will be to give me pleasure."

"Yes sir," and now her posture shifted toward him, and her eyes lit with that same expression, as though she wanted him more than anything.

"Please sir," she purred. "Please tell me what you desire."

Fuck this is even more intense than last time.

"I wish for you to strip. Slowly. Make it worth my time, Mudblood."

"Yes my lord. Anything my lord."

Then she stood and slowly lifted her T-shirt, revealing a rather pretty bra beneath.

"I see my elf is dressing you as I have requested," he said.

"Yes my lord," she said, "I wish to please you."

"Your pants then," he said. "Take them off and then let me look at you."

She did and then stood there as he circled her, touching her body lightly.

“I want your nipples hard and your cunt wet.”

He watched in slight disbelief as her nipples peaked under the fabric of her bra.

“Take your knickers off,” he said. “And show me how wet you are.”

She slid her underwear down and then touched herself for a moment before holding her hand up to show him. He nearly shuddered with anticipation when he saw the slickness on her fingers.

I shouldn't be enjoying this, he thought. Maybe I really am a twisted, evil bastard.

But he couldn't help it. Even though he knew she wasn't in her own mind, she was so beautiful and so compliant like this.

“Please sir, am I wet enough?” she asked in that small voice.

Fucking hell.

“Perhaps not,” he said, and he forced himself to smirk at her.

“I wish only to please you,” then to Draco's utter shock she began to moan and shudder, and he knew she was having another unstimulated orgasm simply to make herself even wetter for him.

Draco couldn't stand it anymore. He needed to take her.

“Turn around, bend over the bed, and spread your legs,” he ordered.

She did as he said, and he immediately buried his cock into her, balls deep. He hissed in pleasure at it. She was tighter than normal, with no prior stimulation herself other than that created by her mind.

“I'm going to fuck you now,” he said, and he was no longer pretending.

“I want you to show me how good I am at fucking you. I want you to feel it. I want you to know what I'm doing to you.”

And at this, it was like the dam burst, and she started to moan and shatter, all along his cock. Suddenly she was Granger again, able to feel it because he had ordered it, but still so pliant and giving him that positive feedback he craved from her. She wasn't holding back, and he wasn't either as he took her fast and hard.

It was arguably the best sex he had ever had, and he desperately wanted to go in another position too, but the temptation to kiss her and touch her intimately was too strong. He just let himself feel it like this, and soon he was spilling himself into her, forcing himself back into character as he did so.

“There's some pure seed to coat that dirty cunt of yours,” he said as he stepped back.

"Thank you, my lord," she said, and Draco felt his cock twitch again. She hadn't moved, and she was still bent over the bed. He took one last long look before releasing the curse, and then she gasped and sank down onto the floor next to the bed. She hid her face from him, and he said nothing more as he turned away and walked out of her room.

As soon as he got to his room he exhaled.

Holy hell, what am I doing? How am I enjoying any part of this?

He knew he shouldn't like it. He *knew* it. But he liked being dominant in bed, and this took it to a whole new level. Having to maintain a Death Eater persona through it was nearly excruciating though. He supposed it was some small relief that he didn't enjoy *that* part. Not at all.

He sighed and walked back into her room. She had cleaned herself up and was sitting on the bed. He gave her a grim look.

"How many more of these are you going to want to do Granger?" he asked. "Because this is just..." he trailed off and closed his eyes.

She stood and walked over to him.

"I rather thought you would enjoy it," she said. His eyes flew open to stare at her.

"I don't like calling you... that word. I hate degrading you. That shit doesn't turn me on."

She ran her hands up his chest and laced her fingers around his neck. "But the rest of it?"

He closed his eyes as he brought his hands to her waist. He could hardly bear to admit this to her. She seemed to sense his hesitation.

"You like it, don't you?"

He felt miserable. But he owed it to her to be honest. He nodded.

"I shouldn't. I know that. It's just... you're uninhibited. There's no awkwardness, no hesitation. It's total..."

"Submission," she supplied.

He swallowed and nodded, his eyes still shut.

"I liked it too," she said. And now his eyes flew open to stare at her. "At the end, I mean. When you let me feel pleasure too. You set it up well — it wasn't like you cared about me, it sounded like you wanted to taunt me. But it worked. I could enjoy it. And it was... more intense than normal."

"Fuck," he muttered, now totally confused about how to feel. If she didn't hate it then maybe he wasn't a bastard for enjoying parts of it too.

"Look," she said. "We can do it two or three more times. And we can make the story moves along so eventually I cave without the imperius curse because it's easier to go along with it. And for you, maybe you move from being openly cruel to simply amused that you got Hermione Granger to submit to you. You did say you would be benevolent if I followed orders."

He swallowed and nodded, committing himself to find some way to move past the term 'mudblood' in their next encounter. She didn't need too many memories with that word in it. Surely just a handful would be enough.

"Another round this evening then," she said. "You need some time for potions today too."

He stared at her.

"What?" she teased. "Won't you be up for it?"

"Three times in one day is..."

"A personal record, I know," she retorted. "But I'm in a hurry to finish this. We'll be meeting with Harry and Ron to destroy the diadem on Saturday, and I may need help occluding that too because I suspect it will need to be fully blocked. I like working chronologically. I need to get this story arc with you in place first."

"Fine," he said, starting to relax a little. She seemed much less disturbed about it the second time compared to the first, and she was even suggesting they go again. He thought it must be because he figured out how to make her feel it too. He mentally committed to making sure he gave her that order again. Between that and moving on from the word 'mudblood,' he would be more comfortable with it as well. "When?"

She shrugged. "Surprise me. But make sure you change clothes again first. Now I need to work out how I'm getting to Harry and Ron in a few days, but I'll see you this evening for another go."

"What do you mean?" he asked, suddenly diverted. "I'll apparate you."

"Hmmm perhaps," she said loftily. "We'll see."

Fucking hell, he thought. This witch was going to be the death of him.

Several hours later Draco was in the library and studying potions, dressed in new clothes, when Tippy appeared. "Master Draco ordered Tippy to inform him when Miss was..."

"Yes, thank you Tippy," he said quickly. Draco immediately rose and put down his book, steeling himself for what he was about to do, but also feeling himself get excited about it. He strode into his room and shucked his robes off and rolled up the sleeves of his shirt to make sure his Dark Mark was exposed. He walked through their connecting door and heard the telltale sounds of a splash that immediately got him hard.

He opened the bathroom door quietly and found Granger there in her bath, her eyes closed, as she leaned back.

“Enjoying yourself, Mudblood?” he asked.

She gave an honest gasp and her eyes flew open. Draco lounged against the doorframe as he watched her.

“Malfoy...” she started, and he snarled at her. “Sir,” she amended.

“Better, Mudblood,” he said.

She was watching him cautiously, and she finally said, “Why are you doing this to me?”

“Because it amuses me,” he said. “I like knowing that I can put my cock into Potter’s mudblood whenever I want to.”

“But you haven’t beaten me...” she said slowly. “I thought you would.”

He sneered at her. “And why would I do that? Do you think it will make it easier for me to come if you have a black eye and a split lip? No, I prefer my witches pristine. That’s why I’ve been allowing you to enjoy my hospitality. I’ve been generous to you, have I not?”

Her eyes flashed in anger, but she said, “Yes... sir.”

“Look at that, the little mudblood can be taught. I’m well pleased. In fact, I’m so pleased I’ll throw you a bone, figuratively speaking.”

“You’ll leave me alone?” she asked hopefully.

He snorted. “Hardly. But I do notice you become more... objectionable when I call you a mudblood, even though we both know you are. No, my gift for you tonight is a new title. I’m certainly not going to call you by your first name, but I believe I can manage to call you Granger.”

“Does that mean I can call you Malfoy?”

He sneered. “I am your lord. I am in line for a title. I have wealth and power. You are entirely at my mercy, and you will address me properly. It would be best if you do not forget that. You, however, have no other title except for mudblood. I am being generous by calling you by your name.”

“Yes... sir,” she said.

“Good. Now then Granger, since we’re being so friendly tonight, I want you to stand up so I can see you.”

She sank down further into the tub.

“Granger, do as I say or I’ll use my wand.”

“Sir...” she said in a meek voice. “Please, sir, I don’t want...”

He raised her wand and shouted “*Imperio!*”

She immediately stilled, and Draco felt the excitement flood him again. He could call her Granger now and stay in character. And soon, he would find a way to let her feel it too.

“Do you know what pleases me?” he asked her.

“Yes sir,” she said.

“And what is it?”

“You want me to be docile and not fight you.”

“Precisely. And I want your greatest desire to be my pleasure.”

He said the magic words, and she raised herself out of the tub just enough to show him her tits.

“Very good, Granger,” he murmured. “You’re learning.”

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

“Now then, I want you to stand so I may see you.”

She did, and Draco watched as the water ran down her body. His cock twitched violently. He walked forward and fondled one breast. She pressed it into his palm.

“Do you like this, Granger?” he asked.

“If it pleases you sir,” she responded.

He considered her and chose his next words very carefully. “It will be most amusing if you enjoy pleasuring me. I think it will make that enormous brain of yours misfire when I release you from the curse. You won’t know what to think. You’ll feel disgusted with yourself that you liked it so much, but you’ll want it again. And it may make you more... cooperative next time. So yes... I want you to pleasure me, and I want you to enjoy doing it.”

She practically melted in his palm and moaned.

Fucking yes, he suddenly thought. But he couldn’t lose focus. He needed to stay in character at least a little longer.

He released her breast, and she whimpered at the loss of contact. He raised an eyebrow at her. “Fascinating...” he murmured. “You’re panting for it.”

“Yes my lord,” she moaned.

“Dry off and join me in the sitting room. I want you naked.”

“Yes sir,” she said, as he turned and left her, settling himself on the couch and taking a deep breath while he waited. A few moments later, a dry but entirely naked Granger walked into

the room, her eyes fixed on him and looking needy with her want.

“You will kneel and kiss my Dark Mark,” he said with a smirk. She approached him and sank down on her knees, pressing her lips against his forearm reverently. “How I wish I could show this memory to the Dark Lord, Granger. He would be most pleased.”

“Yes my lord,” she murmured.

“Now Granger, pour me a firewhiskey from the sideboard over there.”

She rose, and Draco admired her gorgeous arse as she did what he ordered and brought the glass back over to him.

“Sit on my lap and bring the glass to my lips,” he said.

She settled into his lap and held the glass for him as he sipped. Finally he dismissed her and unfastened his pants while she returned the glass.

“I want your nipples hard and your cunt wet, but no touching yourself,” he said, and he watched her body flush as she obeyed. This time she moaned at the sensation that washed over her, and her hands twitched as though she wanted to disobey him, but the curse wouldn’t permit it.

“Come over here and ride my cock,” he said. “And touch your tits while you do it.”

She approached him eagerly and immediately straddled him and started to ride, fondling her breasts as she did it. The sounds she was making were incredible, and Draco couldn’t believe how hard she was going. He knew he wasn’t going to last, but he didn’t need to. He had stretched this out long enough.

“I want you to come on my cock,” he groaned, and immediately she started to do it. The sensations of her orgasm were too much, and he spilled himself into her.

“Thank you sir,” she gasped as she finally stilled.

She was still straddling him when he released the curse.

“Hey Granger,” he smirked.

She choked and scrambled off of him, as though disgusted at what she had just done. He forced himself to laugh at her.

“Oh this is going to be so much fun,” he said. “I can’t wait to fuck with your head. I’ll catch you later Granger. You should have another bath. You’re dirty again.”

He walked out of the room, shut the door, counted to ten, and then immediately walked back in and strode toward her to pull her in for a deep kiss, causing her to yelp in surprise.

“Malfoy, what are you...” she asked.

“Fuck me, that was so hot,” he said as he peppered kisses all over her. “But I just wanted to kiss you. I wanted to touch you. And I couldn’t let myself do it.”

She made a contented sound and let him kiss her. He pulled back to stare at her, and he searched her face, desperate to know if she was OK and hoping beyond hope that she had enjoyed parts of it too.

She gave him a small smile. “You’re right it was hot.”

He exhaled in relief.

“I’ll do it one more time,” he said. “And then I want you to cooperate so we can move on from the imperius.”

“I thought you liked it?” she said in a hesitant voice.

He furrowed his brow. “I do. I *really* do. I like it more than I should. But I also love sex with you being you. I’m open to… experimenting with the imperius after we’ve set this story, but I don’t want it to become an every time thing. Besides, it’s dark magic. You know it can become… addictive if I cast it too much. I don’t want to need the imperius to enjoy sex with you.”

She gave him a brilliant smile at this, and something inside of Draco finally eased. “I think… I think that’s a good idea. It can be something we play with once in awhile. I trust you, and it’s very intense for me in a good way. But I also have trouble sorting out the things I actually like from the compulsions of the curse.”

“Good,” he said with relief. “So one more time, and then we’ll do a few where you submit for real, and I’m a bit of an arse to you but not completely horrid. That should set it up.”

“Thank you, Malfoy,” she said. “Seriously, I know I’m asking a lot of you, and I’m sorry for that but…”

He just shook his head. “Don’t apologize. You’re trying to close all the loopholes in your occlumency and protect me, and… well, I get it because I want to protect you too. More than anything. And honestly, the fact that you care enough and trust me enough to let me do this to you means a lot.”

She gave him a soft smile, and pulled him in for one more kiss.

“Now love,” he said. “Let’s go to bed. Naked, if you want,” he said, eyeing her still-bare body.

She just rolled her eyes and moved toward her dresser to pull out some pajamas. He gave a dramatic sigh, and she laughed.

A few minutes later, he was pulling her close, and they were settling in, as he thought about the next scene he would need to stage. As she drifted off to sleep, it came to him.

Chapter End Notes

Summary: Draco tells Hermione her last task at occlumency is to occlude their occlumency lessons themselves. To do this Draco suggests pushing the legilimens to the times they have had sex to craft the narrative that Draco kept Hermione as a prisoner and didn't turn her in because he wanted to use her for sex.

Hermione points out that this plan isn't realistic because he's too caring for her in those memories, and she suggests he imperius her, and they stage some scenes to give her real/convincing memories she can pull from. She wanted to occlude their occlumency lessons and also protect Draco's cover as a Death Eater, without having to storytell through every encounter she's had with him.

Draco is obviously uncomfortable with this plan, but she pushes him to do it anyway. He eventually agrees and finds he really enjoys imperiused sex with her, even though he feels incredibly guilty about it. There are multiple sex scenes where he is pretending to be a Death Eater (meaning he degrades her), and she's totally submissive to him. They do talk about it a lot and try to set boundaries with each other, etc., but there's also a lot of guilt and discomfort that they work through in this chapter.

Chapter 26: Draco the Death Eater

Chapter Summary

TW: AGAIN, THIS CHAPTER BLURS THE LINES OF CONSENT FOR SEX.

There are more Draco-as-Death-Eater scenes, though they only use the imperius curse in the first scene. Please mind the tags and warnings.

Summary at the end for readers who are uncomfortable

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione

Hermione woke up groggily. She turned to the clock on her nightstand and groaned when she saw it was the middle of the night.

“Rise and shine Mudblood,” said a dark voice from the shadows, as a hand started to creep under her top.

Malfoy, she realized. *In character*. He had called her a mudblood to let her know he was about to imperius her for the final time. Her breath hitched.

“I thought you were calling me Granger... sir,” she said in a small voice, trying to sound docile.

“Ah yes, how forgetful of me,” he said as he stepped closer, and Hermione saw he was fully dressed, standing over her now.

What the hell, Malfoy? she wondered. It was two o’clock in the morning. Then she remembered he had a middle-of-the-night step for *felix*. He must have gotten up for that. She realized the late hour gave her a reason to protest.

“My lord,” she said quietly, “it’s very late.”

“But I’m awake,” he said. “And you are here for one purpose.” His hand reached her breast and squeezed. She gasped.

“But sir...”

"You should remember, Granger, that if I tire of you I will inform the Dark Lord that you are here. Is that what you want?"

"No my lord, but..."

"You still wish to resist me?" he asked, and he pinched a nipple. She gasped again.

"It's just so late, and I'm so very tired..." she said.

"*Imperio,*" he whispered, and Hermione felt the familiar blankness wash over her.

"You will do as I say. Your greatest desire will be to pleasure me," he said.

"Yes sir," and Hermione suddenly ached for his approval. She needed to make sure he was pleased with her. She would do anything.

"Will you tell me what you want, my lord? You have wanted me naked before. Is that what you want tonight?" and Hermione began to pull the silky pajama top over her head.

"Fascinating..." he murmured. "She's trainable. Yes, I want you to be naked."

Hermione hurried to remove the rest of her clothing, and she laid down, her full attention on him, hoping that he was happy with what she had done so far.

"I want you to feel pleasure too," he said. "I want you to feel pleasure when you follow my orders. I can see it is making you more compliant when you're outside of the curse."

A different kind of warmth washed over her now, something that was from her own body. She could feel it. She didn't just want his approval, but his approval turned her on. It made her want him. It made her insides coil with anticipation.

She keened.

"Fuck, Granger," said Malfoy roughly. Some distant part of Hermione's brain recognized the phrase as the real Malfoy and not his Death Eater persona. She knew he was turned on. She was pleasing him, and it made her unbearably excited.

"How does my lord want me?" she asked.

Instead of answering her, he grabbed her hips and slid her to the edge of the bed until her bum was resting there. She spread her legs for him, and she felt Malfoy's hands at her knees, moving up to her center.

"Does my lord wish to tie my hands?" she asked.

His hands suddenly stilled, and in the darkness she saw his eyes had gone wide. He swallowed before assuming a casual voice.

"Bondage, Granger? I never would have guessed."

“I only wish to please my lord,” she said meekly.

“Fuck,” he muttered, and again that tiny voice in Hermione’s head that was still herself told her that this was the real Malfoy speaking. “Later, Granger,” he finally said, and Hermione felt a moment of anxiety that she had done something wrong. “I don’t wish to delay tonight. I wish you to lie just like this.”

She quickly stilled, eager to make up for her mistake, and Malfoy ran a hand all over her body. She shuddered as he dipped his own finger inside of her. “You’re already wet for me, Granger,” he said, and the approval in his voice made her even wetter.

“It is what my lord desires,” she murmured.

He didn’t respond, but she heard him unbuckling his belt, and it made her so excited she instinctively arched for him.

“Goddammit,” he said quietly, before he was at her opening, pushing himself in. She moaned at the intrusion, feeling herself stretch to accommodate him, and soon he was moving fast.

“I’m going to fuck you just like this,” he said, and Hermione very quickly felt her orgasm approaching. She knew the angle was good and the speed and pressure were incredible, but mostly she knew she was splayed out for him, and he wanted her like this.

“You’re fucking tits, Granger,” he groaned, and Hermione was suddenly cognizant of her breasts bouncing up and down with his motions. She could tell he liked it, and she relished the feeling. “I’ll keep you here just for those tits and that arse,” he said.

A tiny part of her brain again warned her that Malfoy was forgetting himself

“I only wish to please my lord,” she said.

The word ‘lord,’ seemed to remind Malfoy that he was supposed to be a Death Eater. “You are most pleasing when you remember your place. I am your lord. You are here to give me what I want, whenever I want it.”

“Yes sir, of course sir,” she said quickly.

“I want to feel you come tight on my cock. Come. Now,” he said, and Hermione’s body immediately obeyed. She felt herself coming completely undone, though she also forced herself to clench her inner walls while it happened, tightening down on his cock just like he wanted.

“Fuck,” he moaned, and then he was spilling himself for the fourth time in twenty-four hours. “Take it just like that,” he said, and Hermione automatically tilted her hips up in a futile effort to keep his seed inside of her.

“Is my lord pleased?” she asked breathlessly.

“Most pleased, Granger. You’ll be a good girl for me now, won’t you?”

At the words, Hermione started to moan again. “I’ll do anything to be your good girl, my lord.”

He gave her a dark smirk. “Then the next time I ask you to follow my orders, I want you to do it without the imperius curse. I want you to show me how grateful you are for the opportunity I’m giving you.”

“Yes sir,” she said quickly.

“Good,” and he released her. Hermione immediately felt her head clear, though she remembered everything.

“Don’t forget your promise, Granger,” he said, as he turned and walked out of her room, leaving Hermione behind to clean up the mess.

Dear Rose,

In the spirit of occlumency training I’ll tell you that I am curating my memories again, but this time Malfoy is helping me. We are approaching the day when we are going to go after the last things we need to do to defeat You-Know-Who and hopefully beat him once and for all.

The plan that’s developing is... complicated. And so many things could go wrong that I’m afraid I’ll be captured and your father’s cover will be blown before we’re ready. If that happens it’s likely my mind will be searched for how I survived, and they will see Malfoy in my memories. I’ve been here for so long I can’t hope to block him out entirely.

We are staging memories to convince whoever is looking that he kept me captive for sex and not to help me and Harry Potter. It’s not flattering for either one of us, but our hope is it will give me enough material to block the truth and keep him from getting killed.

When we practiced I was able to storytell through it to some degree, but envisioning torture is too painful. And I don’t think I could imagine your father torturing me convincingly. He would never do it. He would rather die than hurt me. So instead, I tried to imagine him casting the imperius curse on me to force me to have sex, but Malfoy could tell the memory was false. My mind wasn’t blank enough to make it convincing. Besides, nobody can do condescension quite like your father. I didn’t exactly nail the set up for that scene either.

My solution was to have Malfoy cast the imperius curse on me for real then stage a few different scenes. This way I have real material to pull from. To keep both of us safe the person searching me can’t know I’m an occlumens. Staging the scenes that way pushed me into the correct headspace for it, and Malfoy thought it was convincing when he reviewed my memories later. No Death Eater would ever think I had let Malfoy do that to me willingly, and he stayed in character throughout.

I want to be clear with you that this was all my idea. I have trained to throw the imperius curse, so he could not force me to do anything I really didn’t want to do. And I trust him

more than anybody in the world. He would never hurt me with it. He made me show him I could throw it before he did it. Once I was under it, he was careful, he was fast, and he didn't do anything to me that we haven't done before in real life, just in case I got lost in the curse and couldn't consent to something new. There was even one instance when I suggested something new while under the curse, and he chose not to do it even though I'm pretty sure he wanted to. He was as respectful as he could be while still maintaining his cover.

It gave me enough material to work with, and in an odd way it deepened our relationship. Not to overshare with you, but having sex that way is incredibly intense. And while neither of us enjoyed the things he had to say to me to stay in character, I think we both rather enjoyed the act itself, especially in the later scenes as we got used to it.

We've progressed the narrative to the point where I will submit to him without the curse being cast on me first. So we will do a few more like that before we are finished with this. I only hope it will be enough to protect him.

After Hermione had requested another pain potion for soreness, Malfoy put his foot down about continuing their sex marathon at the pace she had originally intended.

"You need a break," he said. "We'll resume in a bit. But I'm not fucking you again until you've rested," he said.

"I'll be fine in the morning," she insisted, but he just glared at her until she said, "Alright, fine. Have it your way then. We'll go again after dinner tomorrow."

He nodded and then pulled her close to him before immediately falling asleep.

The following evening couldn't come quickly enough, as far as Hermione was concerned. They were through the imperius stage, but there were still a few scenes she wanted to create. To make this work she needed to appear meek and Malfoy indulgent, in a dangerous, Death Eater sort of way. Hermione felt it was crucial because there was so much she had to block about him. It would be a hundred times easier if she had a series of real memories she could show, instead of manipulating existing ones. Malfoy-as-Death-Eater had become her home base for the purposes of this portion of her occlumency training.

As dinner wound down, Hermione shoo'd Malfoy back to his room.

"Give me ten minutes," she said.

Malfoy nodded, and Hermione moved to her dresser to pull out the thing Tippy had brought to her earlier that morning.

It really is incredible, she thought, as she touched it. It's a shame we're using it for a fake memory. But then again, it would be the perfect prop. It would prove to whoever watching

her mind that Hermione Granger had finally conceded defeat.

She shrugged out of her clothes and pulled on the outfit, taking a quick look at herself in the mirror before moving to the bed.

Malfoy's going to die, she thought, with a slight smirk. But then she smoothed her face. She was supposed to be meek.

A moment later the door to her room opened, and Malfoy came striding in before coming to a complete halt as he stared at her. Hermione was sitting on the bed, her legs crossed, wearing a teddy with sheer lace that showed her nipples. She had chosen Slytherin green.

Malfoy swallowed hard and was openly staring at her.

"Does this please you my lord?" she murmured as she put her hands before her back and arched toward him.

"I am... well pleased," Malfoy croaked.

Hermione dropped her eyes as he tried to compose himself.

"I see you have followed my instructions tonight. You're wearing what I ordered."

She inhaled at this. The outfit was a total surprise, but he was smart to play it off like it was something he told her to do.

"Yes, my lord," she said, with her eyes still on the floor.

He walked toward her slowly, and Hermione risked raising her eyes to look at him. His pupils were blown with want as he surveyed her.

"Are you finally willing to follow my orders without protest then?"

"Yes, my lord," she said, looking down at the floor again.

"And what is it you will do?" he asked.

"Anything you wish, my lord."

"And what do you desire more than anything?"

"Your pleasure, my lord."

"We are learning then. Ten points to Gryffindor. And twenty points to Slytherin for taming the little lioness."

Hermione risked a glance at him.

"If I may say... my lord has such exceptional taste in lingerie," she said, and this seemed to snap him out of it, though he was still staring at her as though trying to understand exactly how the whole thing *worked*.

"I have exquisite taste in many things, Granger," he said. "I no longer wish to see you in muggle clothes. You will wear lingerie or nothing in my presence at all times. I will be sure to provide you with an adequate... selection. Tippy will inform you what you are to wear when I come to you."

"Yes, my lord," she breathed.

"And because you have been so good at following instructions tonight, I'll give you a choice. Shall I fuck you from behind, or shall you ride me?"

Hermione's breath hitched, and she bit her lip.

"If it would please you... sir. I have... enjoyed it... from behind."

He gave her a dangerous smirk.

"You see Granger? This arrangement can be mutually beneficial for us both. Now then... prepare yourself. I will... observe."

Hermione slipped one finger inside the lace, and it came back slick.

"Please sir," she said. "I am ready now."

He cocked his head at her as though considering this.

"Very well, then," he said. "If there's friction that will be your problem and not mine. Up on the bed and get on your knees then."

Hermione narrowed her eyes a little. They usually did this standing, but she complied as she got on her knees and turned to look at him over her shoulder. He was unbuckling his belt and moving his pants down, stroking his cock as he looked at her.

"Legs apart," he said roughly, and she felt the bed dip as he climbed up behind her.

He traced the scrap of lace crossing her arse and then moved it aside before pushing himself in. Hermione let out an involuntary groan, and without even realizing it, she dropped her head to the mattress.

"Just like that my little lioness," he said. "Bow before my cock." Then he shoved it in farther, until she could feel his balls against her bum, and Hermione felt herself lose all sense of direction.

In and out he moved, quickly picking up the pace as she became increasingly wet, until he was grunting with the effort.

"Come around my cock," he ordered, and Hermione arched her back to give him access to that deliciously deep spot, and almost immediately she felt herself falling apart.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck..." he groaned, as he released himself into her. He pulled out and climbed off the bed as Hermione collapsed.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Granger," he said lightly. "I'll be back soon."

She didn't look at him as she heard the door open and close. She just waved her hand to make the mess disappear. A few moments later it opened again, and Malfoy was grabbing her and flipping her over to her back as he attacked her mouth, her neck, and her chest with his lips.

"Granger," he rasped between kisses. "Where the *fuck* did you get this... thing? Holy fuck, it might be the greatest thing I've ever seen. Except when you're naked, of course."

She felt a giggle bubble up. "It's muggle. It's called a teddy."

"Goddammit," he said. "I always knew muggles would kill me someday. This is how I'm going to go. You nearly gave me a heart attack."

She laughed as he was pulling the straps down now so he could lavish her breasts.

"Malfoy, you just came," she said.

"So?" he asked. "I didn't get to do what I wanted to do."

"And what's that?" she asked.

"You," he said simply, as he kissed his way down to her core. "Normally I'd tease you, but I can't stand it. I haven't tasted you in days because of this stupid charade we're doing. And this... teddy, did you call it? Goddammit, I can't control myself."

He gripped her knees and opened her legs before moving the lace aside one more time and immediately started sucking on her core, and she heard his groan of pleasure at her taste. Hermione's hips bucked, and she moaned with delight. This was Malfoy. *Her* Malfoy. He was still demanding. He was still dominant. But he was also very focused on giving her attention. Her pleasure was the main event for him.

"Come for me, beautiful," he said. "My darling girl."

His words and tongue ignited her, and she began to shake. "You can do it, love. Come on now..." and then he gave one hard suck, and Hermione broke. As she came down from her high she instinctively reached for him, and he moved to envelop her.

"I like this," she murmured. "You, like that. It makes me feel safe."

He seemed surprised, but also touched by her words.

"You are safe. Except when you wear lingerie. Then I want to have my wicked way with you."

She snorted at this, and he grinned down at her.

"Seriously, though, I'm going to shower you with lace and other sheer shit. You should wear it. All of it. We can do some more Death Eater memories with it if you want, but then I'll

take it off with my teeth once we're done with the scene."

Hermione gave him an amused smile. "Fine. It's a date then."

"I can't fucking wait," said Malfoy, as he pulled her in for a kiss.

Draco

Dear Journal,

First, to business. The pace on the felix felicis is finally picking up. There are middle-of-the-night steps for the rest of the potion, and most of them don't allow for advanced prep of ingredients. As we get closer to the end the pace will increase until it's round the clock, with just a few blocks of time each day to simmer. I know I could ask Granger or even Snape to help. It's more important that we have the potion for the war than that I get my mastery. And I will ask for help if I need it — I really will. But I've been doing this for four months now. I've studied and trained and practiced. The techniques are so diverse and there are so many ingredients that I really will be a master if I can actually do it. I've devoted myself to it, and whenever I'm not doing occlumency with Granger or just doing Granger generally, I'm doing potions. Snape is actually pleased with me if you can believe it. He says he has never seen me so focused. I say he has never seen me try to win a war in which the love of my life might die. I have a lot of motivation to succeed.

It will be finished at the end of November, and I'm both eager for it and dreading it. On the one hand I won't be at the mercy of the felix schedule. On the other hand, I'll be much closer to the day we execute the plan and one or both of us may die.

Speaking of Snape, we are making sure to carve out a little time from potions training every few days to work on the defensive plan too. For now we're just getting the plan in place, and then we will do the actual magic once felix is done. It's going to be extensive, and it's going to take a lot out of both of us. We can't do them at the same time.

I really hope I get to sleep before I'm dead.

And now for Granger.... Believe it or not she let me put the imperius curse on her and stage some sex scenes for her memories. She did it to protect me so I can keep my cover, but I realized by the end of it she actually likes being under it.

After I got past the early scenes where I had to be cruel to her, it turned really fucking hot. She was totally in my control, so ready and willing to do anything I wanted to please me. I know I should be probably ashamed by how much I enjoyed it, but I can't help it. She was utterly perfect.

In fact, I didn't think it would get any more perfect until she showed up wearing this thing called a teddy in the first staged scene without the curse. I've never even heard of such a thing but fucking hell it was unbelievable. And in a way it was even better because she was all herself, but she was more comfortable in the rollplay we were doing since she had had practice with it under the curse. When we were done I just had to make her come dressed like that.

Hermione Granger, I have learned, likes some really kinky sex. And Salazar help me, but I do too. She's perfect for me, I'm perfect for her, and I feel like we're only starting to discover each other. I just pray we both survive so I can keep doing this with her for the rest of my life.

Draco kept his word. The day after Granger's surprise with that teddy, Draco took a rare break and left immediately after breakfast to buy her more. Upon the advice of Tippy, he made his way to a discreet shop between Diagon Alley and Knockturn Alley and was stunned to find a whole range of magical and muggle selections to choose from.

He had never seen this place before.

"Sir must know where it is to find it," said Tippy. "Tis hidden with a notice-me-not charm for discretion. Tis usually elves who go there, sir."

As he looked around, he saw Tippy was right. He was the only wizard in the shop, but he didn't mind. He wanted to see the selections for himself. As he surveyed the options he thought he recognized a few things. He had ordered Tippy to replace Granger's basic undergarments with prettier things, enjoying the look of amusement and exasperation she gave him once she noticed he had done it. He even thought he recognized those silky pajamas she favored in one corner. But the rest of it... Draco was nearly overcome with desire as he imagined Granger in some of these things. Sheer, lacy, strappy, magical, muggle, in every color of the rainbow. He couldn't make up his mind.

Then there was the wall of books and sex toys, again a mixture of magical and muggle. The muggle options, he saw, were truly creative to work without magic.

The other Death Eaters must have never come here, he thought. If they did, their opinions on muggles would surely change. Draco's own views on muggle ingenuity had just changed rather dramatically.

Finally, after help from one of the shop's elves to locate items that would enhance Granger's arse and tits, Draco purchased a dozen things, along with a couple of magical sex toys, one of which he was sure the Death Eaters would approve of. He brought everything back to the Manor.

At lunch he passed her the first thing across the table. "Get dressed, Granger. Time to play Death Eater again before I have to brew."

To his surprise, she blushed a little.

“Picking out lingerie for me now, Malfoy?” she asked. Draco could see she was pleased.

“You know I like to spoil you, love. And this is a gift for both of us.”

She was trying not to smile as she said, “Where do you want me, then?”

He considered her for a moment. “The other night... when you suggested being tied up... you were imperiused.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” she said quickly.

Draco just raised his eyebrows, his suspicions about her little suggestion confirmed. He felt himself harden.

“Alright then. Get dressed and wait on the bed.”

Her cheeks were flushed, and Draco could sense she was excited too as he rose to head into his room to give her a few minutes. When he opened the door again, his mouth went dry.

He knew what to expect this time, but it was still shocking to see her dressed like this. The fabric was white and see through, tight around her breasts before falling in soft folds and stopping just below the triangle of her thighs. It was so sheer it hid nothing at all. He could see rosy nipples straining the fabric, and the threads of the matching thong underneath.

“Most obedient, Granger,” he said in his best Death Eater voice as he walked toward her. “If I had known you could be so... compliant, I would have done this to you at school.”

She looked up at him, and he caught a flash of annoyance in her eyes at these words, and he cocked his head. “What’s that? Surely you would have preferred to lose your virginity to me instead of Pothead or the Weasel.”

Her eyes dropped back to the floor. “Yes sir,” she said in that small voice.

“Very good. Now stand so I can look at you.”

She rose, eyes still on the floor, and Draco walked in that familiar circle, brushing her tits and arse with his hand as he did so.

“Tell me, why are you here Granger?” he suddenly asked.

“To give you pleasure sir,” she said.

“And do you desire pleasure for yourself?” he asked.

She gave him an uncertain look. “I desire... whatever you wish of me,” she said slowly.

“A very thoughtful answer and spoken like the true swot you are,” he said with a smirk. “Pretty soon I think you’ll even believe it.”

He ceased his circling and came to a halt in front of her. “Strip,” he ordered.

He watched as she lifted the white gauzy thing over her head until she was left only in the thong. “Turn around and bend over like that,” he said.

She complied and looked back at him over her shoulder. “Does my lord wish to take me like this?” she asked. He heard some excitement in her voice.

“Not so fast, Granger. I just wanted to see your arse.”

He walked forward and ran a finger down the line of the thong. He felt her shudder.

“Goodness, the little Gryffindor lion is getting hot for a Death Eater. Whatever would Dumbledore say? Oh wait, he can’t say anything at all can he? Because I killed him.”

She gasped convincingly as he continued to stroke her.

“Take your knickers off,” he said suddenly. “And lie down on the bed on your back.”

She quickly complied. “Legs and arms out,” he snapped. She did it, and he could see the anticipation in her eyes. He tried not to smile at her as he raised her wand and muttered, “*incarcerous*.”

Immediately the ropes sprang out and tied each limb to one of the four posts of the bed.

He casually made his way over to her, running a hand firmly along her. “You’re at my mercy now,” he said. “I can do anything to you that I wish. You are as helpless as a muggle like this. Dirty, too.”

It wasn’t true of course. He was sure she could wandlessly magic her way out of bindings. But she widened her eyes at him as though she believed him.

“Yes sir,” she whispered. Draco could hear a quaver in her voice and saw the flush on her cheeks.

She really wants this, he thought.

“I have a gift for you, Granger. Now seems like the appropriate time.”

She gave him a look of confusion, but he could see she was intrigued.

“My lord is most generous,” she said hesitantly.

“By Salazar you *are* learning,” he said, as he pulled out the magical toy he had bought earlier and held it over her face so she could see. “This is a collar Granger. It’s tied to my magic. It will... help you sense my moods. When I am pleased with you, it will reward you. When I am displeased, it will become... very uncomfortable. You will always wear it in my presence.”

Draco saw her eyes get wide at this, and he placed the collar near her throat. It magically bound to her, securing itself just under the chain of the necklace she always wore. She gasped a little as it adjusted to her.

“Did you prepare yourself as Tippy instructed? Did you make yourself wet already?”

“Yes my lord. I am ready for you.” Draco smirked, and she gasped again. The collar was supposed to be stimulating her, and based on her reaction it seemed to be working. Draco knew that he was never displeased with her during sex. It would never punish her for him. But he also couldn’t really stimulate her during their scenes they were creating because it would look like he cared too much if anybody searched her memories. The collar would do it for him by translating his moods to physical pleasure.

“Let’s see then, shall we?” he said as he unbuckled his pants and climbed on top of her. He didn’t even check. He could see the collar was doing its job. He immediately sheathed himself into her, and she groaned at the intrusion before he went to work and just pounded her.

He had to make it quick now. If he got off then he could end the scene and do those things to her himself. He went fast, and before he knew it, she was arching underneath him.

“My lord,” she gasped, and he smirked down at her.

“I am benevolent, am I not?” he asked.

“Yes.... sir.... Yes.... *Thank you* my lord,” she cried as she came apart, Draco following moments later. He hopped off as soon as he was able.

“Tippy will be by to release you eventually,” he said in a lazy voice, and he strode out of the room, counted to ten and then came hurrying back, stripping his own clothes as he did so and waving her wand to clean her.

“Fuck, Granger,” he said as he pressed his naked body to her. He released the collar and replaced it with his lips.

“Malfoy, that collar...” she gasped, as he trailed kisses all along her body.

“Mmm, I thought it would be helpful,” he said.

“Your lips...” she gasped, “are better, but...” she arched and started to moan. “But I wouldn’t mind... wearing it for you,” she finally said, in between noises that told Draco he was driving her mad.

He suckled her nipples in approval and she moaned again.

“So intense like this,” she gasped. He nipped and she squeaked, which made him chuckle.

“Granger, if I ever give you a collar for real, it will be a choker made out of diamonds,” he said. “And it would be private, just for us. I wouldn’t want anybody else to see you in it but me, not even in a memory.”

He raised his head and saw her eyes were wide.

"You're worth far more than some cheap parlor trick from a sex shop," he continued. "I bought that collar because I can't stimulate you myself while we are curating your memories without ruining the scene. But if you want to wear something around your neck when we're being us, I'll find a piece that's more worthy of you."

Her eyes softened. "Thank you," she said. "I'm not going to ask you to do that. And I mean what I said, you do a better job stimulating me than the collar does, but I'll admit, it... helped me stay in character."

He smirked. "Allow me to stimulate you some more, then," he said, as he trailed light kisses down her stomach, moving down her leg. He felt her quivering as he got closer to her center.

"Malfoy, *please*," she said.

"What do you want darling?" he asked, as he kissed her inner thighs.

"Your mouth. Your tongue. Everything. *Please.*"

Gods he loved her liked this. He immediately started sucking, and he tasted her as she became unbearably wet for him. It was salt and musk, and the scent of it was the thing he now associated with sex because it was uniquely hers. She moaned and twisted, and he held her hips in place while she started to shake.

"So close, beautiful. Come on love," he murmured. He tasted her pleasure begin to wash over her, and he looked up to see her face. She looked transformed.

So fucking perfect, he thought.

"I... I... *Draco!*" she shouted. Draco buried his face in her one more time while he pressed his ring to her tattoo.

"Again, love. Fucking come again for me, just like this," he said.

Her first orgasm rolled into a second, and she shouted his name again as she shuddered hard against her bonds. He would never get tired of hearing his name on her lips, he decided. Not ever. It was the way she gave herself over to him – not in role play, not to create false memories – it was honest, and it was all her.

"One more time," he said. "I have to see you one more time."

He rose on his knees to come closer to her face, and he shoved his fingers inside of her, using his ring to press against her clit.

She moaned and writhed, but Draco held her in place. He licked one nipple, and her back arched at the same time, pulling her into yet another one, as her eyes rolled back into her head. He watched her come down, and it was different this time. She was still twitching.

Curious now, he withdrew his fingers from her and touched one nipple lightly. She gasped and arched hard and began to shake again.

Holy fuck, he thought. She was so overstimulated she was reacting to his lightest touch as though it was about to send her careening. He tried it one more time, and she started to moan and wiggle her hips.

“More?” he asked in disbelief.

“I... I...” she said. Draco realized she was totally incoherent. He slipped two fingers inside of her, and she immediately bore down, trying to ride his hands as though she couldn’t get enough.

“Careful darling,” he said. “Take what you need, but don’t overdo it.”

“*Draco*,” she gasped, and he felt her spasming again. He rubbed her clit once with his thumb and she shouted with pleasure, as he finally withdrew his hand. It was tempting to keep going, but he sensed she was nearly at her limit even if she didn’t realize it.

“Enough darling. I know this can be a little intense.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I just... I need...” she trailed off, and Draco saw she was still hazy and unable to speak clearly. He waved his wand to release her, but she still didn’t move.

Fuck, she went into a real subspace, he thought in disbelief. That explained her sudden sensitivity and overstimulation. He had heard a couple blokes in Slytherin talk about this before, but it had always sounded like they used pain to get their partners there. He was shocked to see it could happen like this. Her orgasms had simply gotten so intense she was practically boneless.

“Darling,” he whispered, as he moved toward her. He started massaging her gently, trying to wake up her limbs. “Tell me what you need,” he said.

“Just you,” she whispered. “I’m all... fuzzy. And my skin feels like it’s vibrating. It’s so... odd...” she said.

“It’s from the activities we just did,” he said gently. “It’s normal,” he added, hoping he was right about this and making a mental note to read up on it as soon as possible. “You’ll come down from it in a few minutes. I’ll stay as long as I can.”

“Thank you, Malfoy. Draco.”

“Anything for you darling.”

She sighed into him as he continued to rub her. “Did you like it?” he asked hesitantly.

“Mmmm,” she said, clearly not paying attention.

“Hermione, darling, listen to me... if we do that again, we need a safe word.”

“I’m safe,” she mumbled.

He warmed at this, but stroked her cheek to make her listen to him.

"I'm serious," he said. "We probably should have come up with one a while ago."

"Fine, *mimbulus mimbletonia*," she muttered.

He was torn between amusement and exasperation. "That's a mouthful."

"I'm articulate," she said, and Draco's lips quirked at this. He knew she was finally coming back to him.

"Not when you're tied up," he countered. "And that's the entire point."

"Fine. 'Hagrid,' will be my safe word then. Happy?"

Draco grimaced. "That image will definitely make me stop."

She just rolled her eyes before sighing and snuggling into him. "Want to go again later?" she finally asked.

"You're insatiable, love."

She leaned up to kiss him. "Only for you."

Mine. She's all mine.

Chapter End Notes

Summary: Draco and Hermione stage one last scene under the imperius curse before staging several others outside of the curse. In these other scenes Draco is still pretending to be a Death Eater, and Hermione is still pretending to be his captive. They are both finding they enjoy the more intense dom/sub dynamic that they are playing with. In the final scene Draco ties Hermione down and gives her a collar that magically stimulates her for their Death Eater scene. When the scene is over, he removes the collar, and they do sexy things while she's still tied up just because they want to. He manages to send her into subspace for the first time.

Chapter 27: Escape

Chapter Summary

TW: LAST CHAPTER WITH STAGED/IMPERIUSED SEX

If this makes you uncomfortable, skip down about halfway and start reading from there.

Hermione

Dear Rose,

My plan to manipulate my memories has worked. I have hours of real material now that shows your father as an evil Death Eater (he's not) and me as a helpless captive (I'm not).

I'm telling you all this because according to Malfoy and this journal, I'm the first one who has tried to do something like this. Blocking can be challenging under the best conditions, and Malfoy says it's infinitely harder when under torture or threat of death from the person performing legilimency. Creating false memories has become a method to work around the difficulties with blocking. I'm able to lock away the truth about your father and me along with the fact that I'm now a rather proficient occlumens. If my memories are searched by those we don't trust they will only see what I want them to see.

I sincerely hope you're never in the position to need to try something like this. But if you ever are, remember the lessons from this journal.

Hermione's plan to curate her memories worked better than she could have hoped. For the next few days they staged scene after scene of Draco-as-Death-Eater, with Hermione always in the stimulation collar and wearing a scrap of lace or nothing, while Malfoy was mostly fully clothed unless he was dropping his pants. They only took breaks for *felix*.

Most of the time he took her. But a couple times she sucked him off and there were several scenes where she simply served him food or got herself off while he watched.

During the scenes he never kissed her. He never even touched her except to have sex with her or occasionally fondle her breasts or arse. The message was clear: he had no emotional connection with her, and he had no interest in her except for sex.

Then each time, without fail, as soon as the scene finished, Malfoy would return and remove the collar before lavishing her with kisses, praise, and warm touch. He practically worshiped her body and showed her just how much he cared about her. Hermione felt nearly drunk from his attention and affection. In a very odd twist, Hermione found the scenes where they role-played for her memories oddly sexy because she knew exactly how Malfoy would behave once they were finished. It had become a bizarre kind of foreplay for them before he turned back into himself.

When he finally tested her occlumency again at the end of the week, it was enough. He pushed and prodded for memories of his mother and himself, but she held her block and kept him at home base while she showed him the curated memories they had prepared together. She was able to hold it for hours as he pushed.

“Flawless, Granger,” he said, with approval. “Truly flawless. I was ready for my cover to be blown if you’re caught early, but... damn. I don’t think it will be. He will torture me for not turning you in right away, but he won’t suspect I’ve helped you and Potter. And I can’t tell you’re occluding.”

She gave him a broad smile at that. “Perfect. And we’ll stage my escape when we go see Harry and Ron. You’ve let Tippy and your mother know, right?”

He nodded, looking a little grim. Hermione knew he was nervous to let her out, but she was nearly bouncing in excitement. She hadn’t been out of the suite in months.

“Speaking of which, are you finally going to tell me where your fireplace goes? Because we’re about to use it.”

He considered her for a moment. “You can’t freak out,” he finally said.

Hermione felt a lurch of nerves. “OK... You told me I could trust them and they would protect me.”

“And he will,” said Malfoy confidently. “I’ve been working with him for months, in fact.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes until they suddenly widened in understanding. “Are you telling me that Snape...”

“Is still part of the Order, yes,” said Malfoy.

Hermione felt a bit sick as she thought about this. What if Malfoy had been tricked?

“How do you know?” she finally asked. “He killed Dumbledore!”

“Dumbledore was dying anyway,” said Malfoy quietly. “That cursed hand of his – he wouldn’t have lasted much longer. He arranged his death with Snape in advance so it would be quick. He’s the one who left you lot the Sword. He showed me his patronus, and it’s a doe. We’ve been working together for months. And he has real motivation to work against the Dark Lord.”

Hermione felt like she had been hit by a sledgehammer with all of this news. She knew Malfoy had suspected he was working for Dumbledore all along, but she was shocked to hear his suspicions were confirmed.

“What motivations?” she finally asked.

Malfoy sighed. “He was in love with Potter’s mother. He loved her from the time they were children. He still loves her even though she’s dead. And when the Dark Lord killed her...”

“He wanted revenge,” said Hermione quietly. Draco just raised an eyebrow and nodded in confirmation.

Just like Malfoy, she thought. What was it about Slytherin wizards who fell for muggleborn witches? It seemed that Snape, like Malfoy, was willing to do anything for Lily Potter, even though she was never truly his.

It all fit, Hermione realized. Snape had hated Harry more than any other student, but he continued to intervene and protect him until the moment Dumbledore died. Of course he hated Harry. He looked just like James, the wizard who had married the witch Snape wanted. But he also protected Harry because he was the only part of Lily that was left. And Harry was the way to defeat Voldemort.

“So your fireplace...” she started.

“Connects directly to the Headmaster’s office at Hogwarts,” said Malfoy. “The only other fire connected to the Headmaster’s office is at Grimmauld Place. It’s a holdover from when Grimmauld Place was headquarters for the Order, and Snape has never disabled it.”

Hermione’s eyes were huge. “Then we can get to Grimmauld Place directly from there!”

Malfoy shook his head. “No, the floo network is being watched. Grimmauld Place’s floo has been dormant for so long that it’s flown under the radar, but the moment it lights up they will know Potter is there, and Snape will come under suspicion. The connection to Grimmauld Place is only for emergencies. Today we will do exactly as we planned with the polyjuice. Snape’s aware, so we won’t be stopped.”

Hermione felt a bit of anxiety at this, but she nodded. “OK. It might take me a little longer than I thought then, if I have to get out of the castle too.”

His jaw twitched at this, but he nodded curtly. “I really wish you would just polyjuice into my mother or something so we can go together.”

“I can’t,” said Hermione simply. “I need to have a memory to show my escape. And you need to have a memory of finding the room empty. You and I both know it’s easier to stage it than to block each other out of a real memory like that.”

“Fine,” he gritted. “But take your sickle. And if there is *anything* that goes wrong, message me and forget staging your escape. We can come up with some other plan for that.”

Hermione exhaled and nodded.

"And you still won't tell me what we're doing when we get to Grimmauld Place? After we destroy the horcrux, I mean?" Malfoy added.

"I haven't told Harry or Ron, either," she said.

And it was true. Hermione had told them there was one more thing to work out before they finished the *felix* and then went for it.

Malfoy groaned, but he didn't protest. He knew it was pointless.

"Alright, let's stage our last encounter together with you as a Death Eater," she said. "Remember, you need to tell me you'll be turning me over to You-Know-Who and leave the door to your room cracked after you leave. Once the scene is over I'll escape through the floo. Give me about an hour to get to Grimmauld Place and then you apparate over directly."

He looked grim, but nodded. "I will. I have a round for *felix* that I'll finish right before I leave so we'll have time at Grimmauld Place once we get there. But don't forget the sickle," he warned. "I can adjust forward or back an hour for this step."

"I won't," she said.

He took a deep breath and then stilled. "Alright then. For the last scene I want you naked. When I tell you that you're going to the Dark Lord you need to protest. Then I'm going to imperius you and bind you before starting anything... just to make it clear I haven't gone soft while I've had you with me. Pretend to panic and do accidental magic to get out of the bindings at the end. If we're really going to do this, I want to make it look like I tried to restrain you to keep you from escaping."

Hermione sucked in a breath, now very turned on. Malfoy wasn't meeting her eye as he said any of this, but she glanced down and saw the start of an erection. He was excited too, though he was trying to act casual about it.

"Alright," she said. "Give me a few minutes to get ready then."

He nodded once and then rose to leave, and Hermione took a deep breath as she undressed and put the collar on. She moved to sit on the edge of the bed and crossed her legs as she waited.

A few minutes later Malfoy walked in and gave her one long look.

"So obedient," he said with a sneer. "Shame it won't last."

"Sir?" she asked, as he walked toward her slowly.

"The Dark Lord is redoubling his efforts to find Potter. And I know just the thing to make Potter show his face."

He grabbed her collar and yanked her toward him. She gasped in surprise.

“But sir...” she said, trying to infuse her voice with panic. “You said I was here to pleasure you. And you wouldn’t....”

“I told you that I would give you to the Dark Lord when I was finished with you. I’ll admit you have entertained me longer than I thought possible. It’s been an enjoyable few weeks. But it’s time.”

“Please.... No....” she said.

“Yes,” and he gave her an evil smile as he ran a hand over one breast and squeezed. “It will be inconvenient to find another plaything, but it’s no matter. If I can train one mudblood bitch I can train others. And the Dark Lord needs you now Granger. Far more than I do.”

“My lord...” she said in her most pleading voice.

He placed a firm grip on her throat. “I’m going to have you like this one last time Granger. Something to remember me by, yes? Then I’ll be calling the Dark Lord.”

“No....” she said.

“Stand,” he commanded.

“No!” she shouted. “No! That’s not our agreement!”

“Agreement?” he scoffed. “There is no agreement. Now stand!”

“No!” He tightened his grip on her throat.

“Playing the hard way then? Suit yourself. *Imperio!*”

Hermione’s mind went blank.

“You will desire to give me pleasure,” he said.

“Yes my lord,” she said, as that now-familiar feeling of want flooded her.

“You will know what’s happening and you will feel it, even though you know what’s coming for you.”

“Yes my lord,” said Hermione as her own pleasure centers turned on.

“Stand and walk to that chair,” he said, pointing to a wooden chair with a lattice back in the corner.

She did as he said.

“Now sit down and spread your legs.”

She did, arching toward him and looking up through her lashes at him. She hoped she was doing it right.

"I'm going to tie you down," he said, "for good measure. Hands behind the back of the chair."

Hermione felt a thrill of excitement as she positioned herself and ropes shot out of her wand to secure her arms behind the chair and hold her ankles in place. She could feel his own excitement through the collar as he watched, and it started to stimulate her. She groaned at the feeling.

Malfoy's eyes were dilated now, and she felt another jolt through the collar. He was pleased, and this made her all the more eager. She was doing it right, just as he liked it.

"A little higher," he muttered, as he waved his wand and the legs of the chair grew several inches so her opening was lined up with his cock.

"Your nipples are already taught, aren't they?"

"Yes sir," she whispered. "You prefer them that way."

"It's true," he acknowledged. "And I want you wet."

Immediately her insides started to melt at his words, and he raised an eyebrow at the glisten that appeared between her legs.

"Excellent. And now I'm going to fuck you like this. I want you to show me how good I am at fucking you."

"Please sir," she begged.

He opened his pants to take out his cock, and he surged into her, using the back of the chair as leverage to help him anchor himself to go hard and fast. Immediately Hermione started to moan and gasp, and she felt more of him through the collar. She knew she was doing it right.

"Come, now," he said, and Hermione instantly felt an orgasm hit her as she keened.

"Again," he gasped, and she had another, her walls clenching and shuddering around him.

"Fuck," he gasped, as he finally spilled into her.

He released the curse, and Hermione slumped in the chair, still bound, her limbs shaking slightly at the intensity of the orgasms she had just experienced.

"You're going to stay tied to that chair until I'm ready for you Granger. I think I'll take you downstairs just like this. I'm sure the Dark Lord will be more appreciative of my gift that way."

Then he turned and left through their connecting door, leaving it slightly ajar.

Hermione forced herself to imagine her torture and her fear of Voldemort as she worked herself up into a mild panic. She was straining against her bonds until she thought,

"Relashio!" and she felt her bonds break.

It was the only wandless magic she risked doing. Malfoy had coached her over and over again about the importance of hiding the extent of her abilities, but given the circumstances she thought she made it look convincing. Still, she knew she wouldn't do any more unless she had no choice, so she stood up, rummaged through her beaded bag, and threw on some of Harry's robes before running to the bathroom to quickly clean herself up.

She hurried back out and grabbed her beaded bag before running to the connecting door to Malfoy's room. She made a show of waiting for a few moments to make sure he was gone, and then she hesitantly opened it and stepped across the threshold. She pretended to look around as though she had never been there before, and then moved to his bathroom to start going through his drawers. On the fourth try she found a hairbrush with several white blonde hairs, and she snatched one off the brush as she dug through her bag for some of the polyjuice she had recently brewed.

She poured a dose and added Malfoy's hair to it and watched as it bubbled. To her surprise it turned the exact shade of green as the Slytherin banners in the Great Hall. She forced down the flash of amusement at this as she took a deep breath and then drank.

It's odd, she thought, as she transformed into the wizard she had been sleeping with for weeks now. She shot up nearly a foot, and her hair receded, and she felt that odd appendage appear between her legs that she now knew so well.

Once the transformation was complete, she ran back to the bathroom to glance in the mirror and saw Draco Malfoy staring back at her. She took a moment to practice a few of his more arrogant expressions and evil smiles in the mirror before nodding and turning back into his room.

Too weird, she thought. *But at least I'll be convincing.*

She knew him so well she felt sure she could mimic him even if she had to interact with someone. She hoped she wouldn't have to, but she could do it. She knew his posture and his mannerisms. Even their accents were similar.

She quickly rummaged through his drawers and closet to pull out clothes that actually fit, stuffing her beaded bag into a pocket of his robes. Then she moved to the fireplace and began to look for floo powder. She found some on her third try and, taking a deep breath, threw some powder into the fireplace and stepped in as it turned green. She spun away from Malfoy Manor for the first time in over six months.

She crossed the threshold of the Headmaster's Office at Hogwarts and was relieved to find it empty. She cast a quick glance at the slumbering portrait of Dumbledore before she took a deep breath, rolled up her sleeves to show the Dark Mark on Malfoy's forearm and strode out of the door and down the spiral staircase.

When they originally picked this date to meet with Harry and Ron, Malfoy had casually mentioned there was a quidditch match that day at Hogwarts so he wouldn't be expected at

the castle since Snape would be supervising. Hermione hadn't thought anything of it until this moment, as she noticed the corridors were nearly empty.

He had planned this, she realized, with a rush of relief. As long as the quidditch match didn't end early she should be able to avoid nearly everyone if she just stayed away from the pitch.

Hermione made it through the castle without seeing another person before she finally stepped through the open front doors and came to an abrupt halt.

Air and sunlight enveloped her, and Hermione couldn't help but tilt her face up. It had been months since she had been outside, and she had nearly forgotten what it felt like. She took a deep breath and smiled broadly before taking a step forward and running nearly headfirst into Astoria Greengrass.

"Draco!" she said with delight. "Are you here to watch the match?"

Oh my God, seriously? Hermione thought. According to the timeline they had established with her memories, Hermione had only been Draco's captive for a few weeks before she escaped. That meant Draco and Astoria weren't engaged yet. She could always try to block this part, but it would be better to just get away. Besides, she estimated she had already burned nearly a half an hour getting to this point.

"Not now," she said in her best impression of Malfoy's commanding tone. "I have business in Hogsmeade. I'm late," and Hermione shoved past Astoria without another word, ignoring her protests as she walked away.

Hermione felt no guilt whatsoever for her coldness toward Astoria. She was engaged to her boyfriend after all. Hermione was *not* a fan.

She pushed Astoria out of her mind as she hurried down the steps and strode across the lawn, Malfoy's robes billowing behind her.

She had to move quickly. In order to maintain her escape story she didn't have her wand. She and Malfoy had fought about it, but she finally won when she pointed out that she could do wandless magic for most anything she might need *except* apparition. Still, it complicated matters. She would have to get to Grimmauld Place using other methods.

She finally made her way through the gate and headed for the Three Broomsticks.

Don't make eye contact and don't stop to talk. Just get to the floo.

Hermione pushed open the door and walked straight to the fireplace. Several people turned and looked like they wanted to speak, but she didn't acknowledge them. She threw some floo powder into the fireplace and shouted "St. Mungo's!"

She immediately felt herself spinning away, some of her anxiety ebbing at the same time. St. Mungo's was close to Grimmauld Place and unlike the Leaky Cauldron, it didn't require a wand to enter and exit the muggle world from there.

She stepped out into the waiting room and turned a corner to walk down a corridor before finally exiting out of a side door and stepping into an abandoned alley. She stripped off the robes and shoved them into her beaded bag before allowing herself to breathe a sigh of relief. She was nearly there. She just had to get within the fidelius charm before her polyjuice wore off.

Hermione pulled some muggle money out of her beaded bag before stuffing it in her pocket and rolling down her sleeves to hide the Dark Mark. She set off.

She knew from visiting Mr. Weasley in fifth year that St. Mungo's was only a few tube stops from Grimmauld Place. Not for the first time Hermione was grateful she was raised by muggles and familiar with public transit. She made her way to the nearest tube station and was relieved to see the train she needed pulling in just as she arrived. She hopped on and a few stops later alighted at King's Cross, which was walking distance from Grimmauld Place.

Hermione studied a nearby map for a moment before setting off on foot at a brisk walk, and several minutes later she found herself walking toward the square with Grimmauld Place. She slowed as she approached.

This, she knew, was the most dangerous part of her plan. Harry had informed her the Death Eaters had been patrolling the area, and he and Ron usually apparated straight into the boundaries of the fidelius so they wouldn't be seen.

She walked forward cautiously and then crouched behind a bin, peering out as she saw two Death Eaters lounging against a nearby fence.

"Bleeding waste of time," one of them said. "We all know he's in there but it's not like he ever leaves does he?"

"Wish we could leave," said the other. "But you know what happened to McNair when he abandoned his watch."

The other shuddered and pulled out some firewhiskey from his bag. "Don't mean we can't drink though, don't it?" he said, and he proceeded to take a swig.

"Come on..." muttered Hermione, and then to her horror she felt the polyjuice wearing off, as Malfoy's clothes bagged around her.

"*Shit,*" she muttered. There was nothing for it. Malfoy had made her swear up and down that she would use her wandless magic if she didn't get to Grimmauld Place before the polyjuice wore off. She finally agreed to it, knowing that if she had made it a whole hour without serious complications the memories of her escape would likely be enough to be convincing.

She took a deep breath and took aim from behind the bin. "*Stupefy! Stupefy!*" she cried out, and two jets of red light shot out from her palm, taking the two Death Eaters down. She breathed a deep sigh of relief. She hadn't practiced real dueling in ages, and she wasn't certain that the small number of defensive spells she had learned how to do wandlessly would actually be powerful enough to be effective. But both Death Eaters appeared to be out cold.

Hermione cast another furtive look around before standing up and sprinting straight toward the townhome, slumping with relief and exhaustion as she felt herself pass through the boundaries of the fidelius. She had done it. She was safe.

She walked up the front steps and took a deep breath before opening the door and letting herself in.

“Hermione!” bellowed a familiar voice, and suddenly Hermione found herself swept up in a large hug between Harry and Ron.

“You guys! I can’t breathe!” she said, laughing.

A moment later the front door opened again, and Hermione spun around to find Malfoy standing there, with a very tense look on his face. All the tension drained out when he saw her.

“Thank Salazar,” he said. “I take it those two unconscious Death Eaters outside were your work?”

“Yes,” she said. “The polyjuice wore off just as I arrived. I stunned them wandlessly from behind a bin.”

He gave a curt nod. “I thought as much. I Obliviated them and vanished half the firewhiskey. They’ll think they drank too much when they wake up.”

Hermione nodded, as he looked at her more critically and then waved her wand. She felt the pants she was wearing transform into yoga pants and her shoes shrink, but he kept the shirt as it was. She saw he had a slightly satisfied look on his face to see her wearing his oxford. She just gave him a knowing smile and rolled up the sleeves again. Then he got a more serious look on his face.

“And earlier,” he pressed. “The way I left you in the room... you’re OK?”

He was giving her a dark, intensely searching look now, and somehow she knew he had been on edge about this for the last hour. He *always* returned to make sure she was OK after he had played Death Eater. This was the first time he hadn’t, and though he made sure she got off during their scene, he had also left her in an extremely vulnerable state so she could “escape.”

She could tell he didn’t like it. He didn’t like it one bit. She gave him a reassuring smile and moved toward him to touch his face. He slipped his arms around her.

“I’m fine,” she said. “*Really*,” she added after he gave her a skeptical look.

He searched her face one more time and finally gave a nod, his expression immediately clearing.

“I didn’t have any trouble getting here except for those Death Eaters.... and Astoria,” she said. “I ran into her at Hogwarts.”

"Did you get her to dump me?" he asked hopefully, and Hermione snorted with laughter.

"Sorry, but no. You're still engaged."

"Damn," he muttered with clear disappointment.

Hermione chuckled again before gently pulling away from him and turning back to Harry and Ron, who were watching them both with rather stunned expressions.

"What?" she said.

"It's just... you're really friendly with each other," said Ron with some disbelief.

Hermione just rolled her eyes. "*Honestly*, Ronald, of course we're friendly! It would be kind of hard to shag him if I didn't like him!"

There was a ringing silence at this, before Malfoy and Harry both snorted with laughter simultaneously, as Ron got a pained look on his face.

"Hermione," said Harry, now grinning broadly. "I didn't realize how much I missed you scolding us."

Hermione got a reluctant smile on her face at this. "Same," she admitted. "Malfoy puts up a better fight than you two do."

"Hey!" said Harry and Ron at the same time, as she just gave them an impish smile before walking toward the sitting room. The three wizards followed.

"You know," said Ron, now studying her as they walked toward the sofa, "It seems like you've gotten shorter."

She rolled her eyes again. "I have not. You two have just gotten taller. Malfoy as well I'd wager, though I haven't noticed since I see him every day."

It was true. Hermione was distinctly petite. And now staring at her two best friends and boyfriend she was suddenly struck by just how large the three wizards were compared to her. Malfoy and Harry were nearly identical in height, though Malfoy was a bit broader in the shoulders and chest. And Ron was easily a couple inches taller than them both.

She gave a little harumph and caught identical grins on all three of them as she rolled her eyes and turned around to sit down. Malfoy sank down next to her and slung an arm out around the back of the sofa, while Harry and Ron sat on chairs across from her.

"So first thing's first," she said. "The horcrux."

Hermione opened her bag and fished out the diadem, before handing it over to Harry and Ron who inspected it curiously.

"I can feel it," said Harry softly, and Hermione nodded.

"Yes. It's been in my bag since Malfoy retrieved it. I suspect it's meant to be worn to draw out Riddle's soul."

"Absolutely not," said Malfoy quickly. "You'd be mad to try it."

Hermione hesitated. "Harry opened the locket before Ron stabbed it," she said.

"Did he have to though?" asked Malfoy, and Harry, Ron, and Hermione all looked at each other curiously.

"What do you mean, Malfoy?" asked Harry with some forced politeness.

"I mean," said Malfoy, "Granger told me that Dumbledore destroyed the ring by breaking it open. And you destroyed the diary by stabbing it with a fang. Couldn't you have stabbed the locket without opening it first?"

Harry's jaw dropped open, and then he closed it to think. "I don't know..." he said slowly. "We didn't try it. The minute we had the Sword I realized I could open the locket with parseltongue, and Ron stabbed the center soon after those forms materialized. We didn't even take the time to get Hermione first."

Draco's mouth thinned, and Hermione got the impression he was struggling not to roll his eyes.

"Well I would suggest that you try stabbing the diadem first before anybody puts it on and risks activating whatever curses are attached to it. Theoretically it should work because the sword can destroy the magical container. Once that's ruined, the soul should be released."

"You may be right," said Hermione slowly. "In any event, it can't hurt to try that first."

"Alright," said Harry. "Let me get the Sword then."

He left for a moment, and Hermione stood up to take the horcrux back from Ron and looked at it thoughtfully.

"The dark magic seems to be centralized around this gem," she said quietly. "I think we should aim for that."

Before either of them could respond, Harry arrived carrying the Sword of Gryffindor, and as he walked toward her, Hermione felt the diadem twitch.

She gasped and dropped it, and Harry came to a halt.

"What?" asked Malfoy in a tense voice, as he stood and quickly walked over to her. "What is it? Are you OK?" She glanced up at him and saw he looked very worried. Harry and Ron looked tense as well, though they both cast rather surprised looks at Malfoy.

"I'm fine," she said quietly. "It's just... it jumped. I think... I think it knows the Sword is here."

“Shit,” said Malfoy.

“Agreed,” muttered Harry.

“Alright well one of us may need to hold it down while another tries to stab that jewel thing,” said Ron.

“I’ll hold it,” said Harry quickly. “Hermione, you can stab it. You haven’t gotten to do one yet.”

Hermione felt a swooping sensation in her stomach at this, and she glanced at Malfoy who looked grim. But she just swallowed and nodded, as she took the Sword from Harry. It was heavy, with a hilt so thick she couldn’t wrap a single hand around it. The horcrux was jumping violently now that the Sword was so close, and Harry knelt down and snatched it out of the air with his seeker’s reflexes.

“Sodding hell,” he muttered, as he struggled to hold it still. “It’s strong.”

Ron knelt down and helped him, and together they were able to hold it relatively still against the floor. Hermione saw Malfoy draw her wand and point it toward the horcrux. “I’ll cast a shield as soon as you stab it,” he said. “I just have a feeling...”

She gulped and nodded as she held the sword blade down with both hands. “Go Hermione,” said Harry in a tight voice. “It’s trying really hard to get free...”

She nodded and then took aim, before plunging it straight down through the jewel in the center. She felt Malfoy’s shield go up a split second later, as Harry and Ron were both thrown back by the force of the horcrux breaking open, and the two halves exploded. Hermione instinctively turned away and ducked, but the shield caught the pieces before they hit her or any of the boys, and then they dropped innocently to the floor.

The jewel, she saw, had a dark, tar-like substance seeping out of it, and an entire puddle of it formed on the floor before it shimmered and disappeared with an odd noise that sounded like a moan.

“Unbelievable,” muttered Malfoy, as Hermione turned toward Harry and Ron who were both rubbing their heads.

“Are you two OK?” she asked worriedly.

“Yeah,” said Harry, getting to his feet gingerly. Ron nodded his agreement. “You?” he asked Hermione.

“Yes,” she said. “Malfoy’s shield caught the shrapnel.”

“Thanks for that,” said Harry. Malfoy gave him a stiff nod.

“So we think it worked, right?” asked Ron eagerly.

Hermione reached out a hand for her wand, and Malfoy handed it to her. She knelt down and cast the spell over the broken jewel and pieces of the diadem. Nothing happened.

“It’s gone,” she said, as she turned to the others. All three looked very pleased.

“Only two left then,” said Harry quietly. She glanced at him, and she could see he looked a bit sick as he thought about this, but also very determined.

“I can get into Bella’s vault as soon as the *felix* is ready and the defensive modifications are done,” said Malfoy. “So probably the first or second week of December at the earliest. But we also need to be strategic about it, and Granger says there’s one more thing she wants to do first.”

He gave her that look that told her she was finally going to have to explain herself.

“Yes,” she said. “Let’s sit.”

They all resumed their places, and the three wizards looking at her with a mixture of curiosity and wariness.

“I think Malfoy needs to teach Harry and Ron occlumency.”

Chapter 28: Occlumency

Draco

Draco had almost been expecting this, but Potter and Weasley clearly had not.

Weasley's jaw dropped. "You want me to let *him* inside of my head?"

Granger rolled her eyes. "Of course! What do you think I've been doing with him for the last six months, Ron?"

"Shagging him," supplied Potter.

Granger turned crimson as Draco smirked.

"Well there has been a lot of that, especially recently..." he started, as she turned around and smacked him lightly on the chest. He just grinned at her.

"We haven't just been shagging," she said, as she rolled her eyes. "I'm an occlumens now, and I'm pretty good at it. But Malfoy's a true master. He taught me, and he can teach you too. I'm sure your training will go a lot faster than mine. We had to take a lot of breaks so Malfoy could finish school first, and he'll have a big head start with you two since he's been through all of my memories already."

"I'm not... comfortable with it," said Weasley stiffly.

"Tough shit," said Granger, and all three wizards gaped at her. She almost never cursed. "You're going to learn. Both of you. And yes, it's very uncomfortable at first, but you have to learn how to do it. It gets better as you practice. I'm not saying you're going to become a master at it, but you're going to develop some basic proficiency before I let Malfoy go after the cup and we draw the Death Eaters to Hogwarts. Too many things can go wrong with our plan, and I'm not going to risk exposing the horcruxes or Malfoy if it all goes to hell."

She pointed at Draco, her voice raising. "You two have *no idea* the things I've done to protect him, and I'm not going to let your pride be the reason he gets killed. Do you understand me?"

She was standing now, breathing heavily, and all three wizards stared at her. Weasley and Potter both gulped and nodded.

She's magnificent, thought Draco a bit dreamily. She was so fierce, so protective of him. It was an honor. It was a privilege. It was really fucking hot. Draco wanted nothing more than to take her upstairs and ravage her.

Unfortunately that would have to wait.

Granger calmed a bit, as her two friends agreed to this. She turned to Draco and just raised an eyebrow at him, clearly expecting him to protest as well. He just raised both hands in the air.

"Hey, I've been saying from the beginning it's crazy that they don't know how to do this. I'm not saying I'm thrilled about it, but it's important."

"Good," she said. "Then I think you should take them each in turn. You split your time with them. While you're working with one, I'll work with the other to practice and speed things up."

He gave her a curious look, ignoring Potter's and Weasley's looks of consternation that they were not being consulted about this.

"You're not a legilimens though," he said slowly.

Granger shrugged. "Not yet, but I'll probably get the hang of it to some degree. I won't be as good at it as you are, but it can't hurt. Besides, it will give them some real memories of me breaking into their heads. It should make it easier for them to block their training with you."

Draco's eyebrows shot up. She wanted to try staging memories with them in case they couldn't fully block their occlumency training. She really was exceptional at this method.

"Fine. You're right I'm probably going to need your help anyway if we do this. The schedule for *felix* is going to be insane at the very end, and I won't be able to spend large blocks of time with them unless you want to push their training past November."

She gave him a small smile. "No, I don't want to push it that long." She thought about this for a moment and then got an excited look on her face that made Potter and Weasley both groan before she said anything else. She glared at them for a moment before turning back to Draco.

"I'll make a study plan for us! I used to make them for exam time at Hogwarts! You can work with them on new memories, and I'll reinforce them with practice while you're doing *felix*. Unless, of course, you would let me actually *help* you with *felix*."

"I've got the *felix* handled," said Draco casually. "You know I've done all the prep for it."

She pursed her lips in acknowledgment. "True. You're much better at potions than I am now. Fine then. I won't help with *felix*. But I can help reinforce the occlumency. You don't need to spend the time doing that part."

"Erm," said Weasley, and Draco and Granger both looked at him. "Do you plan on filling us in?"

Granger sighed. "Let's just say there's a lot more to occlumency than 'clear your mind.' There are different strategies and techniques. Malfoy's a master at manipulating real memories just the slightest bit to turn them into lies. He can also manufacture false

memories that don't exist, but it takes practice to do it consistently. I've been working on staging memories to create whole narratives that aren't real. That makes blocking – or burying the real memory you're trying to hide – easier because it gives you something real to turn to instead. There are other strategies as well. There's a journal you're both going to read that describes everything. Malfoy and I have both recorded our experiences in it."

"A journal?" asked Potter curiously.

Draco nodded now. "Yes. It's from the House of Black. It was passed down through my mother's family. Quite a few members of the House of Black studied occlumency and contributed to it."

Potter looked intensely curious now, and Draco was sure he knew why.

"Did Sirius..." he started, and Draco cut him off with a nod.

"Yes, Sirius contributed. So did Regulus. And my mother, Bellatrix, and Andromeda. Learning occlumency is a Black family tradition."

Potter's eyes were wide now, and even Weasley looked a bit intrigued. "Sirius never told me..." said Potter softly. "I wonder why he didn't train me himself?"

Granger jumped in. "He couldn't, Harry, he was stuck at Grimmauld place, and you were supposed to be at Hogwarts under the nose of that foul Umbridge woman. It would have been too risky to send you back and forth for training, and he was probably out of practice. His entries are from before he went to Azkaban."

Potter looked stricken now, but then his face morphed into a look of determination.

"I want to read it," he said.

Granger nodded. "You will. But first, I think it might be helpful to have a demonstration."

Draco looked at her curiously and the others did too. "What are you on about?" he asked.

"I want Harry and Ron to break into my head just to watch. Then you do your thing, Malfoy, and I'll do mine. We'll show them the story we've created for the horcruxes."

Draco nodded slowly, as he thought about this. They had taken great care to craft a particular narrative to hide the horcruxes, even going back to review earlier memories and modifying them instead of blocking them. She was right that it would help if Weasley and Potter saw it firsthand. They would need to learn this version of events too, and seeing Granger do it first would make their training go faster.

"That should work," he finally said.

Then he turned to Potter and Weasley with a stern look. "You simply point your wand at her and say, '*Legilimens!*' Breaking in is the easy part, and you'll find yourself in her head. Finding the right memories and extracting them is the part of legilimency that takes practice,

but I know where hers are. Don't go poking around her head once you're in. Just sit still, and I'll pull all of us to the right memories once I join."

Potter and Weasley exchanged nervous looks, but then nodded.

"And pay attention," chimed in Granger. "Malfoy and I have created a whole story that explains what the three of us have been up to for the last year without hunting horcruxes. You two will need to learn it so your memories back mine up."

Again, they nodded as they raised their wands.

"Ready when you are," said Granger lightly.

"*Legilimens!*" shouted Weasley and Potter at the same time.

Draco looked at them. "Are you both in?"

They nodded. Draco took a deep breath and thought, "*Legilimens!*" and then he was back in Granger's head, only this time he felt an unfamiliar presence. It was just lurking, observing.

Time to give them a show, he thought, as he pulled her to the memory of Potter telling them the prophesy.

Potter was standing in the bedroom at the Burrow with Granger and Weasley. He looked at them both and said, "Dumbledore heard it. The exact wording was, '*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the weapons of their forefathers shall meet in a final battle... but only he who harnesses his true power shall prevail.*'"

Draco distantly registered shock from the observers, but he moved forward and pressed on, searching hard for horcruxes.

Now Potter was talking to Granger and Weasley in the Gryffindor common room. "So Riddle asked Slughorn about horcruxes. And then Slughorn's memory went all odd. Slughorn's voice kept shouting over himself that Riddle would come to a bad end, and he didn't know anything about horcruxes. Dumbledore wouldn't tell me what they are, and he says the memory has been damaged beyond repair."

Granger looked curious. "Horcruxes. I've never even heard of them. I'll check in the library."

Draco pressed harder, and then Granger pulled forward a memory of her walking into the Gryffindor common room saying, "There's nothing about them in the library! Not a single thing!"

"Damn," said Weasley.

Granger sighed, "I know."

"I don't think it matters anyway," said Potter. "Dumbledore is just showing me every memory he has. He didn't seem to think much of that one. He's sure the prophecy refers to some other power."

He kept pushing, and then the trio were sitting on the sofa in the Weasley's sitting room when Scrimgeour read Dumbledore's will. He could feel her sadness as she received the book, but then a spark of interest as Potter received the snitch and then the Sword of Gryffindor.

She pushed again, and then they were sitting in the boys' room at the Burrow.

"Shame we couldn't have the Sword though," said Weasley. "Why do you reckon Dumbledore wanted to pass it to you?"

They all thought for a moment and then Granger lit up. "It's because we need it to defeat You-Know-Who!" she said excitedly. "That must be the weapon from the prophecy! Harry, are you related to Godric Gryffindor?"

"I don't know... but Hermione, why wouldn't he have just given it to me then? I was in his office the night he died..."

"Maybe he wanted to keep it safe for you," she said.

"Or maybe..." said Weasley slowly, "you have to earn it. It came to you in the Chamber of Secrets, didn't it?"

Potter nodded. "Yeah, Dumbledore told me that only a true Gryffindor could have pulled the Sword out of the Sorting Hat."

Weasley looked pleased. "There you go then. Maybe it won't work properly unless you're being all heroic when you take it."

"Yes," breathed Granger. "Ron! That's it!"

Weasley furrowed his brow now. "What about You-Know-Who's weapon though? We've never really focused on that part," said Weasley.

"It must be related to Slytherin," said Granger softly, "since Harry's is related to Gryffindor. Maybe it's his ability to speak parseltongue."

"Nagini," said Potter suddenly. "I'll have the Sword in the final battle, and Nagini will be there too. He will try to kill me with Nagini, and I'll try to kill him with the Sword. That's how we'll know it's time. We should try to kill Nagini before she can kill me first. Then I'll go after him."

Again, Draco felt shock from the observers in Granger's mind, but he kept pushing for information on horcruxes, and instead Granger pulled him to a planning session to break into the Ministry of Magic.

"The Ministry *must* have the Sword. They probably locked it away somewhere after Dumbledore's will came to light."

“It’s going to be bloody hard to steal it,” said Weasley.

“Yes, but if we manage it, Harry will be appropriately heroic, won’t he?” asked Granger, a bit wryly.

“Alright,” said Potter. “We’ll do it.”

Still pushing for the horcruxes, Granger pulled them to the moment when Potter joined her next to Dolores Umbridge.

“It’s me,” he whispered. She jumped violently as Umbridge turned to look at her, clearly showing Slytherin’s locket.

“What is it Mafalda?” she asked irritability.

Granger appeared to be casting around for something to say. “That’s a pretty necklace, Dolores!” she squeaked.

“Thank you. It’s from Selwyn family. I am descended from the Selwyn’s you know. Indeed, there are few pureblood families to whom I am not related.”

Granger just gave her a tight smile and turned back to the proceedings.

“Have you found the Sword?” whispered Potter.

She just shook her head slightly. “I haven’t either,” he whispered. “I even went to Umbridge’s office, and there was nothing. I don’t think it’s here.”

Granger immediately jumped to her feet.

“Must be going!” she yelped, as she hurried down the steps.

“Wait! Stop!” said Umbridge, but then Potter stunned her, and her patronus disappeared. Granger showed the rest of the memory unaltered as they escaped from the Ministry.

Draco pushed, and Granger fought, but she pulled forward mundane scenes of her wearing her rose necklace instead of the locket.

“Where did you get that necklace?” asked Potter one day. “I’ve never seen you wear it before this year.”

“It was my mother’s,” she said simply. “I took it when I Obliviated her.” Potter gave her an awkward look and then dropped it.

She pushed again, and they watched as the trio heard the voices of Ted Tonks, Dean Thomas, Dirk Cresswell and a goblin nearby, talking about Potter and retelling the story about Ginny Weasley, Luna Lovegood, and Neville Longbottom breaking into the Headmaster’s office to try to collect the Sword of Gryffindor.

Draco felt the observers start to grow uncomfortable with this.

They know where this is headed, he thought grimly.

Granger pulled out the portrait of Phineas Nigellus from her bag to question him about the students and their punishment. Finally, just as Phineas was turning to leave, Granger asked him about the last time he had seen the Sword, and Phineas informed her that he had seen Dumbledore use it to break open a ring and then leave the office with it.

Granger and Potter gasped, looking thrilled with the discovery, but Weasley had a mulish look on his face. Potter and Granger were talking quickly now, getting more and more excited. “He hid it, Harry! I’m sure of it! He must have hidden it before his will was ever read because he knew the Ministry would try to seize it if something went wrong, and he died! We just have to find it!”

“What do you think, Ron?” asked Potter. “Ron?”

“Remembered me, have you?” asked Weasley in a foul tone.

The trio fought about the Sword with just a few modifications from Granger until finally Weasley looked at Granger and asked her to leave Potter with him. When she said no, he said, “I get it, you choose him,” and he stormed out.

The memory followed Granger as she chased after Weasley pleading with him.

“Ron! Please! Don’t leave us! Don’t leave *me!*”

He turned and snarled at her. “You’ve made your choice. Now fuck off!”

She gasped, tears streaming down her face as Weasley disapparated away.

Draco felt a strong sense of guilt radiating from one of the observers.

That will be Weasley, he thought.

Draco pushed for more information about horcruxes, and then Granger released the next memory.

“I want to go to Godric’s Hollow,” said Potter, as he approached Granger.

“Yes, I really think we’ll have to,” she responded, and he looked surprised. “Dumbledore probably left the Sword there.”

Potter looked confused.

“Oh honestly, Harry, did you ever even open *A History of Magic?* ” asked Granger with exasperation.

He gave her a small smile. “Erm, maybe, you know… just once… to see what it was.”

She rolled her eyes. “Godric’s Hollow is the birthplace of Godric Gryffindor, and all of your ancestors have lived there. I’ve been thinking for awhile that Dumbledore probably hid the

Sword there.”

She pushed again, and then they were following Bathilda Bagshot into her home, Granger feeling very nervous. She watched as Potter followed Bathilda up the stairs and then a moment later he started screaming.

He felt the observers tense as they watched the scene unfold, as Granger’s curse ricocheted and caused Potter’s wand to snap, before she grabbed Potter and disapparated a moment before the Dark Lord arrived. Now Potter was lying on the ground.

“Harry! HARRY!” she shouted, as she looked down at Potter. He was bleeding profusely and thrashing, muttering words that were intelligible.

“Harry, wake up!” said Granger, and she was starting to sob. She grabbed his shirt to shake him and then pulled her hands back as though they had been burned. She ripped Potter’s shirt open, and instead of the locket she saw a dark black curse starting to spread over his heart.

“Oh my God,” she muttered, and as she bit her lip until she finally swallowed hard and seemed to be stealing herself for something. She cast one last look at Potter before turning to her bag. “*Accio* bandages! *Accio* dittany! *Accio* burn ointment! *Accio* knife!”

All of the requested items came flying out of the bag, and then Granger began to slice the burned skin off of Potter.

She was crying and talking to him as she did it, but Potter was still out of it. “Come on Harry. God I’m so sorry... come on... just a little more now.”

She finally severed the last piece of flesh, and then dressed Potter’s wounds. She pushed to the next memory.

“Hermione! You won’t believe who’s here!” came Potter’s voice, as Granger woke up groggily.

She opened her eyes to see a dripping wet Potter and Weasley standing there in the snow, Weasley carrying the Sword of Gryffindor.

She pushed a little further, and then she was saying, “So *Ron* got the Sword out of the pond then? But I thought it was supposed to be Harry!”

They both just shrugged. “Maybe Harry has to take it back from me,” said Ron.

“That doesn’t make sense. We’ll have to think about it. Maybe Ron has to be at the final battle too? Maybe it’s just the *weapon* that matters and not Harry? I just don’t know...”

She trailed off for a moment as she bit her lip and then sighed. “While we think about this I want to go see Xenophilius Lovegood. I want to get to the bottom of that small mark in the book Dumbledore left me. Maybe it’s a clue about the Sword.”

Draco pushed, and then Granger released the memory of the trio apparating through the air as they escaped from the Lovegood home. When they landed Potter was saying, “That’s it! It’s the Deathly Hallows! And the Elder Wand... that’s the special weapon!”

“No it’s not, Harry,” said Granger, rolling her eyes. “It’s the weapon of your forefathers remember? You-Know-Who is related to Slytherin. You must be related to Gryffindor! The prophecy *must* be talking about his affinity for snakes! His weapon is Nagini and yours is the Sword of Gryffindor! We’ve been over this a hundred times. The Deathly Hollows is just a children’s tale. We’re wasting our time. I’m sorry I even suggested we go there.”

Another push, and then Granger was on the floor of the sitting room in Malfoy Manor, screaming as Bellatrix tortured her.

“I’m going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword? *Where?*”

“We found it – we found it – PLEASE!”

But then Bellatrix cast the spell on her again, and the rest of Granger’s explanation was lost to the pain and screams.

“You are lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, *tell the truth!*”

But Bellatrix didn’t even give Granger a chance to respond this time before she cast the curse again, and the pain overwhelmed her.

Draco felt horror from the observers as they watched. He was surprised to feel Granger push one final time and then she was sitting in Grimmauld Place with Potter. He suddenly realized he had never seen this before, and he watched curiously.

“He’s definitely a Death Eater. Malfoy, I mean.”

“He saved you though...” said Potter hesitantly.

“No, his elf kidnapped me while your backs were turned and healed me,” she said firmly. “He was just keeping me there for...” she trailed off and blushed.

“Sex?” asked Potter hesitantly.

She gulped convincingly and nodded, looking down at the floor in the same way she did during their staged scenes.

“God Hermione, I’m so sorry,” said Potter in a stricken voice, as he pulled her to him. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

Granger provided a convincingly awkward look on Potter’s face at this question.

“No. You don’t need to know the details. And please don’t tell Ron,” she whispered. “He’ll go mental.”

"I won't, I swear it," said Potter.

"I got away," said Granger firmly. "I got away and that's what matters. And I've had a lot of time to think while I was locked away in Malfoy Manor. I'm worried the Sword we have is a fake. I know the goblin we overheard talking to Dean and Ted said the one in Bellatrix's vault is a copy, but what if he's wrong and the real one is in Bellatrix's vault? The goblin who identified it at Malfoy Manor said *ours* was the copy. I don't know if he was helping us or not. I just... I don't know Harry. I think we need to get into her vault and steal the one that's in there. We need to have them both, just in case."

Potter nodded. "Fine. You're probably right. Ron and I can check it out. We'll do some reconnaissance."

"I'll come too," she said, but he shook his head firmly.

"No. If you're caught again..." he gave her a meaningful look. "I'm not risking it, not after what Malfoy did to you. You can stay here and help us plan. You know Grimmauld Place has a library. You do the research, and Ron and I will do recon on the ground. The cloak only fits two of us anyway."

Granger hesitated, but then nodded a bit meekly. She looked relieved. "Alright," she said. "Thanks Harry."

Draco released her, giving her an impressed look as Potter and Weasley stared at them both with a mixture of awe and slight horror from everything they had just seen.

"That one at the end was new," said Draco, ignoring them for the moment.

"Well I thought we should set up all the recon they did at Gringotts. It will be too hard to block those memories. And I have tons of memories reading books about Gringotts' security. I need to account for the months in between my 'escape' and when we finally go for it."

Draco smiled. "Your fabrication is getting better. That was convincing."

"I've learned from the best," she said simply. "You're always telling me to keep it as simple as possible." Then she turned to Potter and Weasley. "That's what you both have to learn how to do."

"That was amazing," said Potter. "It all fits doesn't it? Even the whole weapons of our forefathers bit because it could apply to the Deathly Hallows too if he finds the wand between now and then. The cloak is the real artifact from my forefather, but the Gaunts were related to the Peveralls too."

"That's what gave Malfoy the idea for it, actually. And that's why I included the memory at Xenophilius's house. Malfoy's version of the prophesy could be interpreted in a couple different ways if it were real. It should throw him off and make him think. You-Know-Who is related to both the Peveralls and Slytherin through the Gaunts. If he happens to find the wand, he might think *that* is the weapon from the prophesy, but we want to show that we

have dismissed that interpretation of it and the very existence of the Deathly Hallows in the first place. He needs to think we believe your weapon is the Sword, not the Cloak. And we were hunting the Sword, not horcruxes.”

Potter nodded slowly. “That fits. But you did show a couple things about the horcruxes.”

Draco jumped in. “I told her to show those things because the Dark Lord is probably aware that Dumbledore knew about the horcruxes. But Dumbledore is also dead, and he was notoriously secretive. When you went to that cave with him Potter, the locket wasn’t there. The story Granger needs to tell is that Dumbledore was hunting horcruxes, but he died before he told you exactly what was going on. If the Dark Lord searches, he will think the diadem and cup are safe, and he will see the locket on Umbridge’s neck, but he will also see that you two didn’t recognize it. He will think you’re only after the snake because that’s how you interpreted the prophecy.”

“Why do you think You-Know-Who knows about Dumbledore?” pressed Potter.

Draco felt his stomach flip. Remarkably, Granger had never really questioned him when he suggested modifications to those memories. But now that they were here, there was nothing for it.

“Because Snape showed him memories of Dumbledore wearing that ring last year. I did too. Neither of us knew we were supposed to occlude it until after the Dark Lord saw it.”

There was a ringing silence, and he saw Granger looking at him with some surprise. But Draco couldn’t focus on her because he was staring down Potter’s wand.

Hermione

“You traitor!” Harry shouted.

Hermione dove in front of Malfoy. “Honestly Harry just listen! Snape is on our side!”

“He killed Dumbledore! He killed...”

“Dumbledore was dying anyway! That curse on his hand was killing him!” she shouted back.

Harry froze, a look of shock on his face.

“Please Harry, just listen,” she pleaded. Harry didn’t lower his wand, but he finally nodded stiffly.

“Tell him Malfoy.”

"They aren't occlumens yet, Granger," said Malfoy.

Hermione felt a surge of annoyance at this. "They aren't leaving Grimmauld Place until they can occlude it. Tell him what you told me."

Malfoy sighed. "Fine. Dumbledore arranged his death with Snape in advance. It was supposed to look like I killed him, and that's what the Death Eaters think happened... but neither of us knew you were in the tower that night to see it, Potter. Snape found out the Order knew the truth when he tried to make contact with Lupin the next day, and Lupin tried to kill him. Lupin wouldn't listen to Snape, so he didn't try again. But he's still part of the Order. He's been working with me for months to undermine the Dark Lord's plans with the defensive spells at Hogwarts. There's literally no way I would be able to do it without the Headmaster's cooperation because only the Headmaster can change the defensive mechanisms of the castle, even if he isn't the one who can activate them. And Snape has also been training me in theory and techniques for the *felix* so we get it right on the first try. He has a potions mastery. He's been absolutely critical."

Harry and Ron both looked shocked, and even Hermione felt surprised, though it certainly explained why Malfoy's potion skills had really taken off the previous few months. Private lessons with Snape would do it.

"But... but... why did Dumbledore trust him?" Harry asked in disbelief. "Dumbledore would never say, but after seeing what he did... I can't believe it unless I know."

Malfoy sighed. "You're probably not going to like this, but he was in love with your mother from the time they were children. He despised your father for marrying your mother, and that's why he hates you so much. But he loved your mum. He still does. He showed me his patronus, and it's a doe, just like hers. He's been working against the Dark Lord ever since your mum died. He wants revenge, and he wants it badly. Dumbledore knew, and that's why he trusted Snape. That kind of rage.... It doesn't go away, Potter. Not ever."

Malfoy glanced at her when he said this last bit, and she knew what he was implying.

Malfoy understands that kind of rage. That's why he arranged for Dolohov to die.

Harry looked to be in disbelief, but he lowered his wand slowly.

"I saw a memory once..." he said softly. "One of Snape's memories. My dad... he did levicorpus on Snape and taunted him. It was... well it was horrible, really. My mum tried to defend him but Snape called her a mudblood. I never thought he cared about her."

Malfoy grimaced. "Your mum was friends with Snape. That's probably why she defended him. But think about it from Snape's perspective, Potter. A bloke he hated had just humiliated him in front of the girl he fancied — the girl he more than fancied. And then she tried to rescue him. It probably really hurt his pride, and he lashed out. That doesn't mean he wasn't in love with her."

Harry bit his lip, but Hermione could see he was considering this point. Ron was nodding to himself also.

"It fits, Harry," said Ron quietly. "It all fits. How we got the Sword...Why he's always saved you even though he obviously despises you... Why he didn't torture Ginny and the others for breaking into his office... the defensive wards and the *felix*... Malfoy's right, he would need Snape's help with both."

"And Dumbledore was very adept with wandless magic," added Hermione quietly. "He could have stopped Snape from doing it, even after Malfoy disarmed him. He didn't try, Harry. He didn't try at all. He wanted to die that night. He didn't want to suffer."

Potter sat down again and put his head in his hands.

"God he was just maddening! Dumbledore I mean... he never told anybody all of it!"

"For what it's worth, that's one thing you and Snape agree on," said Malfoy wryly.

Harry just sighed, looking defeated.

"Alright, so Snape's not a traitor after all. I still don't like the git, but I'll admit that helps us quite a bit. Talk me through the horcrux thing again."

Hermione saw Malfoy was looking a bit nervous now. "Snape became aware of the horcruxes the night I brought the diadem to Granger."

Hermione felt shocked as she looked at Malfoy, and she could see Harry and Ron were looking wary again too.

"What? How?" she asked.

Malfoy gave her a defeated look. "Your bag, Granger. Your beaded bag was open while we were talking about it that night. Phineas Nigellus overheard us and reported it to Snape. I'm guessing that's also how Snape knew where to plant the Sword for you lot to find. He said it had happened before."

Hermione groaned as embarrassment took hold. Harry and Ron both looked resigned.

"What happened then?" she asked. "Tell us all of it."

Malfoy shrugged. "The last day of term he called me to his office, pretending to talk about Head Boy things. The minute I stepped in he practically attacked me with legilimency to see if I could block you. After the conversation Phineas Nigellus overheard, he knew you were alive, and he knew you were staying with me at the Manor. I occluded you and the horcrux, and once he knew I could do it he revealed himself to me. He knew about the diadem of course from Phineas Nigellus, and he had worked out that there were others – he figured out the diary and the ring were both horcruxes based on the kind of magic they exhibited. He suspects the snake as well. But he doesn't know about the locket or the cup. I haven't told him, and he hasn't asked me about it again. That same day he suggested we work together on the Hogwarts defensive plan. That gave us the excuse to connect the fireplace in my room directly to his office so you would have a secure escape if you needed one. It also gave us a cover to meet often so we could prep for *felix*."

Hermione just stared at him in shock. “And you didn’t tell me any of this because...”

“Because your occlumency training wasn’t done,” he said simply. “Snape would kill me if he knew that I had told any of you about this before you could sufficiently occlude the information. His position is just as precarious as mine is, and unlike Dumbledore he’s not willing to let that kind of knowledge out into the wild unless the people who know about it can close their minds.”

Hermione grimaced, but nodded. She understood of course. She didn’t like it, but she understood it.

“So that’s how you’re sure You-Know-Who knows about the horcruxes,” she said.

Malfoy nodded. “Yes. It’s obvious, really, if you think about it. The Dark Lord regularly searched my memories that year to check on the progress with my mission, and I showed him loads of memories with Dumbledore wearing that ring on his burned hand because I didn’t know I was supposed to occlude it. Snape told me he did the same thing. Snape also said that the Dark Lord himself ordered that the Sword be placed in Bellatrix’s vault. That means the Dark Lord knows what happened in the Chamber of Secrets, and he knows the Sword can kill horcruxes. The Dark Lord isn’t a fool, and he knows Dumbledore wasn’t one either. The Dark Lord knows Dumbledore was hunting horcruxes, or at least he strongly suspects it. But he thinks Dumbledore only found two.”

“He hasn’t checked on the others?” asked Harry curiously.

Malfoy shrugged. “I can’t say, but I doubt it. He only has a few weaknesses, but one of them is arrogance. He clearly didn’t check the cave last year because you found the fake locket there. He has so many horcruxes I don’t think he will look until he realizes we’re after them too. He thinks Dumbledore operated alone, just like he does, for critical missions. Since Dumbledore is dead, he’s not worried about them.”

Hermione felt herself nodding along with this logic.

“And we don’t think he made any more, right?” asked Harry.

Hermione shook her head. “I don’t think so, Harry. His soul is so unstable. I don’t think he can.”

There was silence for a few long moments and finally Harry said, “Alright, then. Occlumency. Let’s do occlumency, and then we’ll finish it.”

Hermione smiled as she pulled out the journal. “In the interest of time, start reading from the place I have tabbed. It covers Narcissa, Bellatrix, Andromeda, Sirius, Regulus, Draco, and me. That will give you a good overview of most of the techniques, though the entries from Malfoy and me are going to be most relevant for you. And...” she felt a bit of a squirm in her stomach as she prepared to say this final bit. “You’re both going to read some pretty shocking things from both of us. Prepare yourselves for it and please do not judge us for it. I want you to start reading tonight so we can begin working on this in the next day or two.”

Harry and Ron were looking at the journal with some trepidation now, but they took it and tucked it away.

Hermione stood and looked down at Malfoy. “Back to the Manor then?”

He just looked back at her incredulously.

“What?” she asked.

“Granger, you’re safe here.”

“So? I’m safe at the Manor too.”

“Sneaking you in and out of the Manor each day is not happening. You need to stay here.”

Hermione felt her stomach drop. She hadn’t intended to leave Malfoy. “I told you I was staying with you,” she said quietly.

“It’s not safe, Granger,” he said. “But I can come to you at night until the *felix* schedule no longer allows it. You have your own room here, right?”

She nodded, but she still wasn’t happy about that idea.

“We’ll do that, then. I can apparate between the Manor’s grounds and Grimmauld Place directly.”

Hermione bit her lip, thinking hard. She didn’t like the idea of him having to sneak outside to come to her every night, especially not now that he had to wake up in the middle of the night to brew. He would have to go back and forth. Then she had a brainwave, remembering something she had discussed with Narcissa on her first day of captivity.

“What about Tippy?” she asked. “Could Tippy apparate you directly between your room and Grimmauld Place? Or me? Dobby apparated Harry and Ron out of the Manor that day.”

Malfoy shrugged. “Call her and see. Your necklace might allow it.”

Hermione was both nervous and excited. “Tippy!” she cried.

Nothing happened, and Malfoy grimaced. “I suppose that makes sense,” he said slowly. “Tippy is tied to the House of Black, not to the Manor. Your necklace gives you rights in the Manor, but you aren’t part of the House of Black just yet.”

Hermione glanced at Ron and Harry as he said this, and they were both eyeing her necklace curiously. She turned a bit red at what Malfoy had just implied in front of her best friends.

“Let me try,” added Malfoy. “Tippy!”

Tippy suddenly appeared, making Harry and Ron jump. Hermione stepped forward.

“Tippy, this is Harry Potter and Ron Weasley,” said Hermione gently. “They’re my friends.”

“Tippy knows of Harry Potter Sir!” she squeaked. “And she knows of Harry Potter’s Wheezy! Tippy was friends with Dobby! And she knows Kreacher from the House of Black!”

Tippy bowed low toward a very bemused Harry and Ron.

“Tippy,” said Malfoy. “Can you apparate me or Granger directly between Grimmauld Place and my room in the Manor?”

“Tippy thinks so sir,” she said. “House Elf magic is different from wizard magic sir. Tippy feels she cannot speak the location of Grimmauld Place, but since Master has called Tippy here, Tippy can find it now.”

Odd, thought Hermione. One day she would have to do more research into House Elves.

“Can you answer a call from Granger now that you’ve been here?” asked Draco curiously.

“If Master orders it, Sir,” she said. “Tippy can answer Miss at the Manor because Tippy was ordered to answer to Miss while Miss was a guest in the Manor.”

Malfoy nodded. “In that case, I want you to answer to Hermione any time she calls you, wherever she is. I also want you to answer to Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley if they call you too.”

Harry and Ron looked shocked by this. She just gave them both knowing smiles. Malfoy was always closing loopholes. She knew he was only doing it to protect Hermione if she was in trouble and couldn’t call Tippy herself.

“Yes Master,” said Tippy happily.

“I’d like to test it,” said Malfoy. “Please return to the Manor and wait for Granger to call you.”

“Yes sir,” she said, and she apparated away.

Malfoy nodded at Hermione, and she said, “Tippy!”

Tippy immediately appeared. Malfoy looked relieved.

“Good. Now let’s try it one more time with Potter.”

Tippy nodded and disappeared.

Harry now said, “Tippy!” and Tippy appeared once more.

“Excellent,” said Malfoy. “Alright Tippy, I want you to apparate me and Granger back to my room.”

Tippy bobbed while Hermione walked over to Harry and Ron and gave them both hugs.

"I'll come by tomorrow afternoon so we can catch up. Read the journal, yes? Malfoy and I will start occlumency with you both the following day."

"We will," said Harry, and Ron nodded. She gave them one last smile and walked over to Tippy and Malfoy.

"Back to the Manor then Tippy," said Malfoy, and Hermione felt herself being pulled through the darkness with a *CRACK!*

Dear Rose,

This is my final entry for now because it's time for Harry and Ron to learn occlumency too. I'm going to insist upon it.

We're going to stage my 'escape' from Malfoy Manor so I have a clear memory to use for it. With any luck you'll be with Harry and Ron by the end of the day.

Your father isn't thrilled with the plan because he's very protective of me. But I'm just as protective of him. I can't live without him. I need him to survive, and he's about to do some very dangerous things. We have to get that final memory right.

I hope you're here. I hope you're real. Because if you are that means we both made it.

Love, Mum

Chapter 29: Dragon

Hermione

Hermione spent that evening and most of the following morning wrapped up in Malfoy, who pulled her into his bedroom the moment they arrived back at the Manor.

“I was so worried, Hermione,” he said between frantic kisses. “Never again. Never travel without a wand like that again.”

Hermione fully intended to be wandless during the final battle so that Malfoy could use her wand instead, but she hadn’t told him this yet.

Another fight for another day, she thought.

Still, she didn’t object to the careful attention he gave her that night or the way he held her and woke her up with his mouth on her nipples the following morning.

Not long after Malfoy finally left to visit Hogwarts, Hermione dressed and called for Tippy.

“Tippy!” she cried, and Tippy arrived with a *CRACK!*

She gave Tippy the exact location of the place she wanted to visit. Tippy looked a bit skeptical, but Hermione said, “Trust me, Tippy. It’s a muggle place. Nobody will recognize me, and I’ll call you right away if I need help.” Tippy sighed and held out her hand for Hermione, who grabbed it, and they apparated away together.

Several hours later, Hermione emerged into an alleyway and called for Tippy again.

CRACK! “Miss is OK?” asked Tippy worriedly.

“I’m perfectly fine, Tippy, thank you,” said Hermione. “Can you take me to Grimmauld Place now? I promised Harry and Ron I would drop in.”

Tippy looked relieved, as she grabbed Hermione and apparated her directly into the sitting room at Grimmauld Place.

To Hermione’s surprise, she felt her sickle burn as she arrived. She yanked it out of her pocket, her heart pounding.

I miss you beautiful.

She let out a sigh of relief and smiled. They hadn’t used their sickles very much ever since Malfoy moved back to the Manor, but for some reason he felt the need to talk to her today.

I miss you too. I’m surprised to hear from you though. I’ll see you tonight.

Well you're spending time with a couple other blokes this afternoon. I'm a jealous bastard.

Hermione rolled her eyes at this, but smiled to herself. At least he was being honest about it. And she liked it more than she was willing to admit.

I take it this will become a common occurrence then?

You can bank on it. Whenever you're with them I'm going to make sure your mind is on me.

I'm always thinking about you. But I do need to go see them now.

Fine. But keep your sickle close. I'll be in touch...

Hermione just smiled to herself, as she wandered into the kitchen.

“Hey you two,” she said to Harry and Ron. They turned around with identical looks of concern on their faces. She sighed to herself. She knew what was about to happen, but she wasn’t looking forward to it.

The boys exchanged glances, and then Harry spoke. “Hermione, we read the entries in the journal you asked us to read. All of them.”

She just nodded and pulled up a chair.

“I thought you would. That’s why I came over without Malfoy today.”

They both looked a bit surprised at that, but she gave them a knowing look. “I told you it would be intense, didn’t I? I thought you might want to talk about it before you start training with him.”

She saw Ron’s jaw was very tight, and Harry exhaled as he ran a hand through his hair.

“It’s just...” started Harry, “the things he did to you...”

“You mean the things I *asked* him to do to me,” said Hermione. “He was rather skeptical at first.”

“Oh please,” said Ron, suddenly. “You said yourself he enjoyed it!”

Hermione just closed her eyes for a moment, praying for patience. “Look Ron, I was completely honest in that journal. I wanted to create a narrative so I could occlude the last seven months of my life. There was absolutely no way I could block him out entirely, since he’s the only person I’ve had any real contact with since April. And yes, we eventually figured out how to do it in a way that was enjoyable. For both of us, I might add.”

“I just don’t understand it,” he insisted. “It’s not like you to enjoy... that sort of thing.”

Hermione felt her temper flaring. “With all due respect Ron, you have no idea what I might enjoy because you never got off your arse to start something with me. Malfoy did. And we connect in a really deep, physical way. And yes, we enjoy some things together that might be

different than what you would expect, but there's nothing wrong with it. He and I are on the same page about it, and he has always asked before trying something new with me."

Ron just gaped at her, while Harry looked uncomfortable. Hermione was distracted by the burn of her sickle. She discreetly pulled it out of her pocket and glanced down.

Will you be my good girl?

Oh my God, thought Hermione as she struggled not to react. She tapped her finger on it under the table.

Yes.

Ron opened his mouth to say something else as Harry jumped in.

"Look Hermione, we just want to make sure you're OK. And that he's not... controlling you in some way."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Honestly Harry, you know I can throw the imperius. And he hasn't given me a love potion or anything like that. You don't see me mooning around like Ron did with Romilda, do you?"

Ron's mouth opened to object but Harry looked reluctantly amused. Hermione felt her sickle burn.

Then come to my room at 8. Wear something... accessible.

Hermione bit her lip, as she struggled to stay present.

"You're positive Hermione?"

"Positive. It was my idea. He was very careful. And I enjoyed it." Both of them looked a bit pained at this. She pressed her sickle under the table.

I will.

"As long as you're sure," said Harry, giving Ron a stern look now. "You did say in the journal that you're..."

"In love with him, yes," said Hermione calmly, as her sickle burned.

And I want you to be wet for me when you get there. I'm going to take you.

Hermione felt it happening as she sat there. She gulped.

Harry nodded and Ron looked resigned now. "Alright," said Harry. "Then I won't ask you more about that. But can you tell us what occlumency training is like? We could feel him in your head, pushing you."

Hermione thumbed her sickle as she tried to focus on the question.

I'm ready now.

"It feels like pressure, but it doesn't hurt. His entry is subtle. He kind of... lies in wait until he pushes for something. When he does push it's a bit like a battle of wills. I think storytelling is much easier than blocking though, so we'll start with that."

She felt like she was rambling, but she could hardly focus. Her sickle burned again.

I said 8 darling. And you can't come until I see you tonight. Be good and don't touch yourself.

Harry and Ron exchanged looks. "The thing with blocking though," said Harry, "is the eruptions. They sound terrible."

Hermione was determined to respond to this before she responded to Malfoy.

"They can be embarrassing, yes. You saw that in my entries. I had quite a few... very personal eruptions."

"I don't really fancy him seeing that," chimed in Ron. "Nor you."

Hermione sighed. "I hear you Ron. But Malfoy is really good about it. He won't comment on it. I won't either. He and I can both guess the kinds of things we'll see."

She pressed her sickle.

I thought you liked it when I touch myself.

Harry and Ron were both looking really tense. Hermione was feeling too distracted to be gentle.

"Look, we'll see you wanking or having sex or whatever it is you're trying to hide. I'm sure I'll feature prominently in some of Ron's fantasies. It doesn't matter. We're all adults."

They both gaped at her now, but she ignored them as she glanced down at her burning sickle.

I like to watch you touch yourself. And since I can't watch, you had better not do it.

Hermione exhaled and looked at her two best friends. Ron's ears were very red and Harry was rubbing the back of his neck.

"You're different, Hermione," Harry said finally. "Being with Malfoy has changed you."

Hermione tapped her sickle.

What if I cheat?

She looked at her friends. "He's just made me realize what's important. And learning occlumency is important. There isn't time for mortification or embarrassment. He and I both

know that. We won't comment when you erupt. We'll just make you keep trying to block. I promise you will get used to it eventually."

Her sickle burned and she glanced down.

Then I won't let you come.

Hermione nearly gasped out loud. Surely he wasn't serious. She had never *not* come when she was with him.

Harry and Ron groaned. "Alright, fine. We'll do our best with it."

"Good," she said. "We will start with storytelling until you get used to having us in your head. But we will be doing a lot of training on an accelerated schedule, so we will get to blocking rather quickly. Don't stress over it. Every one of us who has trained like this has had to go through eruptions. The journal makes that clear."

She thumbed her sickle.

You can't be serious.

They both nodded at her. Then Harry sighed and gave her a thoughtful look.

"Honestly after reading that journal, I trust Malfoy more than I did. He turned against You-Know-Who before we got to the Manor. It wasn't just because of you."

Rod gave a reluctant nod of agreement at this.

"I know," said Hermione. "I thought his entries were fascinating. You can see how he changed. And what happened to him..."

"It's terrible," said Harry immediately. "I mean, I never liked him, though I'll admit he's been better since taking up with you. But still... to have your mind searched under torture? That's just..."

"Evil," supplied Ron, looking sick now.

"I know," said Hermione quietly as her sickle burned.

I'm very serious. Don't test me darling. I want you wet, ready, and eager for my cock. I'll know if you haven't been good.

Hermione felt herself shudder. She was going to be in a right state if he kept this up.

Harry said, "I hate to admit that Malfoy's good at anything, but if he can really occlude like that then you're right that he's a master. Especially if You-Know-Who has never figured out that he's an occlumens in the first place."

She tapped her sickle.

Yes sir. I promise to be good.

“You-Know-Who has no idea,” said Hermione. “It’s a huge advantage.”

Her sickle burned.

That’s better. Be good for me, and I’ll fuck you until you can’t think straight.

And with that, Hermione was done. Just done. She couldn’t focus anymore. She rose.

“I’ll see you both tomorrow, yeah? I need to be getting back.”

They looked a little startled at her abrupt departure, but they didn’t object as she called for Tippy, who appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Tippy, please take me back to my room at the Manor,” she said. Tippy bowed to Harry and Ron and then grabbed Hermione’s hand. A moment later she was staring at her room and groaned when she saw the clock on her nightstand. She had six hours to kill.

At eight o’clock on the dot Hermione stepped through the door to Malfoy’s room. He had spent most of the day at Hogwarts with just two quick floos back for *felix*, where he just winked at her before disappearing into the potions room. But she had also done as he asked. She was truly worked up now and more than ready to see what he had in store for her. In a nod to his request for easy access, she was wearing the same robe they had used to stage the scene with her wand and nothing else.

That’s about as easy as it gets, she thought.

As she stepped through, she saw it was dark and the room appeared to be empty. But then she heard his voice coming from a corner of the room.

“Tomorrow the student becomes the teacher. But it occurred to me that you haven’t had your final exam yet.”

“What are you –” she started, but suddenly she felt him in her head, and a moment later his solid form – still very much dressed – was pressing her back against the wall at the same time, as he immediately went searching for memories of him.

She was dizzy and distracted – they had never once done this while moving, let alone moving like *this*, but as she did her best. She forced her mind to stay on the staged memory of Malfoy-as-Death-Easter while she felt his hand in real life following the progression of his hand in the memory – first on her throat and then down to open her robe and cup one breast hard, and then this time he kept going as his hand made its way between her legs. She hardly knew if she was feeling the memory or feeling him in real life as she watched.

He pushed hard, trying to force her to show anything but the staged memories they created, while at the same time pressing his fingers into her center and making her knees buckle. She threw a memory back at him, the one of her being tied to the bed for the first time while he pounded her, and she heard his voice rasp, "That one was fucking hot," as he bit her ear.

Now he shifted gears and was pushing for horcruxes, and Hermione pulled him into the memory where she reported finding nothing about them in the library. She felt her robe opening and Malfoy's teeth grazing her nipples as he started looking for the prophecy, and she made her mind recite the false prophecy they had created together.

It was so dark she still couldn't see him, but she could feel him kissing down her stomach and toward her core as he looked for the Sword of Gryffindor. She pulled him to the memory immediately after the reading of Dumbledore's will, where she, Harry, and Ron concluded that the Sword and Nagini must be the weapons referenced in the prophecy.

"Spread your legs," he said roughly, and she instinctively did so while he shifted gears again and started looking for wandless magic. She could feel his lips kissing up and down on her inner thighs as she forced herself to show failure after failure as she tried wandless magic at Malfoy Manor. Then he pushed hard, and he pulled her to the moment she was crouching behind the bins at Grimmauld Place, and she frantically tried to occlude the wandless stunning she had performed on the Death Eaters. She story told through it and instead showed them turning their back on her for a moment as she sprinted to the boundaries of the fidelius charm.

He lightly touched his tongue to her core, and she gasped, as he pushed for memories of her escape. She watched him place her under the imperius curse and bind her to the chair before fucking her ragged, and Hermione groaned as she watched it. Or maybe she was groaning because he was sucking her clit now. She couldn't be certain, but she felt herself orgasm in her memory, and her body started to spasm in real life at the same time as she got so close.

Malfoy abruptly pulled away and then surprised her by quickly pushing to scan through her memories of the previous six hours to see if she had cheated. She didn't occlude this at all, but showed him how frustrated he had made her, how she had tried to distract her mind by reading, having a lengthy tea, taking a long bath, and promising herself that she would behave.

"You've been good then," he said roughly, as he released her, and then suddenly he stood and spun her around to press her against the wall so he was behind her.

Hermione realized she was breathing hard, already on the precipice of an orgasm, but true to his word he hadn't let her come until he had checked to make sure she didn't cheat.

"You passed your final exam darling," he said as she heard his belt unbuckling. "And you were a good girl too."

He nudged her legs open and slipped her robe off of her shoulders as he said, "Celebrating this achievement has made me a bit nostalgic. And I do recall an eruption you once had. It was a fantasy of yours. Remember this?"

And then she felt his cock at her entrance as she was pressed into the wall. She gasped and started to shake as he began to move, quickly picking up the pace the moment she had adjusted to having him in her like that. The angle was hard and tight, and Hermione found herself on her tiptoes to accommodate his height.

“I told you that if I ever got to fuck you like this, you wouldn’t be able to stand afterwards,” he said roughly. “Let’s see if I was right,” and then he unleashed himself on her, and Hermione felt something inside of her break as she collapsed onto his cock. Malfoy instinctively grabbed her tightly around the waist and pressed her further into the wall to keep her upright. It was only now that she realized he was *still* mostly clothed while she was completely naked, just like when he pretended to be a Death Eater. Hermione felt herself go weak with this realization, while the part of her that enjoyed letting him take control fully opened to him.

“*Oh fuck,*” he groaned, “take it love, just like that,” and Hermione tilted her hips back ever so slightly to give him deeper access, and then he was hitting gold.

“*Draco,*” she gasped. “*Oh God...*” and her vision blurred as she came so hard she didn’t know which way was up.

She realized rather suddenly that she had fallen to her knees, and then she felt Draco pull her hips back up and drive into her again.

“*More,*” he gasped. “*I want more from you, beautiful,*” and now Hermione instinctively presented to him, finally feeling more steady, now that she was on all-fours. She felt another orgasm start to rock through her, and her forehead hit the floor, while he groaned from behind her and emptied himself into her.

She was still as she caught her breath, and a moment later she heard him mutter something and the mess vanished. She felt him gather her gently into his arms, and she buried her face into his chest as he lifted her up and carried her bridal style to the bed. He deposited her there and pulled the covers over her without saying another word, and she sunk down into the mattress and pillows that smelled just like him as her body fully relaxed. It wasn’t long before she felt the mattress dip and Malfoy slipped in next to her. She yawned and said, “It’s still so early but I’m so...”

“Shhh, I know,” he whispered. “Rest darling. I’ll be here.”

Hermione murmured something unintelligible and soon fell fast asleep.

Draco

Dear Journal,

She staged her ‘escape,’ and made me promise to train Potter and Weasley in occlumency all in the same day. I love her more than anything in the world, but Salazar help me. She puts me through the wringer sometimes.

She’ll make it up to me though. She always does.

True to his word, Draco stayed with her, and he played with her curls that were splayed out on the pillow until finally falling asleep himself. He woke up once for *felix* and then again in the wee hours of the morning to find a naked Granger nestled firmly into his naked chest, and the part of him that was only whole when she was with him felt truly sated. He wasn’t sure what had gotten into him the previous day. He told her the truth that he was jealous that Potter and Weasley were spending time with her when he was not, even though he had had months of exclusive access to her. He just couldn’t get enough, and now that she was released to Grimmauld Place he found he didn’t want to share her. At all. He relished their little bubble in Malfoy Manor that was just for the two of them. Draco was thrilled that Tippy could apparate Granger securely. It would allow them to stay together at night, even through the final stages of *felix*.

He knew his possessiveness was bordering on ridiculous. He knew she was a package deal with Potter and Weasley. He had always known that. But he still wanted to remind her that what she shared with him was unique. The Boy Wonder and the Weasel King might be her oldest friends, but they would never be able to give her the same things Draco would give her. He would lay the world at her feet if he could.

And so he had sent her sexy messages to keep her mind on him instead of her friends. He had been honest about his motivations though, and she didn’t seem to mind.

Then he had totally blindsided her with legilimency while thoroughly distracting her to really test her defenses. She managed to hold her occlumency, and he couldn’t have been prouder of her. It was the closest thing to torture he would ever be able to do to her to give her practice with the Death Eaters who may try to hurt her while they were searching her mind. She had had to dissociate to hold her occlumency while he touched her and ate her out, just in the same way she would need to dissociate if she were ever tortured again. She had been flawless though.

And once she passed his first test, he discovered she had also passed his second by getting herself very worked up for him, but waiting for *him* to be the one to give her pleasure. That, he thought, was exactly how it should be. He should be there for it. He wanted to witness every orgasm she had for the rest of her life. The revelation that the long wait had made her like putty in his hands had been a bit unexpected, but it was truly gratifying, and he resolved to do it again soon. She had turned molten for him the moment he released her from the legilimency.

He felt his witch start to stir, and he had the oddest thought that she was a bit like a cat, all curled up in sleep but now starting to stretch as she woke up. As she adjusted herself the

sheet fell a bit to reveal one of those dusty pink nipples that he was so obsessed with. He reached up and ran the pad of his thumb across it and watched as it instantly peaked for him as Granger's eyes fluttered open. She yawned and stretched in earnest now, her breast becoming fully exposed, and Draco knew he was done for. He slipped his hand across her waist and lowered his mouth for a taste.

"Mmmm, that's the second day in a row I've woken up like this," she said in amusement.

"That's because you keep falling asleep in my bed naked," he quipped. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you. But something about seeing these tits first thing in the morning is all it takes to get me randy as hell."

"You're always randy," she laughed, but she arched into him and tangled her legs with his. "And you also like to sleep naked."

"True," he acknowledged between licks. "Can you blame me for either one though? You're the one who once made me come four times in a twenty-four hour period, all for the sake of occlumency."

"I take my studies seriously," she joked.

"So do I," he replied. "And right now I'm studying you."

He gave her several long, lazy kisses between her breasts before moving back to her nipples. He was in no rush. Potter and Weasley wouldn't be expecting them for some time, and his schedule with *felix* still gave him a large block of time in the morning. Mercifully, that block of time wouldn't disappear until the very end.

"Hmmm, I wonder what else you'll find in your studies of me this morning," she said in a too-casual voice that made him lift his head and narrow his eyes at her.

"Is this your way of telling me Tippy gave you a haircut and I didn't notice? Or some other nonsense like that?"

She gave him an amused smile. "Well I doubt you'll call it nonsense once you figure it out, Malfoy. And I'm rather surprised you haven't noticed already. But in your defense, it was awfully dark last night. And the sex was really hot."

He raised one eyebrow at her. "Don't try to butter me up. What did you do?"

She gave him an impish smile. "I left the Manor for a few hours yesterday morning to have a... procedure done."

The bottom dropped out of Draco's stomach as he gave her a fierce look. "Granger..." he warned. She wasn't supposed to leave. She was supposed to stay at the Manor or Grimmauld Place. Those were her only options. She was safe within the wards at both places. And yet the first full day of her freedom, Granger had opted to go somewhere else without telling him about it first. Draco felt himself starting to spiral with fear and anger.

She must have seen his eyes flash because she gave him an intense look. “Don’t chastise me for it until you know what it is. Tippy took me there and back. I was perfectly safe, and I won’t need to leave again.”

Draco tried to force the dark thoughts back down as he started scanning her body, trying to understand what the fuck she meant by a “procedure.”

Her face looked the same with the hazel eyes and smattering of freckles across her nose. She still had those three moles on her neck and chest. He made a point to kiss them every time they had sex. She hadn’t gone to a healer to have them removed like so many pureblood witches would opt to do. He pulled the sheet down further and saw her arms and breasts and stomach all looked the same.

He pulled the sheet down past her hips and suddenly his mind ground to a halt as all the air left his body, and he stared at it.

There, just below the first date of her tattoo she had added a small crown made out of silver that was a replica of the diadem of Ravenclaw. Surrounding the outer edge of the dates was a complete, perfect circle made up of Tudor roses, though they were in silver and gold instead of the traditional red and white. And there, in the very middle, leaving just a small space at the bottom for two additional dates and the final horcuxes to be added later on, was a dragon holding a single, traditional rose in its claws that was the exact shade of pink as the Gentle Hermione he had planted. The dragon was clearly a Hebridean black, with the distinctive ridged back, arrow-tipped tail, and violet eyes.

A dragon and a rose, surrounded by promises and trust, he realized. She had added Draco and herself to her tattoo, along with a symbol that represented everything they had done together and hoped to do in the future. Draco felt a lump form in his throat as he looked at it.

He reached out a shaky hand to touch it reverently, in disbelief that she had already done it. Ever since she told him about it, he assumed it would be something to do after the war, maybe once things were settled and their relationship had finally come out into the open. But she had taken the very first chance she got after being released from the Manor to put Draco on her body permanently.

“Hermione,” he said in a scratchy voice, as he looked up at her. She was watching him intently, a small smile on her face. He was emotional, and his chest felt oddly tight. She didn’t say anything, but her eyes seemed to glow as she watched him process it. And suddenly he had to tell her everything. All of it.

“I love you,” he said softly. “I’m in love with you. You probably already know it, but I haven’t told you. I... I’ve never said that to anybody. But I do. I love you. And I want to date you so the whole world knows. I want to marry you and have kids with you. I want to build a life with you. I want to get old with you, really, really old. So old that I want us to be sent to St. Mungo’s for mutual hip replacements one day because we’re still trying to get a leg over when we’re a hundred and fifteen. And when we’re both finally gone after spending at least a century together, I want you to be on my right side when they bury us in the family mausoleum. I just... I love you so much, Hermione. I would do anything, *literally anything* if it meant we both survived this war and could have that.”

Her eyes were huge and filled with tears as he spoke, and she pulled his face to hers for a searing kiss. When she released him she gave him a blazing look and said, “I love you too, so much it hurts. You’re it for me. You have my mind and body and heart, and they could never belong to anybody else, not ever. I did this because I want you to know it. Whatever else happens, whatever else comes next, I’m yours. It’s done, and you have me. And God, I hope we both make it through this war. I’m going to do my very best to make sure that happens. Because everything you just said? Yes. Yes to all of it.”

Draco felt something in his chest swell, and he kissed her again, deep and slow, trying to pour every single thing he wanted to say into it. When he pulled away, he looked down again at the dragon and for the first time noticed some redness around it. He touched it lightly again. “Does it hurt?” he asked quietly. “I was rough with you last night. I didn’t know. But...”

She put a finger to his lips, and he quieted. “It takes a few weeks for muggles, but I used a magical salve on it yesterday to heal it. I’m fine. It’s a little sensitive, but the pain is nearly gone. And somehow you managed to avoid it last night.”

He exhaled a sigh of relief and kissed her again. “Good, I don’t ever want to hurt you,” he murmured, “because I love you. Merlin, Hermione, I love you so much.”

His kisses were becoming frantic, and he rained them over her face – her nose, her chin, her eyelids, her cheeks. He tried to kiss every freckle on her face. He finally made his way to the shell of her ear, and he felt that familiar catch of her breath that told him she was attuned to him, as he lavished attention on one of the most erogenous parts of her body.

“Let me show you,” he whispered. “Let me show you how much I love you.”

“Yes,” she breathed, and then Draco closed his eyes and just let himself touch and smell and taste her. He inhaled her, consumed her, allowed her to seep into every pore of his body.

He trailed his lips from her ear down her neck toward her chest, and when he reached that place just above her left breast he whispered, “*Carissime cor meum,*” and instinctively he pushed with his magic. He heard her gasp as his magic touched hers for the briefest moment, melding together and attuning to one other in a spark of golden sunlight. It was beautiful, he thought, absolutely perfect in every way because it was theirs, together, before it split and seeped back into their respective bodies.

Feeling her magic like that, even for just the briefest moment, seemed to light a fire, as his inner dragon recognized its mate. It flooded his veins, and she gasped again as his attention turned from gentle to heated in a moment. He gave an open mouthed kiss to her left breast before returning to her neck and sucking hard. She had marked herself for him, and now he wanted to mark her too, thanks to some primal need to show the world she was his. She offered him her neck and melted with a sigh that made his dragon’s heat calm to a gentle simmer.

As he moved back down and his hands traced the familiar planes of her body, he suddenly smelled it: the scent of her arousal. He knew it so well he could recognize it in an instant, and automatically he hardened as he knew she was ready for him. The touch of his fingers at

her core was just a confirmatory swipe – something so light she shuddered – but it made her open for him and tilt her hips in just the right way to tell him she was ready and wanting.

He would give her what she wanted. Of course he would, always. So when her body went supple and her nipples hardened and her pupils dilated and she arched ever so slightly, she told him to claim her, and he would do just as she asked. When he sheathed himself inside of her, he did it gently, taking care to avoid that sensitive place on her hip she had reserved just for him. He knew he would wait until she was healed to trace every line with his tongue, because it was permanent, and it would be there tomorrow and the next day and the next.

As he began to rock, his lips found hers, his hands found hers, and he pressed the length of his body into hers to imprint himself upon her. It was a claiming, just as he sensed she wanted, slow but hot, each thrust matched by her as she took him in completely and molded her body to his.

Before long his dragon started to stir again, sensing its mate was approaching that moment, and his movements became harder, tighter, while hers became even more pliant, truly offering herself up to him in a way that he could hardly comprehend. He buried his face into her neck and breathed her in as he whispered, “I love you,” over and over again. Now that he had said it once it was like the floodgates had opened, and he couldn’t stop. He would say it to her every day, every hour if he had to, so that she would know it and never doubt it.

He heard her answering, “I love you too,” and something like joy lept in him as he increased his pace. Before he knew it, she was crying his name as he pushed her over the edge, only to catch her on the other side with his answering pleasure, as his seed spilled inside of her.

Something about the promises they had made to each other that morning took hold of him now, and he slipped out to kiss that spot just below her navel that would hopefully grow round with his children someday. He closed his eyes as he thought of it, the image so arresting it left him nearly breathless. He opened his eyes again and found himself staring at the dragon holding its rose, and he allowed himself the pleasure of the lightest, gentlest kiss before moving back up to her lips.

“I love you,” he said again. “I’m going to love you until the day I die and afterwards, assuming there is some type of afterlife.”

“I’ll do the same. And I think there is some form of afterlife,” she whispered. “You should watch Harry’s memories of the night You-Know-Who rose again. His parents appeared to him through *priori incantatem*. They knew him. They talked to him. They still loved him.”

Draco felt a sudden fierce hope that this was true, because if it was then he’d never be without her, regardless of what happened during the war.

“Come here, beautiful,” he said, as he pulled her close. “I’m going to spend every minute with you before I have to let you go.”

She just smiled at this and curled into him again, much the same as she had been when he first woke up. He gave a contented sigh and closed his eyes. Potter and Weasley could wait.

The dragon had found its treasure.

Dear Journal,

I told her I love her, and she loves me too. It might have been the greatest moment of my life. I can't wait to keep every promise I made to her. I just hope the world lets me do it.

Chapter 30: Crucio

Chapter Notes

TW: Mention of childhood abuse

Draco

Dear Journal,

If you had told me a year ago that I would be spending hours every day alternating between Potter's head and Snape's office I would have lit you on fire for even suggesting such a thing.

War changes everything doesn't it?

I'll write more someday. Maybe. I'm absolutely exhausted.

In the days following the morning that Draco discovered the dragon holding a rose something truly curious happened. Granger's wand, which had always been a bit temperamental, suddenly cooperated without hesitation for the first time. True, it had been growing more cooperative over the months as he had worked with it and became closer to the witch herself, but it still had a mind of its own when he pushed it too far. He could still feel her magic in it, which he had grown very fond of and wouldn't trade for the world. But it finally really felt like his wand for the first time ever and not a wand he was borrowing.

He thought it might have been something to do with the magic that had touched them. Draco wasn't certain *what* he had done, other than whisper a sentimental phrase to her in Latin and allow his instincts to take over. But ever since that moment he had felt more attuned to her and her wand as well. Instead of judgment he felt trust. Instead of disapproval he felt eagerness. Granger had committed herself to him, and so had her wand. He was certain now it would do anything he asked of it because everything, *everything* he was doing now was being done for the protection of the witch herself and their dream for a life together after the war.

That dream required a working wand. And it also required training Weasley and Potter in occlumency and brewing one of the most challenging potions on the planet. Draco truly had his work cut out for him.

Weasley, in a truly lucky break, picked up on occlumency much more quickly than Draco could have ever expected, and it meant the period of watching him erupt was mercifully

short. That was a good thing, because neither Draco nor Weasley particularly enjoyed watching Weasley wank to thoughts of Granger. Draco had to force himself not to hex Weasley every time it happened.

But thankfully it was very short lived. Weasley had connected most strongly to the emotional outpouring method that Sirius and Bellatrix both used, and he did it so well that Draco and Granger eventually concluded he didn't have to learn how to storytell at all. He created a true, complete block. A legilimens could look into Weasley's head and wouldn't be able to make it past the enormous swell of emotions Weasley threw their way to even begin to look for any details. Even when Draco and Granger broke in and pushed together, they could never make it past a blurry face before they were completely inundated.

The unique thing about Weasley's method was that the emotions changed depending on what type of information Draco was looking for, whereas all previous iterations of it Draco had studied in the journal focused on a singular emotion. When Draco pushed for information about Potter or the horcruxes, Weasley quickly learned to push an odd type of blinding loyalty towards him that was tinged with jealousy. When Draco pushed for information about Granger, Weasley pushed back sadness and unrequited feelings. And when Draco pushed for information about himself, Weasley pushed anger and rage that Draco had gotten the girl.

Draco sensed that Weasley's non-occlumency feelings toward the others weren't really this strong, except possibly his loyalty to Potter. He had seemed to accept that it wasn't happening with Granger, and he even managed to be relatively cordial to Draco, though he was still a bit prickly now and then. But when he focused on occluding, he could turn on the emotional centers in his brain and just let it flow. Draco was reluctantly impressed and told Weasley to record it in the journal.

"You've really got it locked down," he told Weasley after a couple weeks. "We'll keep testing it, but I can't get past that initial flash of whoever I'm looking for. I can't see or feel anything at all except the emotions you're pushing on me. You'll need to be careful with it, though. They're mostly negative emotions, and you can see what that did to Bellatrix."

"Yes, well, I don't plan to let Death Eaters into my head on a regular basis, do I?" he asked tightly.

Draco just rolled his eyes. "When the Death Eater's not me, they aren't going to let you go so quickly. Just be careful with it. The Blacks who have used that method successfully have all developed a streak of instability, and I've always thought it was because of constant exposure to whatever emotions they're tapping for occlumency. You just shouldn't overuse it, that's all I'm saying."

Weasley gave him a stiff nod and Draco moved back to Potter.

As Snape had predicted when Draco first told him he would be training Potter, the task was more monumental than Draco had originally anticipated. Coupled with his schedule for *felix*, Draco was running on fumes, and Granger was brewing him a steady supply of awakening solution to keep him on his feet.

Potter actually wasn't half bad at storytelling. Draco discovered during one of his eruptions that Potter had spent much of his very lonely and desperate childhood making up stories about imaginary friends. And he had always had a tendency to lie when caught doing something he shouldn't be doing. So Potter could storytell, and he could even do it pretty well on the fly with less preparation than Granger required. With some practice he got rather good at it.

His blocking was getting better too, after Potter erupted memory after memory of early childhood abuse from his aunt and uncle that Draco had not been expecting at all. Draco had prepared himself to see the typical eruptions of teenage fantasies, most of which he assumed would be featuring Weasley's sister and possibly Granger. But instead, Potter's eruptions were darker than that. Draco and Granger both became rather familiar with the cupboard under the stairs where Potter had lived for the first ten years of his life with only spiders for company.

After one particularly rough session when Potter continued to erupt memories of his cousin beating the shit out of him, Draco finally looked at him and said, "Look, I know I'm supposed to just ignore what I'm seeing, but I can't. I know you disliked me from the first moment we met in Madam Malkins and then again on the train, and now I think I know why. I reminded you of Dudley, didn't I?"

Potter looked uncomfortable but nodded. Though he gave Draco a wry grin and said, "Well, a skinnier version of him, yes."

Draco felt his lip quirk at this before his face fell, and he sighed. "I think that's why you keep erupting those memories. I'm in your head, and I remind you of him. Look, for what it's worth, I'm sorry. I really am. I know I was a little shit as a kid, and I'm still an arrogant prick. I'll probably always be an arrogant prick. But what those people did to you was truly appalling. I can't believe Dumbledore just left you there."

Potter looked startled at this, but then cocked his head to study him. "You sound like Hermione. She was always going on about 'appropriate living conditions,' but Dumbledore said he had to do it to preserve my mother's protection."

Draco rolled his eyes at this. "That's bullshit. There are a hundred wizarding families who would have taken you in and done advanced blood wards to keep you safe. Or he could have brought you to Hogwarts and protected you with elf magic. No, I think Dumbledore was looking for the easy solution in the moment, and he just assumed he had made the right choice. He was arrogant and didn't bother to check to see if he made a mistake after he dropped you off on their doorstep. By the time you got to Hogwarts he didn't think he could undo it."

Potter's eyes were huge. "Look, we won't talk about it again," added Draco. "But for the sake of occlumency, I wanted to clear the air."

Potter gave him a stiff nod, but when they returned to training his blocking got better. Evidently Draco's apology had worked well enough that Potter was able to separate Draco from the Dursleys.

The real problem with Potter's occlumency though, and one that had no quick solution, was the sheer amount of material Draco had to work through. Even with the head start from Granger's memories and help from Granger herself to reinforce the training, he had a mountain of fresh memories to review. Potter had had many experiences that didn't involve the other two at all.

He had extensive memories with Dumbledore, going all the way back to their first year. They had been close, Draco realized, very close. They were close enough that Potter felt deeply betrayed when Dumbledore ignored him for the entirety of fifth year and treated him like every other student. And then he had private lessons with Dumbledore during sixth year that ended the night he had gone to that cave, which was horrifying enough that Draco himself had nightmares from it afterwards.

Potter also had a number of solo memories involving the Dark Lord in various manifestations that reached all the way back to his first year of Hogwarts. Draco watched all of them with shock, starting with an eleven-year-old Harry Potter fighting Quirrell to rescue the Sorcerer's Stone. Then he saw a twelve-year-old Harry Potter kill the basilisk and destroy the diary in the Chamber of Secrets while Tom Riddle nearly killed him and Ginny Weasley. Then he finally watched the full memory of third year and the rescue of Sirius Black, which culminated when a thirteen-year-old Harry Potter cast a corporeal patronus for the first time. Then things turned very dark in fourth year when a fourteen-year-old Harry Potter watched Cedric Diggory drop dead from a killing curse before being tied to a headstone in a graveyard as the Dark Lord rose again. His memories from the Department of Mysteries were more extensive than Granger's because Potter kept fighting after Granger was cursed, and Draco watched with regret as Sirius Black fell through the veil and then in disbelief as Potter was possessed in the atrium while Dumbledore and the Dark Lord dueled. The memories culminated in sixth year while Draco watched himself point a wand at a dying Dumbledore, the blood drained from his face with fear before Snape barged in and just did it, totally unaware that he was being observed by a traumatized teenager who had been tasked to save the wizarding world.

And those were just the highlights. They didn't even touch on the times in between: his lonely visions in the Mirror of Erised, the constant oscillation between being favored and reviled, the late night wanderings of the castle in his invisibility cloak, the failed occlumency lessons with Snape, the retrieval of the real memory about horcruxes from Horace Slughorn.

Over and over again, Potter was alone, so Draco had to take the time to watch first so he could adjust them to fit the story. While Granger had told Draco about many of them from a factual standpoint, hearing a ten second summary of them and watching them were two completely different things. The entire process was taking longer than any of them wished.

"At least you'll be really proficient by the time we get to the end," said Granger one day, as she was watching Draco release Potter from yet another memory.

"But I don't know if I'll be able to occlude him," said Potter grimly, as he rubbed his scar. "It's just... it feels different. I mean, I've had Malfoy and you and even Snape in my head plenty of times now, and it's nothing like the visions I get with him."

Draco knew this was true. More than anything else Draco had seen in Potter's head, his visions of the Dark Lord were truly bizarre and perplexing. Draco and Granger had talked about them extensively, and even Weasley had broken in a few times to watch so they could all discuss them together.

"You may not be able to," said Granger sighing. "And I know I'm the one who was always nagging you about it, but you're right that it's different. Dumbledore seemed to think occlumency would work, but he never watched your visions himself, did he?"

Potter shook his head. "I don't think so. I mean, there are a few times You-Know-Who left my head his own, but I've never been able to figure out *why*."

Yes, Potter's visions were troubling. Something about them made Draco incredibly uneasy, and as he continued to watch them he had an idea about them that was so horrifying he didn't dare raise it to the others. Draco told himself it couldn't be *that*. It wasn't possible. It had to be some odd magic that had bound Potter to the Dark Lord through the failed killing curse, just as Granger always insisted.

"I honestly think my training with Snape made it worse," said Potter one evening as they all settled in for a firewhiskey before Draco and Granger headed back. "All he ever did was just break in over and over. He didn't go through my memories systematically like you're doing."

Draco shrugged. He knew it was true. He had seen it himself. "Honestly I'm not sure anybody's been trained in occlumency this way before. It just kind of... developed between me and Granger when we realized we had the time to be really methodical about it and there was so much stuff to hide. Most occlumency training is just breaking in over and over again, though. Mine was like that."

"Snape was useless though. 'Clear your mind Potter,'" said Potter in his best Snape impression. "I mean, what the hell. He never once tried to tell me *how*."

Draco smirked. "He does rather loathe you."

Potter groaned. "Tell me about it. I still can't believe he's on our side." Draco opened his mouth to say something but Potter jumped in. "I know he is! I just mean he's always seemed like such an evil git. I guess it's just one of the things I inherited from my father: my appearance, my Gringotts vault, my invisibility cloak, and my unfortunate relationship with Snape."

The others looked at him in amusement.

"Yes, one of those things is definitely not like the others," agreed Granger before draining her drink.

As Draco and Granger stood, Potter stopped them. "Malfoy, I wanted to ask you something if you have a minute." Draco looked at him curiously, but nodded and sent Granger back to the Manor with Tippy alone.

To his surprise, Weasley didn't leave, and Malfoy looked at them both warily. They were looking at each other and doing that thing they liked to do where they had a silent conversation with each other without saying anything at all. It always made Draco a little uncomfortable. Finally Potter nodded and looked back at Draco.

"When we read the journal you had a lot of entries about occluding under torture," said Potter.

"Yes," said Draco, wondering where on earth this was going.

"And I know you can cast the cruciatus curse. I've seen you do it in my visions," said Potter.

Draco nodded tightly. That particular discovery had been one of the more jarring moments for Draco.

"We want you to cast it on us and do legilimency at the same time. We want to practice our occlumency under torture," said Potter. Weasley nodded in agreement.

Draco just gaped at them. "Are you both fucking mental?"

Potter shook his head. "No. You know I've had the curse cast on me before. Ron hasn't, but he probably will at some point. And we need to practice it that way."

Draco didn't say anything to this. He just walked to the sideboard and poured himself a drink and drained it. Then he drained another before turning back to Potter and Weasley.

"I don't like that spell Potter," he said. "The exchange is... it feels wrong."

Potter gave him that determined look Draco had come to associate with reckless Gryffindor behavior.

"But you can do it. And you cast the imperius on Hermione."

"That was different," said Draco automatically.

"Was it really?" asked Potter.

Draco just chewed his lip but didn't say anything to this.

"We want to do it to protect Hermione," added Weasley quietly, and now Draco's attention turned to him.

"What are you on about?"

Weasley shrugged. "Just that we know you've never trained her like that. And you won't." Draco felt himself grow sick at the very thought. Of course he wouldn't torture Granger. "But if you do it to us and we can hold our occlumency with it, then she's surrounded by three wizards who can do it. You know that any one of us would take that curse for her. And we can keep her secrets if they're searching us for information about her."

Draco stilled as he really thought about this. He wasn't an idiot. He knew Granger wasn't their only motivation to ask him to do this. But Weasley was also right that it could help protect her. And that meant Draco already knew what his answer would be.

"Alright, but I have a couple conditions."

They glanced at each other and nodded.

"First, we don't tell Granger, at least not yet. She'll *Avada* all three of us."

They nodded immediately in agreement with this.

"Second, I can cast the curse but I shouldn't do the legilimency."

They both frowned. "What do you mean?" asked Potter.

"Just that I've never tried to do both spells at once before. The Dark Lord can hold a cruciatus curse while performing legilimency but most Death Eaters can't do it very well because it splits your attention. Even the Dark Lord prefers to have help with the cruciatus when it's available."

They both furrowed their brows as they considered this. "Who then?" asked Weasley.

Draco just looked at them, and then Potter's eyes got big. "You can't mean..." he started.

Draco just gave him a grim look. "His legilimency is nearly as good as the Dark Lord's. He knows I'm training you. It's the most realistic scenario you could hope for."

He saw a resigned look on both of their faces, but then they turned determined again. "Fine," said Potter.

Draco nodded. "I'll go there now and ask him. I'm due for another round of practice with him tonight anyway. I'll send you a message on Granger's galleon to arrange it."

They both nodded, and he called, "Tippy!"

She appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Take me back to my room please."

Tippy grabbed his hand and apparated away, as Draco wondered what the hell he had gotten himself into with Harry bloody Potter.

It came as no great surprise that Draco had his work cut out for him convincing Snape to show himself to Harry Potter. Draco of course, had not told Snape that Potter already knew

about him.

“His mind is mundane,” Snape sneered. “He won’t be able to occlude me.”

“He will,” said Draco, rolling his eyes. “My training methods are... different. He’s not as good at it as you and I are, but he’s tolerable. He needs practice with this.”

Eventually Snape agreed, and then Draco had to turn to the other problem of keeping it from Granger. This, he found, was a lot more challenging than he had expected.

“You three are up to something. Don’t think I haven’t figured that out.”

“Darling, he just wanted me to test his occlumency one last time, that’s all.”

“Then why did you floo to Snape as soon as you got back?”

“Felix. You know he’s helping me practice.”

She had let it drop, but she was suspicious.

He had arranged for a meeting with Potter, Weasley and Snape for two nights later during a break with *felix*, and then he recruited Tippy and his mother to distract Granger with a multi-course dinner. Tippy also had strict instructions not to let Granger out of the Manor until Draco returned, not even if she asked. To his amusement, his plan worked.

“I have no idea what to wear! This is not the sort of thing I’m good at!”

Draco smirked as he watched Granger dithering over the multitude of robes his mother had purchased for her.

“You’ll look lovely in any of them.”

She threw him a glare. “That is the *least* helpful thing you could possibly say. I need opinions. *Guidance*. You’re the one who’s part of the bloody nobility, not me.”

He chuckled as he walked into her closet and selected something in a forest green that he thought would make the green flecks in her hazel eyes pop.

She slipped into the bathroom to put it on, and when she emerged he surveyed her with satisfaction. It was conservative and hit her at the knee, but the neck was square and showed just the barest hint of the swell of her breasts under her necklace. As she moved back to her closet to look for shoes, he tilted his head and bit his lip. The skirt was fitted and hugged her arse perfectly. He suddenly had a deeper appreciation for the style his mother was trying to impose on Granger.

“No robes,” he said. “It’s a casual dinner. She won’t expect them.”

She nodded as she slipped on some heels, and Draco was rather startled at what they did to her legs. She was still tiny, but they raised her several inches closer to him and made her legs look like they were carved.

“You’re *sure* you can’t stay?” she asked, as she chewed on her lip.

“I told you, I’m not invited,” he said smoothly. “And I have another round with Snape for *felix* anyway. You can message me on your sickle when you’re done.”

She huffed a little. “But *why* does she want to have a nice dinner with me?”

“Why not?” asked Draco. “There’s nothing to worry about.”

“She’s just...” Granger trailed off.

“She’s what?” pressed Draco.

“She’s just so *elegant*. And I’m not. And I don’t know, I just... I want her to like me.”

He gave her an incredulous look. “You’re beautiful. And she already loves you. She just wants some quality time with you. Now I’m going to get out of your hair, but call me on the sickle when you’re done, yes? And don’t take off that dress without me.”

He gave her a quick kiss and turned back toward his room, casting one last look back at her before he slipped through the door and threw the floo powder into the fireplace.

A moment later he was standing in Snape’s office.

“You’re late,” said Snape, without any preamble.

“I had to shake off Granger,” he said tersely. He ignored Snape’s knowing look as he shoved a scrap of parchment into Snape’s hand with Potter’s address on it and called, “Tippy!”

A moment later the little elf appeared, and she whisked both Draco and Snape to Grimmauld Place.

Potter and Weasley were standing there waiting for them. The tension was thick, and finally Draco broke it.

“We don’t have much time. We should get started.”

The others said nothing, and they followed Draco into the library for space to practice. It was the largest room in the house.

“Alright,” he said, now looking at Potter and Weasley. “You’ve read about this, but the key to occluding under torture — especially for you Potter — is to dissociate from the pain as quickly as possible. You have to remember that the pain is just a neurological response. Your body isn’t actually on fire. You aren’t actually dying. It’s all in your head. You almost have to split your mind in two so you can focus on the story you want to tell. When I do it it’s almost an outer body experience, as though I’m watching myself being tortured from above while the part of me that’s watching can tell the story. For you, Weasley, I suspect all you will need to do is focus on a strong emotion against whomever is casting the curse. However, the pain is so intense you may find yourself sticking to a single emotion instead of moving between them like you typically do.”

They both nodded, as Snape gave him a curious look. “They use different methods,” was all he said. Snape just narrowed his eyes.

“Now Potter is probably going to have a harder time with it since Weasley produces a complete emotional block. Partial blocks like Potter and I do are much harder to maintain under torture, and that’s why you have to story tell through it. The Dark Lord always starts with legilimency first to make sure he’s in and then moves to the cruciatus. Potter, the trick is to dissociate the moment you hear me start the incantation for the curse.”

Potter nodded nervously, and then Draco said, “Before you try it, I will demonstrate. Potter, you will watch in my head passively. Weasley, you push the legilimency so you can see it too. Severus, you cast the curse.”

All three of them stared at him now. Draco felt his temper flare. “Look, we don’t have time to fuck around with this. It’s dangerous to do the curse too many times in a row, not just for Potter and Weasley, but for me as well. It will be faster if Potter can see what it feels like to dissociate so he knows what he’s aiming for. And Weasley, you need to see it too just in case you end up needing it. I know you’ve been practicing legilimency on Potter in the evenings. Your legilimency won’t be as strong as Severus, but it doesn’t need to be for a demonstration.”

They all nodded and drew their wands. Before they started, however, Snape spoke for the first time. “Draco, may I ask how you know all this?”

“Experience. A lot of experience,” he said grimly.

Then he turned to the others. “Alright, Potter, you go in first and wait. Then Weasley, then Severus. I don’t care what you look for Weasley, but I would suggest *not* Granger’s captivity, unless you want to see our staged memories with the imperius curse.”

Snape gave him a very sharp look at this, but Draco ignored him. Weasley turned a little pale and nodded.

“Go,” said Draco.

A moment later he heard Potter mutter, and a passive presence entered his head. Another moment, and Weasley was in, pushing for the night Dumbledore died. Draco let himself be pulled to the Astronomy Tower just as he heard Snape’s voice shout, “*Crucio!*” and Draco dissociated before the word fully left Snape’s lips.

Pain slammed into him, but he was already split, watching himself twitch and scream with the part of his brain that carried his pain centers, while the part of his brain that knew it was just neurons forced the story onto Weasley, showing Draco himself casting the killing curse. He felt Weasley pushing hard as he got to that moment to see if Draco would break with the truth, but Draco held the story in place until Dumbledore went careening over the edge of the Tower.

A moment later, the pain stopped suddenly, and Weasley and then Potter both left his head. Draco found himself on the floor and climbed gingerly to his feet.

"Well?" asked Snape curtly, looking at Weasley.

"I took him to the night Dumbledore died," said Weasley in a shaky voice. "He showed himself killing Dumbledore and not you."

There was a ringing silence at this and a muscle in Snape's jaw twitched, but he gave a small nod.

"Did you feel the dissociation?" asked Draco, now looking at Potter, who was giving him an uncomfortable look.

This seemed to snap Potter out of it. "Yes," he said thoughtfully. "But it was very subtle. I don't think I would have noticed it if I wasn't watching for it."

Draco nodded. "The Dark Lord can't tell. He's never caught me doing it. I think it's important to keep it close in time to when the curse is cast though. The curse causes a jolt in your subconscious, and that camouflages the moment of dissociation."

Potter and Weasley were both nodding, but he saw Snape giving him a very appraising look.

You didn't realize how good I am, did you? he thought with some dark amusement.

"Alright, who first?" asked Draco, now looking at Weasley and Potter.

They exchanged looks and Potter sighed. "Me."

Draco nodded. "Weasley, you might as well observe passively. Severus, he won't block you. He's going to try to lie to you. We'll tell you if he did it successfully after you're out of his head."

Snape gave a nod and raised his wand. Potter stared at it and gulped. Draco got the impression that Potter was far more afraid of Snape's legilimency than Draco's cruciatus.

"Weasley first," said Draco, and Weasley muttered the incantation and then gave a nod to Snape.

Snape's lips suddenly curled, and Draco watched as he entered Potter's head so hard, Potter took an unconscious step back. A moment later Draco raised his wand, focused on his hatred for Dolohov and shouted, "*Crucio!*"

Potter immediately fell to the floor and started to scream, and Draco felt that familiar rush of dark magic seeping into his soul, claiming a small part of him. It was odd this time, finally using the vinewood wand for this curse it had so firmly resisted for months. But now the power surged through it, fully in tune with Draco as it channeled his magic and enhanced it with Granger's. Draco thought it might have been the strongest one he had ever cast.

A moment later Snape lifted his wand, and Draco followed, releasing Potter from the curse. Potter was panting on the ground as he pushed himself up. Draco saw that Snape's eyes were narrowed, and then he turned to Draco and said, "I pulled Potter to the prophecy. He showed me a memory of Sibyl Trewlaney in Dumbledore's pensieve. The wording was, '*The*

one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the weapons of their forefathers shall meet in a final battle... but only he who harnesses his true power shall prevail. ”

Draco felt his face split into a broad grin. “That’s not the real prophecy,” he said. “The first half is real, but I made the second half up. He lied to you.”

Potter had a darkly triumphant expression on his face as Snape’s eyebrows flew up.

“Did you feel him dissociate?” asked Draco curiously.

Snape looked thoughtful now as he shook his head. “No. But I was focused on pushing the legilimency.”

“I felt it that time,” chimed in Weasley. “But I couldn’t feel it when I was pushing the legilimency on you, Malfoy.”

Curious, thought Draco. He would need to make sure that was added to the journal.

“Alright, Weasley’s up then,” he said. “Potter, you watch. Severus, he’s going to try to block you.”

Snape nodded, and they all raised their wands. Weasley gulped and closed his eyes for a moment before nodding.

Potter muttered a spell to enter Weasley’s mind, and then Snape’s legilimency slammed into Weasley, his eyes immediately widening at what he found. Draco tried not to smirk. He shouted, “*Crucio!*” and Weasley dropped to the floor and began the scream and twitch. Again the dark magic washed over Draco, taking a tiny piece of him with it, until after several moments Snape lowered his wand and Draco did too.

“Weasley, what the hell was that?” Snape demanded.

Weasley looked confused. “Occlumency.”

Now Snape rounded on Draco. “Did you teach him this?”

Draco just smirked as he shrugged. “Did it work?”

Snape’s nostrils flared. “I was trying to look for the horcruxes, and I got just the slightest flash of Potter’s face, and then...”

“Emotion,” finished Draco. “A fuck ton of emotion. So much you can’t push through it.”

Snape just nodded.

“It’s the opposite of clearing your mind,” chimed in Potter. Snape glared at him.

Weasley was looking a bit uncomfortable, but not displeased.

“Did he break with the cruciatus?” asked Draco.

Snape furrowed his brow. “No. But the emotion changed. First it was...”

“Loyalty,” supplied Draco. Snape shot him a look but nodded.

“Yes, and then it shifted to rage. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“I thought he would be able to hold it,” said Draco simply. “He does a full block. Alright, we’ll do it a few more times on each of you. Severus, poke around for different things, especially on Potter.”

Snape nodded, and his eyes got dark as Potter stepped forward with another grimace.

And so they continued. By the end of it, Weasley was perfect. After three tries he never broke. Potter erupted on the third try when Snape was looking for memories of the night Dumbledore died. He insisted on going two more times, and he held it for his fourth try and erupted again on his fifth.

Draco checked his watch. They had to hurry, and he didn’t think he could keep going. He was feeling ill from the dark magic that had seeped into him after casting the cruciatus eight times, and it was starting to peak. Even the Dark Lord didn’t permit his followers to do it that many times in a row because of the potential aftereffects.

“Alright, that’s enough,” he said. “I think Weasley passes. Potter, we’ll keep practicing the next time I can sneak away from Granger. You’re close, but he caught you a couple times. Keep practicing your regular occlumency too, because you’re not done with it yet.” Potter and Weasley both nodded, looking relieved.

Just then, Draco felt his sickle burn. “I have to go,” he said. “Tippy!”

The little elf appeared and held out a hand for both Draco and Snape to apparate them back to Hogwarts.

“Draco...” said Snape, as Draco started to move to the floo. Draco turned around impatiently. “You’ve done well,” said Snape. “I admit I never thought Potter or Weasley could do it. Potter is... much improved from when I trained him.”

Draco just nodded. The dark magic from the curse was threatening to overwhelm him, and he didn’t think he could speak. He needed... something. He wasn’t exactly sure. But he knew it wasn’t here. He felt his skin crawling and his stomach rolling as he moved to the floo and opened his mouth to force himself to speak without vomiting. “Malfoy Manor!” he called, as he spun away back to Granger.

Chapter 31: Roses

Chapter Notes

TW: Depiction of sexual assault and nonconsensual sex

Hermione

Hermione was worried. Very worried. For the past few days Draco had been disappearing every other evening for an hour or so and returning to her practically covered in dark magic. Hermione wasn't sure why she could sense it or what he was doing to cause it, but it made him cold and clammy to the touch. She nearly recoiled when she felt it.

The first night it happened had been after her dinner with Narcissa. He stepped through their adjoining door, and she nearly gasped as she felt the darkness rolling off of him. Hermione had felt darkness in him before, and it always caused an involuntary heat in her belly, but this was different. This kind of darkness was hard, sharp, and so very cold. It was as though it was freezing his soul.

That first night he didn't even stop to say anything to her as he strode through the door and stared at her with flat, almost dead eyes. He simply walked over to her, pushed her over the nearest piece of furniture, and then hiked up her dress over her hips. He didn't bother to prepare her first, but just cast a lubrication charm – a first for him – before yanking down her knickers and burying himself into her. As he pounded her, Hermione felt the darkness leeching out of him, slowly warming the frigid body she felt behind her. He came before she did, and then he pulled out, flicked her wand to clean her and then went back to his room to go to bed without saying a word.

Hermione followed slowly, wondering what the hell had just happened and trying not to be hurt by how impersonal it all felt. Sex with Malfoy had never once felt impersonal – sometimes it was hard and occasionally it felt desperate, but it was never just *there*. It felt like she had been used, far more so than when he put her under the imperius curse. She wanted to talk to him about it, but he had already fallen asleep by the time she got there, and she knew he would be waking up for *felix* again soon, so she bided her time.

The next morning his odd mood and most of the dark magic seemed to have worn off, and he was her Malfoy again, caressing her, coaxing her, and saying wonderfully dirty things to bring her to climax for him. He kissed her deeply and told her how much he loved her and how he would do anything for her.

Hermione felt her concern ebb at this. After all, it was just a one-time thing. Perhaps he had been called to do something for Voldemort that caused the dark magic. He preferred not to talk about it when that happened, and she tried to respect his privacy. As for the impersonal sex, well it was a was a one-off. Maybe he just needed a release. Sex couldn't be mind-blowing all the time, and he had been lovely and warm with her the next day. She had finally managed to put it fully out of her mind and move on when it happened again.

This time she was in the bath when he arrived, wearing that same flat, dead expression and reeking of dark magic. She looked at him warily, but he didn't falter as he walked over and hauled her out of the tub and bent her over the sink. He didn't bother to cast a lubrication charm on her, presumably because she had just been in a warm body of water, but her bath had cleansed her and her passage was uncomfortably dry as he pushed himself in. She winced a bit, but he didn't seem to notice, and she watched in the mirror as his eyes slowly came back to life, flaring suddenly as he came with a shudder at the very end.

This time he looked at her in the mirror with confusion, as though he wasn't exactly sure how he had ended up there. But then he seemed to shake himself out of it and slipped out, giving her bum a light brush as he left the bathroom without a word. Hermione shakily made her way back to the tub and sank back down into the warm water, her heart pounding. It had happened twice now. Twice he had shown up drenched in dark magic, and he had come to her and taken her without even saying a word. The second time was even more jarring than the first because he truly didn't seem to remember what had happened once he came back to himself.

Resolving to push the issue with him, Hermione got out of the tub and towled off and then went to his room fully intending to make him talk to her. But once again, he was already asleep, and this time she still felt a strong tinge of the dark magic around him that made her hesitate. She knew he might react badly if he woke up the next morning and found his bed empty, but she couldn't bring herself to sleep next to him like this. She moved back into her own room and finally fell asleep in the early hours of the morning after hearing him puttering around the potions lab, only to be woken up a few hours later by their connecting door slamming open.

He was looking at her, anger and hurt and still that hint of dark magic radiating from him.

"Why didn't you sleep with me last night?" he asked bluntly.

Hermione's courage left her in the face of his anger and coldness. "You were already asleep," she said quietly.

His brow furrowed. "So? That's never stopped you before."

"I just... I thought you needed sleep," she said delicately. "I didn't want to risk waking you up."

A muscle in his jaw twitched, but finally he nodded, turned, and slammed the door again. Hermione let out a breath. She thought about following him, but didn't. She needed his foul mood to wear off before she could talk to him about it.

But he didn't return to her all day. She even missed him when he slipped in and out of the potion room because she was at Grimmauld Place or in the loo. By the evening Hermione was hurt and starting to get angry. And in true Hermione Granger fashion, she decided to dig in her heels and wait until he sought her out to apologize. He was the one in the wrong here, not her. And she had always been the type to entrench herself when she knew she was right about something.

Two days passed before she saw more than a glimpse of him. She didn't sleep with him at night, sure that this would draw him out again, but it didn't. She didn't see him during the day except to go in and out of the potion room, and her sickle had gone silent. By the end of the second day she felt like her heart was breaking. She wasn't sure what had happened or why he had acted the way he did, but he no longer seemed to care that she was in the room next door to him.

That night she fell asleep early, exhausted from all of the emotions she had been feeling the past couple of days. She was pulled out of a fitful sleep by a pair of rough hands stripping the sheets back and pulling her pajama pants off, the light from his room piercing the darkness.

"Malfoy, what..." she started to say groggily, but then she felt that coldness of dark magic again, worse than ever this time, and she knew what she would find when she looked at him: dead, lifeless eyes that barely even acknowledged she was there. Fear flooded her – real fear, and for the first time ever she was truly afraid of Draco Malfoy.

"Malfoy..." she started, but he didn't seem to hear her. He just grabbed her knees to spread her legs and move over her, and Hermione felt bile rise in her throat from the coldness she felt.

She started to shake, panic rising in her as she felt him lining up at her entrance. "Hagrid!" she choked out instinctively, eyes squeezed shut.

Remarkably, he stilled. She still felt that awful cold radiating from him, and his much larger body was still hovered over hers, but he was no longer moving. She risked opening her eyes to peek at him and thought she saw something stir as he looked back at her.

"Malfoy..." she said again. He was still frozen, not acknowledging her but not proceeding either.

"Draco," she tried. "Draco, come back."

At the sound of his name, the first real signs of life returned to his eyes. He was still horribly cold, still covered in dark magic, but his awareness seemed to be returning, just a little bit. She closed her eyes in relief.

"Granger, what..." he started to say, but then he seemed to take her in and look at her – really *look* at her – for the first time in days.

"Granger, look at me," he said, as he touched her face.

She instinctively flinched at his touch and another sob rose in her throat.

He pulled his hand back like he had been burned, and an awareness of what he had just done seemed to hit him with a jolt. He tore himself off of her, and a moment later she heard retching coming from her bathroom.

For some reason, the sound of it reassured her. She knew now that Malfoy's behavior was being driven by something else. She needed to shelve her pride and get to the bottom of it before it wrecked the thing that was just theirs.

She slowly pushed herself up from the bed and made her way to the threshold of their connecting door to wait. A moment later he came out of the bathroom and skidded to a halt when he saw her blocking his exit, and in the light cast by his room she could see him clearly now too. He looked wrung out, pale, clammy. The last time she had seen him like this had been in sixth year when he was trying to kill Dumbledore. The dark magic was still lingering around him, but it wasn't as strong as it had been a few minutes ago when he hovered over her. His illness in the bathroom seemed to have purged at least a little bit of it, and it gave Hermione the courage to take a tentative step forward. The guilt and regret on his face when he looked at her nearly made her heart stop, and as she looked at him closely she also sensed a deep weariness. She suddenly, rather forcefully, realized he was magically depleted. Whatever he was doing was pushing the limits of his magic.

She hesitated for a moment, but as she looked at the exhaustion on his face she made up her mind.

"You need to sleep. And then tomorrow we're going to talk about this."

She saw something warring on his face, but his eyes finally dropped, and he nodded. He slipped past her to go to his room without looking at her, turning off the lights as he did so. She hesitated a moment, but then followed him.

She felt him stiffen in surprise when she slipped into bed next to him, and his heart was pounding as she curled up with him. "I love you," she whispered, and suddenly the dam broke and Malfoy started to sob. She just held him, feeling the dark magic finally drain from him as he did it, until at long last he fell asleep.

Hermione felt his eyes on her before she opened hers the next morning. He wasn't touching her, but she knew he was watching her sleep. She slowly opened her own eyes to find his gray ones studying her and flashing with worry, regret, and guilt. He looked ashen, and his eyes were rimmed red and puffy from the night before. She slowly reached out a hand to touch his face, and his eyes closed for a moment as his Adam's apple bobbed.

"Draco," she said softly. "You need to tell me what's going on."

He looked torn. "Hermione, I can't, I... you would... you would hate me."

Her eyes narrowed a bit. "I could never *hate* you. But whatever you're doing has been affecting you. I've been able to feel the dark magic coming off of you. And now it's affecting me. Are you even aware of what happened last night?"

He screwed up his face at this. "Not really, I... I can guess."

"And what about the time when I was in the tub?" she asked.

He opened his eyes and furrowed his brow now. "What?"

"A few nights ago. You snapped out of it just as I was bent over the sink. But I was in the tub before that."

His eyes widened slightly, and now she could tell he was starting to panic. He didn't remember what he had done, she was sure of it.

"Stop," she said firmly. "Calm down and let me finish."

He swallowed and seemed to steel himself as he nodded.

"What about the night after I had dinner with your mother? I was wearing that dress."

He bit his lip and nodded slowly. "That one... that one I do remember. Sort of. I was out of it, but I remember bending you over and..." he gulped and closed his eyes again. "It wasn't well done of me."

"Let me show you," she said. "So you know what happened."

He looked sick as he nodded, and then she felt him touch her mind. She brought him to the first night and showed him the odd, dead look in his eyes and the dark magic she felt spilling from him. He felt her confusion and hurt that he had used her and discarded her. Then there was the second night when he hauled her out of the tub and didn't even bother to cast a lubrication charm. He felt her discomfort and hurt as she watched him in the mirror, wondering what the hell was going on before he snapped out of it. Then she showed him how she came to his room to demand an explanation, only to find him already fast asleep. Finally, she showed him the previous night, and he felt her fear at the waves of dark magic she sensed, knowing that he wouldn't recognize her and being terrified at what he might do to her. He finally released her, and she saw that he had his face in his hands. She suspected he was crying again.

"Draco," she said softly. "You need to tell me. Now."

He took a shuddering breath and raised his head without looking at her. "It's the cruciatus," he finally said. "Potter and Weasley asked me to torture them so they could practice their occlumency while it was happening. They read about me occluding under torture in the journal and thought they needed to practice it. Snape's been coming to Grimmauld Place to perform the legilimency while I perform the cruciatus curse."

Hermione was shocked speechless.

Harry and Ron asked Malfoy to torture them?

It was madness. But then again, a small voice in her head reminded her that *she* had asked Malfoy to imperius her.

She reached out a tentative hand to touch his shoulder, and he jerked when he felt it. But she didn't move away.

"Go on then," he said roughly. "End it. I've been torturing your best friends. And I did unforgivable things against you too. You can call Tippy and move back to Grimmauld Place."

"I'm not moving to Grimmauld Place, and I'm not ending it," she said simply.

He finally turned to look at her, a glimmer of hope in his eyes that then morphed into self-loathing.

"But you must hate me," he said. "What I did..."

"I don't hate you!" she insisted. "I told you, I could never hate you, and I forgive you. But I am worried about you. Surely you must know that the cruciatus is damaging. And casting it too many times in a row makes it worse. The effects are cumulative."

She could see the hope bloom on his face again, and she moved toward him to twine her arms around his neck. He reached out tentatively, and when she didn't pull away, he pulled her close and held on tight. He was shaking.

"You need to tell them you're done training them like that," she said softly.

"Weasley's done," he said. "But Potter... he's so close, Hermione. He can almost do it consistently."

"He's done. You're done. All of you are done. This is not worth it."

"But what if he shows something under torture and you get hurt and..." he started.

"Shhhh," she said. "If that happens we'll improvise. Harry, Ron, and I are rather good at that, you know. You can't close every loophole, Draco. And I'm not going to have your soul wrecked to save me from something that hasn't happened yet."

He looked at her, and she could see that he was very torn. At that moment Hermione remembered something Narcissa had told her at their dinner.

"Malfoy men will do anything for their witches. They will give you anything you want. It's a rather big responsibility not to abuse your position, Hermione, but if you want something from Draco, all you have to do is tell him. He won't be able to say no."

Hermione had been a bit uncomfortable with this – if Narcissa was right then it gave her an awful lot of leverage over Malfoy. Then again, this was surely a time when using that leverage was justified. He would damage himself irreparably if she didn’t.

“Draco,” she said. “I want you to stop. Please stop doing this... for me.”

The expression on his face cleared somewhat, and he nodded. “OK,” he said. “If that’s really what you want.”

“It is,” she said softly. “That’s what I want.”

He nodded. “Consider it done then.”

Relief washed over Hermione. “Thank you.” She hesitated but said, “And I want something else. Something to make it up to me.”

He gave her an intense look now. “Anything.”

“I want you to kiss me. Touch me. Just... be you while you do it. I want to purge that last memory.”

Something she couldn’t quite identify stirred in his eyes, but it was hot and intense and so very Malfoy that she shuddered with excitement. This wasn’t the cold, dead-eyed Malfoy she feared last night. This was *her* Malfoy, and she was relieved to find she wasn’t afraid of him like this. He leaned forward and immediately captured her lips and drank from her.

She felt his hands tangled in her hair before he broke the kiss and tilted her head gently to give him better access to her ear and neck. Then she heard him whispering to her.

“I’m so sorry. So very sorry. I never want to hurt you or scare you or... *Gods*, I love you so much, and it kills me that I did that to you.”

“I know...” she breathed. “I forgive you.”

“I didn’t want to do it,” he said frantically, still raining kisses on her. “I didn’t want to torture them. But Weasley said it might protect you, and I knew he was right and I...”

“Shhh,” she said. “I understand. You’re my dragon. You tried to guard me. And it went too far.”

“Yes,” he said. “Never again. Never ever again.”

He moved back to her lips as he unbuttoned her pajama top and slid it slowly off her shoulders. Then he moved down to her chest, and Hermione gave a contented sigh at the familiarity of it, the warmth of it, firm in the knowledge that they would move past this, and he would never risk hurting her like that again.

Soon he was gently pushing her back onto the bed, as he teased her breasts, showering them with gentle, reverent kisses.

"I did that to you three times," he said, pulling away for a moment. "So I owe you three orgasms. And we're doing this now. So you'll need to have one more for this morning too. I'm going to give you four, darling. At a minimum."

This announcement caught her attention.

"Four?" she asked a little hesitantly.

"Four," he said firmly.

"I don't think I can..." she said.

"You can. You have before. But the last time you did you got a little hazy on me. I know you remember your safe word, yes?"

"Hagrid," she confirmed, as her breathing started to get heavy. She knew she wouldn't use it, not when he was himself, but she appreciated the fact that he was checking, especially after the previous night.

"I'm not going to tie you down this time," he said. "Not after last night. But I want you to clasp your hands over your head. And don't let go unless you need to use your safe word. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes," she breathed as she let go of him and raised her arms over her head, tangling her fingers together.

"Perfect," he said, and then he leaned down and licked from the underside of one breast, over her nipple and all the way up to her neck. Hermione gasped and arched, as her eyes fluttered closed.

"I'm going to take my time with you," he murmured. "I'm going to drive you mad so that when you come you do it hard. I'm going to send you into subspace, and I'm not going to use my cock on you. Watching you get there and not taking you while you do it... it will be excruciating for me. Consider it my penance."

"Send me where?" she asked distractedly. His fingers were tracing her ribs.

"Subspace," he said.

"What's that?" she asked.

"A place you've only been once before. Now relax darling. Let me give this to you. Don't let go of those hands and don't forget your safe word."

And then he started.

He kissed slowly down between her breasts, circling her right nipple several times before blowing hot air on it. Hermione was already wiggling, trying to get him to touch her there, but he refused and moved to the other side. Again, he kissed in a slow circle before giving

her nipple just a whisper of air, making her jump, begging for the contact she so desperately needed.

He didn't give it to her. Instead he trailed kisses down her abdomen before reaching for her wand to vanish her shorts and knickers without breaking his pace. The cold air hit her core, and she shuddered. She felt him smile against her skin at this, as he moved toward her tattoo. Here, he spent a significant amount of time, kissing every Tudor rose before brushing the dragon with his thumb, and then he continued down her leg and toward her inner thigh.

Instinctively she opened her legs for him just a bit, and he made a noise of approval at this, but he didn't go straight to her center. Of course he didn't. He used his tongue to lick near and around and over and under, but never just *there* like she so desperately wanted. She was wriggling her hips and clasping her hands tighter than ever, hoping that if she moved quickly enough she would catch him, but he was too fast for her. Every time she got close he pulled away and kissed or licked her some place else.

Then he sat back, and she felt his hands, one on each ankle as he grazed her calves, and then her knees, and then her thighs before moving back down again. When he got to her knees a second time he gripped them hard and opened her fully. Her eyes flew open, and she saw him staring at her, a hungry expression on his face.

"You have the most perfect cunt, did you know that?" he asked.

Hermione felt herself flush at his words. His compliments and dirty talk never failed to turn her on, and sure enough she felt her heat drop between her legs.

"And look at that..." and he said softly, as he continued to stare. "That beautiful cunt is getting wetter for me as I speak. You're practically dripping darling."

Again, Hermione felt a flush and more heat, and his hungry expression turned nearly feral as he watched the effects of his words on her.

"So beautiful, so perfect, you're about to give me a feast, aren't you?"

"Yes..." she said, wiggling her hips so he would stop talking and start eating.

His fingers dug into her legs as he looked at her one more time. "If you release your hands I'll stop."

"I won't," she promised. "I... please..."

And then she gasped as he practically attacked her with his mouth. Her hips bucked as she pressed them toward him, his tongue swiping in and out as he licked every bit of wetness off of her. Then he found her clit and started flicking it rapidly with his tongue, and Hermione moaned, as she felt the first of his promised four orgasms approaching. She was twisting and writhing, but he stayed on her, rolling her clit around his tongue until she couldn't take it anymore.

"I'm gonna... I'm gonna..." she said, and then suddenly he sucked, and Hermione exploded with a giant moan, and she felt Malfoy raise his head to watch her.

"That's one," he said, moving up to her and kissing her deeply as Hermione came down from it, simultaneously satisfied from her orgasm and also aching for more because he hadn't given her the penetration she craved. She tasted herself on his lips as he said, "Three to go. Or more..."

She gasped as Malfoy's lips moved back to her breasts and his fingers finally moved to her center, lightly teasing her outer folds, as he built upon her eagerness. Again, her hips were writhing, trying to get his fingers *in*. They couldn't go as deep as his cock, but they could reach further than his tongue, and she wanted that stimulation, that pressure.

"Malfoy..." she breathed, "Draco... *please*."

"Please what, darling?" he asked lazily.

"I need you... I need..."

"This?" he asked, dipping his finger in.

"Yes... *please*."

"Patience, beautiful," he said as he pulled his finger back out. "I promise to get you there."

He continued his light strokes, as Hermione groaned and moved beneath him, trying to be patient, but getting so worked up as she did so. The orgasm she had already had was a thing of the past, and she wanted, no *needed* another one, and as quickly as possible.

Suddenly, without warning, he shoved two fingers in and hooked up, and Hermione keened as she finally felt that pressure she had been craving. He rewarded her with a hard suck on one nipple, and Hermione felt herself approaching the edge again, as his other hand gripped her other breast.

"I'm close," she gasped, and Malfoy didn't say a word to this, but pressed down on her clit with his thumb, and then she felt herself breaking apart again, as she spasmed and shook and moaned.

"That's two," he whispered, as he removed his fingers, and Hermione felt herself whimpering, her hips still twitching with aftershocks from her last orgasm.

He raised his head to suckle her neck as he reached for something out of his nightstand. Then he pulled back to look at her dazed face. "I have something for you. I've had it for weeks, and I've never used it because I'm a greedy bastard and always wanted to feel you come around my cock instead."

"You can," she breathed. "You can use your cock. It's so good... it makes me feel so... full."

The part of her brain that registered what she was saying was a bit mortified, but it was true. She had gotten used to orgasming during penetration, and Malfoy's cock could reach spots that even his fingers couldn't touch.

Malfoy's eyes darkened at her words, and he said, "I would love nothing more. I'm aching for you, and I'm sure I've never been this hard in my life. But I told you, I'm not going to get you there with my cock. I don't deserve that right now."

"Oh," she said, a bit disappointed.

"But that's my burden to bear, not yours," he continued. "If you want something deep inside of you, then you can have it." And then she heard an odd buzzing, as Malfoy slowly ran a device that was vibrating along the side of her breast, making her gasp and clench her hands together more tightly.

"Ooooh," she breathed as her eyelids fluttered, and when she opened her eyes again, she saw Malfoy's expression lit.

"Fuck, I can't wait to see you come for me like this. My cock's going to miss you, but I'm going to have an amazing view this time."

He sat back as he dragged the vibrator down her side, over the tattoo on her hip, before pressing it into her clit.

Her eyes flew open for a split second before they rolled back into her head, and she was utterly lost. It was so much more intense than anything she had ever felt before, and she felt herself twitching with pleasure at it.

"Please!" she begged. "Please!"

He moved quickly and shoved it deep inside of her, and then finally, *finally* she was getting the penetration she so desperately needed. She groaned and bore down on it, her hips moving fast and hard as she rode the device.

"Fuck..." he breathed in an amazed voice. "Fucking yes... go darling, take everything you need."

He didn't need to tell her twice. He held it in place for her as she ground herself on it, and before she knew it she was coming for a third time, her earth shattering, and her head dizzy as he removed the device gently, and the buzzing stopped for a moment. She opened a bleary eye to stare at his face, and he looked nothing short of transformed by the sight he had just witnessed, and then he moved up to kiss her hard, as she felt one finger brush her folds again.

She gasped at the place he had touched. His touch was light, barely there, and she was quivering for it.

"Yes," she breathed.

He moved his finger across the spot again, still light and teasing. "There?" he whispered.

She just nodded, and groaned, as he did it again.

The teasing was going to kill her, she was sure of it. Her eyes closed as she felt him move back and forth with his finger, while his other hand traced patterns on her breasts and chest and then her neck. She felt his fingers trace her necklace before moving to the back, and then he deftly unclasped it and slipped it off while his other hand still continued that torturous stroking.

“I promised you one more,” he said. “At least one more. And this time, when you come, I’m not going to let you stop until you get to that special place, OK?”

“Yes,” she said, her hips writhing again, desperate for what he promised her. As he sat up to move back down, she shuddered as she suddenly felt something hard and cold slithering along her breasts and moving over her nipples before touching her neck and securing itself there.

The collar? she wondered blearily. But it felt different, and she couldn’t sense him through it.

But then she stopped worrying about it as she heard that buzzing start again, and all of her attention returned to it.

“You’re so lovely like this,” he said, as he ran the vibrator over her breasts and nipples, sending them to a point of overstimulation where she was arching and gasping before moving the vibrator down her abdomen, across her stomach. “I’m going to send you spinning darling.”

“Please,” she breathed.

“Fuck...” he groaned, “You’re so ready...” and he dragged the vibrator back over her clit, and then Hermione didn’t know where she was anymore.

“*Oh God!*” she said, and then she felt him plunge it into her again, and now she was full, and she heard him mutter something, and incredibly, it seemed to swell. Now she was *so* full, and the pressure that was building was indescribable. He pushed the vibrator all the way in until it hit her back wall, and Hermione started to shake and move and grind again.

“Salazar save me,” he muttered, as he watched her in fascination, and then he started moving the vibrator in and out for her, and Hermione was truly lost. She felt herself teetering on the edge of what she was sure would be the best orgasm of her life. She was bucking her hips, swirling them around the vibrator, as she rode it like she couldn’t get enough. It was doing something to her – it was drawing her closer to something indescribable as she felt the blood start to leave her head and rush down to the sensations in the lower half of her body.

“You cock,” she gasped. “I want your cock in me. Now! Please!”

“*Oh fuck,*” he groaned at her words. “I wasn’t going to let myself, but *fuck...*” and then he pulled out the vibrator quickly and groaned as he entered her before as she bore down and ground on him, while he put the vibrator against her clit.

“Draco...” she breathed. “Draco...”

“Fuck Hermione, get it. Take what you need, beautiful. You’re so fucking perfect, I can’t even believe...”

But Hermione wasn’t listening, because suddenly her vision blurred, the world wrenched in two, and she screamed Draco’s name as she exploded.

Malfoy took over now, moving himself and the vibrator to extend it, and she felt wave after wave crash over her until the world went black around her for just a split second. She didn’t even notice when Malfoy came too a moment later, slipping himself and the vibrator out.

She felt every nerve in her body tingling. Her limbs was boneless, and her brain beautifully blank, until she felt Malfoy’s hands lightly touch her breasts.

Incredibly, amazingly, she arched and felt herself start to tremble and shake, as another, much smaller jolt of sensation washed over her. She thought he was saying something to her, but she couldn’t hear him. This place she had entered was too blissful, too wonderful, and far too sensitive for things like words.

Then she felt his finger stroke her core, and another wave hit her. It was pleasure like nothing she could remember – mind-numbing and all-consuming. Her brain, which was normally running a hundred miles an hour was thinking of nothing at all, except for touch and skin and that wonderful hazy twilight place she was in.

Another brush of her nipple, and she shuddered and groaned. Then she distantly heard that vibration again, and the only part of her brain that could still form any type of thought zeroed in on it, as it slipped inside of her again.

She felt herself go wild. Her hands broke free, grasping for something, *anything* to anchor her down as she pumped her hips against it, faster and faster until another spark of light burst open in her brain, and the world was surely ripped apart.

And then she was floating, floating, floating while suspended in absolutely nothing, and it was sheer bliss.

A few seconds later, or it could have been minutes or even hours, Hermione finally felt a voice penetrate the void in her brain.

“Easy now, beautiful. I’ll be here. You can come back when you’re ready.”

Hermione said nothing in response. The voice was lovely and warm. She was safe just where she was. The voice wouldn’t let anything happen to her. She could float here just a bit longer.

Several moments later she felt something rubbing her arms, firm, but gentle strokes as the blood finally began to return to her extremities. Her skin prickled, and she sighed deeply at the ministrations. Then she noticed somebody was following the strokes with kisses.

“You did so good darling,” the voice murmured. “So perfect. I think I’m going to get the pensieve out of our vault so I can watch you do it for me over and over again.”

Draco.

The thought crossed her mind, and slowly the clouds started to part and the fog began to clear.

Finally, lazily, her eyes opened, and she found herself staring into Malfoy’s warm grey, as he gave her a thoroughly satisfied smile.

“There she is,” he said, before leaning down and giving her a languid kiss.

“How long was I... like that?” she asked softly.

“Mmmm... for a bit. Did you like it?”

“Yes,” she breathed. “Yes, that was...” she trailed off as her eyes drifted closed again for a moment.

“Take your time.”

Hermione felt herself returning as she opened her eyes again to Malfoy tracing patterns on her skin, over her chest and neck and cheeks. She reached up and touched his hand, and her fingers brushed that thing around her neck.

She furrowed her brow as she touched it again, and she saw Malfoy’s eyes were shining now. She didn’t recognize it. The collar she had worn when staging scenes for the Death Eaters was smooth to the touch. This was bumpy, patterned, and she thought she detected stones. She ran a finger along it and realized whatever it was went around her entire neck.

“Draco, what...?” she started softly.

He just smiled again and grabbed her wand to conjure a mirror for her. She held it up and gasped, as she struggled to slowly sit up to take a better look.

The necklace was made of Tudor roses, just like her earrings, each with a diamond in the middle and silver and gold petals. There were easily more than thirty of them, the space between each minuscule, only wide enough to give the necklace flexibility. They formed a circle that rested gently on the dip of her collarbone, the diamonds sparkling brilliantly with every breath she took.

“I told you I would give you something that matched your earrings,” he said simply.

“You said after the war... and this is... I thought you meant a replica!”

He just chuckled. “Not a replica. I wanted it to be just yours. As for the timing... well it’s like your tattoo isn’t it? I wanted you to have it now, just in case. I had been thinking about it anyway, and then when I saw that circle of Tudor roses and the dragon you added to your tattoo... I couldn’t resist giving it to you. It was already on order when you got your tattoo.

It was almost like you knew that I had a necklace made to match it. I knew I had to give it to you when it was done.”

“You commissioned it then?” she asked softly.

“Yes, I’m pretty sure I’m the goblins’ favorite Death Eater at the moment. They enjoy working with unique designs, and they take great pride in their work. Everything is hand forged and cut. Of course, the necklace took considerably longer than the earrings. I had them start it a couple months ago.”

She traced her fingers along it again. It was delicate, each rose utterly perfect, and unbelievably stunning. She knew she was wearing a fortune in diamonds and precious metal.

“Draco, this is far too much...” she said weakly. But she couldn’t tear her eyes away from the mirror. He just watched her dazed expression with satisfaction.

“It’s not too much,” he said. “I can tell you like it. And I’ve decided to create a collection just for you. You can have anything in our vault that you want as well, but most of the styles are old and heavy. You’re so tiny they wouldn’t look right on you, so I’m starting from scratch. The goblins are very pleased with you too, by the way, though I haven’t told them who you are... just that you would be their muse, and you would come by to meet them eventually. They’ll be over the moon to discover it’s you. They are officially neutral in the war so they make no complaints about working with me, but I’ve gotten the impression they really want Potter to win. The Dark Lord has been rather bad for business on the whole.”

She finally forced herself to look away from the mirror, and she pulled him to her to give him a deep kiss. “How can I ever thank you?” she asked.

He just raised his eyebrows. “You already have. You forgave me and didn’t push me away for what I did to you. Besides, one of my greatest fantasies is seeing you come for me while wearing jewelry I’ve given you and nothing else. And until the war is over, you need to wear the pendant whenever you aren’t in this room to work the wards on my door. So this necklace is just for us when we’re in here together. I see no reason for clothes, do you?”

Her lips quirked at this, and her eyes twinkled with mirth. “Is this my collar then Malfoy?”

“Absolutely not,” he said solemnly. “I told you I would get you a choker if you want one. No, this necklace is for the world to know I’ve claimed you once that bastard is dead. I want you to wear it to the victory party.”

Hermione felt her heart give a fierce leap as she pulled him in for another deep kiss. “I will,” she said firmly. “I swear it.”

Chapter 32: Felix Felicis

Chapter Notes

If I had to pick a single favorite chapter in this fic, it's probably this one. Felix felicis has fascinated me since the sixth book came out, and it felt like a major plot hole in the canon stories. I've had a lot of fun trying to fill it in.

TW: Drug use and abuse.

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

Draco

Dear Journal,

Let me tell you a little bit about felix felicis:

Number of months to brew: ~6

Number of magical ingredients: 87

Number of times Snape made me practice the preparation method for each separate ingredient so I don't fuck it up when I do it for real: 10 times per ingredient (quick math: $10 \times 87 =$ approximately 870 times I have prepped ingredients just for practice, not counting the times he made me redo it).

Number of fighters we should be able to dose: 45

Number of hours of luck per dose: 8

Number of nights in a row I have woken up to stir this fucking potion counterclockwise at 2 AM: 62

Number of galleons I have directly spent on this potion: 132,000, give or take, not counting bribes or other things I had to buy in order get the sellers to actually sell.

Number of times I have cursed Horace Slughorn for keeping his stash of felix locked down in Gringotts: too many to count.

I think I know why Snape chose wolfsbane for his mastery instead of felix.

Draco was exhausted. He couldn't remember ever being this tired in his entire life. Between the *felix* and occlumency and defensive preparations, he was working around the clock as the end date for the *felix* approached.

Felix felicis was an odd little potion that got increasingly complex as the months moved along. Draco really wished it didn't. If he was going to fuck it up, it would have been much better to do it six months ago. But of course that's not how it worked. *Felix* wasn't that challenging until you were very much invested in it, and then it became positively brutal. Each day that he worked he feared that this would be the day he messed it up and ruined nearly six months and tens of thousands of galleons worth of work. As the end approached, he could almost taste the victory of it. But he also felt his concentration slipping and his brain becoming mush as he tried to remember everything he needed to do so he wouldn't screw it up in the final hours.

Snape was a taskmaster, but he was also incredibly helpful. After the initial shock wore off and Snape was certain Draco was serious about it, he threw himself into the potion and training Draco with a fervor that almost felt like enthusiasm. It was an odd reaction to observe coming from Severus Snape, but Draco could tell Snape's own intellect was piqued by the complexity of it, and the Slytherin in him couldn't resist the advantage it might give their side in the final battle.

Given the fact that Draco had to train as *felix* brewed, Snape had decided to take a brute force approach with repetition and practice. He set up a station for Draco in his office, concealed with a notice-me-not charm for the rare visitor. And then, armed with the knowledge that Draco's bank account would not run dry and that Lucius had promised to look the other way about the absurd quantity of gold Draco was spending, Snape and Draco got to work.

They did not buy substitutes, and they did not scrimp. Snape ordered Draco to buy at least eleven of everything – ten for practice, one for real – and Draco would skin, slice, dice, stew, simmer, smash, and crush until Snape was satisfied that he could do each step by rote. If he couldn't do it after ten tries, then Snape simply ordered him to buy more and held him late at night until Draco got the hang of it. They practiced four or five steps ahead of the potion, always, in case they hit a step that required extra practice. Snape had even taken a leaf out of Granger's book and made Draco a detailed study schedule.

And then there were the ingredients.

They had to buy so many rare, expensive, and illegal ingredients that both Snape and Draco started going to the apothecaries or Knockturn Alley disguised with polyjuice. Granger had made an entire vat that Draco and Snape consumed in order to procure the ingredients for *felix* without raising suspicions about what they were doing. The hairs they used were from unsuspecting muggles after Potter and Weasley snuck into a movie theater under Potter's invisibility cloak and plucked hairs from at least a dozen people as they quietly confounded them.

But even with an unlimited budget and a fresh vat of polyjuice, Snape and Draco had trouble sourcing some ingredients. A few were so rare that Snape took trips abroad to find them, under the guise of international recruitment for the Dark Lord. But even those trips didn't help them with the rarest of all: goblin gold dust.

As it happens, goblin gold dust actually *wasn't* that rare in a literal sense. The goblins had plenty of it, and it was commonly used in goblin-made artifacts. But the goblins also had a strict law against selling it to wizards due to the magical properties of it, so if Draco and Snape were going to acquire it they would have to get it on the black market.

"Can't you just melt down some galleons like I did to make the cauldron?" Granger once asked.

"No," said Draco. "The goblin gold dust is unrefined. They meld it with other metals to turn it into galleons and other things, and the melding process changes the properties of it. Based on our research, Snape and I are pretty sure it can't be undone. We have to find the dust in its raw form."

Having come up short for months whenever they checked the various dark shops in Knockturn Alley and a few others Snape had visited on his international trips they were both getting very worried they would not source it in time. Then Potter, of all people, finally suggested a solution during one of his occlumency sessions with Draco.

"Hermione told me about that necklace you gave her. It sounds like it was ridiculously expensive. Why don't you go back to those goblins who made it and ask? They might think they owe you one. She told me you said the war has been bad for their business."

Draco had been certain this wouldn't work, because the goblins who made her jewelry were affiliated with Gringotts. Gringotts goblins had a reputation of being very sly, but also scrupulous followers of goblin law. Still, after talking to Potter about it Draco realized they shouldn't leave any stone unturned, and he *had* in fact spent an awful lot of gold with the shop in recent months. Her necklace would surely compete for the largest single order they had received in the previous year. So he steeled himself for it and dropped in to visit one afternoon. When he told them what he wanted they were very reluctant at first, but eventually they agreed to sell their dust to him. They drove a hard bargain, however, and Draco had to place an order for another commission along with the small fortune he paid for the gold dust itself. Draco didn't really mind though. He had always planned on going back to them for that specific piece at some point anyway, and they couldn't finish the potion without it.

Snape had been shocked when Draco finally showed it to him.

Yes, Draco, Snape, and the Golden Trio all thought of *felix* as their secret weapon. It was classified. It was as top secret as the horcruxes. Nobody else in the Order knew they were working on it, not even Remus or any of the other Weasleys, whom Harry and Ron stayed in touch with. It could tip the battle in their favor if Draco pulled it off, and as he got closer to the end, all of them did what they could to help Draco reach the finish line.

Just like the *felix*, the Order still didn't know that Granger was alive. The plan, if they could pull it off, was for Granger to come back from the dead bearing vials of *felix* in the final battle with the story that she had stayed in hiding all this time to study it and then brew it in secret. Her brilliance was well known enough that this would be believable, and the advantage it would give their side would explain her reasoning for utter secrecy. It would also protect Draco and Snape in case anybody was caught and their minds were searched.

As they worked, Snape made meticulous notes of their progress for the potions guild to review, though he assured Draco that if he really did present *felix* for his mastery then the certification was a foregone conclusion. But as the weeks progressed and Draco got closer to the end, he worried more and more that he would fail.

Granger, of course, was also driving him mad.

"Honestly, Malfoy, I can help! You are killing yourself!"

"I know, and you have offered, but I'm *fine*. Truly. Work on Potter's occlumency."

For some reason Draco still hadn't told Granger he had applied for a mastery. Draco wasn't sure why, exactly, but he still didn't know if he could finish it. He didn't want her to get her hopes up on his behalf. So he and Snape both kept it a secret from the others. They used the fact that Draco was now far better trained than they were in potions and the fact that the lab was in Granger's bedroom as their excuse for Draco executing it by himself. He still had trouble shaking Granger off though.

The *felix* schedule had gotten so bad that *Snape* of all people had offered to help with the end of Potter's occlumency training whenever Draco was brewing and not practicing. Draco took him up on this offer because Potter was close to the finish line himself, and it was really just a matter of fine tuning it to nail down his skills. Draco only spared the time to watch the last few memories unaltered, suggest the modifications he wanted to see, and then he turned it back over to Snape and Granger and even Weasley to actually practice it. Then Draco fled to the potions room to shred granian tail hair or quarter flutterby petals.

Draco knew that he could abandon the mastery. Both Granger and Snape were getting concerned about the dark circles and slightly manic look on Draco's face as he practically lived on awakening solution to get through it. Snape suggested several times that maybe Draco should give up the mastery with *felix* so that Snape could intervene and help take shifts to finish. Snape pointed out that Draco could reapply for his mastery with something much shorter once the war was over – wolfsbane, for instance, was very complex but only took a couple weeks to brew. Snape was sure that Draco had studied enough to be able to do it.

But for some reason, Draco dug his heels in and wanted it to be *felix*. More than anything, even more than the occlumency, this potion felt like his contribution to the war effort. It was his idea, his work, his money, his everything. Draco realized he felt the same way about *felix* as Granger felt about her tattoo: it would be so incredibly satisfying to actually finish it.

And the other thing Draco wanted to do was change it.

Draco knew that he was certain to achieve a mastery by presenting a finished vial of *felix* to the potions guild. But if he modified some component of it even just a little bit and found a way to improve it, then he would be eligible to receive a note of distinction on his certificate. Maybe Granger's bloody wand was starting to affect his brain, but fuck it if he didn't want that note of distinction as the cherry on top. Besides, the change he wanted to make would improve the potion for battle, at least in his professional opinion as a member of Slytherin House.

You see, despite the condensed time frame for studying *felix*, Draco had a truly unique advantage that no others who had attempted it before him could claim: he could perform legilimency on three people who had actually taken it.

It was such a rare potion that almost nobody consumed it. The side effects were vaguely referenced and not very well documented. But shockingly, remarkably, Potter had won that single vial that Slughorn gave away during sixth year. Slughorn hadn't given away any *felix* during Draco's seventh year out of fear that the Carrows would find out, and he had been retired for fourteen years before that. Dumbledore's portrait confirmed that Slughorn once mentioned he had stopped giving it away after retirement. Even when he was teaching it had only been given to a handful of favorite potions students over the years, and the "competition" Slughorn staged in sixth year was really a way to endear Harry Potter to him and collect him for the Slug Club. Dumbledore's portrait confirmed it was the only time in Slughorn's entire teaching career he had done something like that, and they all thought he had done it because he was pretty sure Lily's son would win.

Thankfully Slughorn had been right, though not for the reasons he believed.

But win he did, and it meant that Potter had received the one vial Slughorn had given up in over fifteen years. Potter took some of it to retrieve Slughorn's memory of horcruxes before splitting the rest of it between Weasley, Granger, and his girlfriend the night Dumbledore died. After finally watching Potter drink *felix* and then retrieve the memory from Slughorn during an occlumency lesson, Draco realized that this was a truly unique opportunity to watch *felix* in action.

When Draco told Snape that all three of them had consumed it and two of them actually fought Death Eaters after taking it, Snape nearly fell out of his chair in shock. Snape immediately agreed they needed to really study the Trio's memories to see if there was anything that could be improved, not just for Draco's mastery distinction but for the final battle itself.

The members of the Trio, of course, were happy to oblige, and Snape and Draco both spent hours in their heads examining their behaviors, their mental states, their strengths and weaknesses, and even whether or not legilimency could pick up on the "nudge" that all three of them described feeling while under the influence of *felix*.

Both Snape and Draco agreed that if *felix* had one major flaw, it wasn't a risk of nose tweaking like Slughorn had mentioned in class that day. It was the fact that *felix* inspired feelings of overconfidence and exuberance. It made the people who took it practically bounce on their heels with excitement. In other words, it made Gryffindors – who were already prone to dive headfirst into danger – positively reckless.

Seeing as how most of the Order of the Phoenix and the entire Golden Trio was made up of Gryffindors, Draco and Snape both felt like this was a serious problem, even if luck would be on their side in the end.

Draco and Snape had searched and hypothesized and tested and tweaked, but they struggled to land on the modification they needed that would allow *felix* to nudge but not send the Gryffindor's off the deep end with their excitement. They both thought the dosing of the *felix*

recipe was partially to blame – all three of the Trio’s memories showed that their buoyancy eventually wore off, and they became calmer and more focused on the task at hand after their bodies had metabolized some of it. But by the time Draco and Snape had realized this was an issue, nearly half of the ingredients had already gone in. Adjusting the dosing wasn’t viable.

They needed to counteract the effects magically. Or rather, they hoped to do it magically. But that was also proving problematic because of the sheer number of ingredients and cross-reactions and the fact that *felix* was brewing and wasn’t waiting for them. They didn’t have the luxury of time to work out the theory in advance, especially when they had to spend what little time they did have practicing the steps Draco was about to perform. It made both of them very nervous to adjust anything on the fly.

“Can’t you just give us a calming draught?” asked Potter one night, as Snape and Draco were reviewing their memories of *felix* again.

“Oh, of course, we should have thought of a calming draught, Draco. How idiotic of us,” said Snape, rolling his eyes.

Potter reddened, but Draco just said, “We can’t. We’re pretty certain that would actually poison you. A couple of the ingredients in *felix* create a poison when mixed with the key ingredients in a calming draught. It’s possible the other ingredients in *felix* would neutralize it, but we can’t risk it.”

“Ah, I take it back then,” said Potter delicately.

“Maybe you should just do it chemically,” said Granger, as Snape exited her mind with a look of clear annoyance on his face.

Draco knew why Snape was annoyed. Granger’s memory of *felix* was particularly irritating. The very first thing she had done after taking *felix* was jump out from behind a statue with a flourish and say, “Ta da!” to the nearest Death Eater. Granted, she hadn’t actually been cursed, but it was still so reckless it made Draco want to strangle something every time he watched it.

“You should just give everybody a Xanax before they take it. That should help,” said Granger, rolling her eyes.

Draco, Snape, and Weasley all looked at Granger in confusion, but Potter snorted with laughter.

“Yeah that could work. Aunt Petunia was always much nicer whenever she was on it. You know how high strung she is.”

“What’s Xanax?” asked Draco curiously.

“Muggle drug,” said Granger promptly. “There are lots of different drugs that muggles take that affect the brain and mood. Granted, Xanax is really for anxiety and not excitement, but it usually has a calming effect.”

Draco didn't ask further, but he and Snape exchanged a look, and the next day Snape showed up to their practice with a stack of books Draco didn't recognize.

"What are these?" he asked.

"Lily Potter's potions books and notes," said Snape shortly. "She was my potions partner before we had a falling out after our O.W.L.s. I took these from her house after she died."

Draco felt his eyebrows disappear into his hairline, but he took one and opened it. Sure enough, elegant handwriting was all over the margins, with notes about muggle ingredients and chemical interactions that Draco didn't necessarily understand.

"Read these," said Snape curtly. "I... I've never read them. I don't think I can... but she might have the answer. She was interested in mixing muggle ingredients and magical potions. She used to go on and on about something called chemistry. And she was even better at potions than I was. In fact, the last vial of *felix* that Slughorn gave away before Potter's went to Lily. I don't know what happened to it, but I always wondered if things would have turned out differently if she had taken it that night."

"Slughorn always said she was brilliant," Draco said quietly.

"She was," said Snape sadly. "Most of the shortcuts in my old potions textbook came from her."

Draco accepted the books and then left his mentor to his thoughts as he made his way back to the Manor and Granger's room. There he read, late into the night, pausing only for *felix*, until he finally decided Granger was indeed onto something if Lily Potter was to be believed.

According to Lily, magical ingredients didn't necessarily interact with muggle ones, at least not in the way that would normally be observed in either world. It was muggle ingredients that interacted with and changed other muggle ingredients. Similarly, magical ingredients interacted with and changed other magical ingredients. When a potion contained both magical and muggle ingredients, then they simply coexisted. If a magical potion caused a certain behavior and a muggle ingredient caused the opposite behavior, then they tended to neutralize each other in the brain – but the muggle ingredients wouldn't affect the magic.

She had written extensively about drinking pepperup potion made with all magical ingredients, which had a well known side effect of keeping the drinker awake. She took it at the same time she took a muggle sleeping pill to fall asleep. The effects, she wrote, were neutralizing. She wasn't overly tired, nor was she wide awake. But it certainly didn't *cancel* the magic of the pepperup potion. She still smoked at the ears, and it cleared up any snuffle she had at the time. Lily concluded that the neutralizing effects of the muggle sleeping pill must take place in the brain, and it would only neutralize the thing it directly counteracted – it wouldn't neutralize the entire potion.

Draco then went through a remarkable book that was a compendium of potions ingredients. It was nearly as thick as a dictionary, and it included many things that were muggle and often used in magical potions. Lily hypothesized that the introduction of muggle ingredients into magical potions was due to their ability to neutralize or enhance the side effects of magical

potions – though most wizards didn’t realize that it had nothing to do with magic at all and everything to do with the chemical properties of the muggle ingredients themselves and what they did to the body and brain.

And even more remarkably, she had gone through the compendium and marked “magical” and “muggle” against every single ingredient in the book. It appeared that this was what she did to fill time during those many months she spent in hiding.

Draco took it upon himself to look up every ingredient in *felix felicis*. To his surprise and great relief, it was an entirely magical potion and didn’t contain a single muggle ingredient. So he could introduce any muggle ingredient into it without changing the other properties of the potion or worrying about cross-reactivity with other muggle ingredients. Any muggle additions he made would simply coexist and could neutralize undesirable side effects of *felix* in a targeted way. But it wouldn’t change the underlying magic at all.

Once again, Draco was reminded why his girlfriend was the Brightest Witch of the Age. And he understood Snape a little bit better too. Lily Potter was evidently just as brilliant as Granger, at least in this one subject. It was a shame Potter seemed to get his brains from his father’s side of the family.

“Granger,” he said one night during a rare visit to Grimmauld place. “And Potter too. I need both of you.”

They both looked at him curiously.

“What’s a muggle substance that makes you feel relaxed? In other words, something equivalent to a calming draught? If it’s muggle I should be able to mix it into the *felix* to help neutralize the boisterous side effects. It won’t affect the luck.”

“I already told you,” said Granger. “Xanax. Or some other drug like it. There are quite a few.”

“I was going to say weed,” chimed in Potter.

“Harry!” scolded Granger.

“What?” he asked. “It makes you feel relaxed.”

“It’s illegal!” she said.

Now Potter got an incredulous look on his face. “And using prescription drugs that aren’t yours isn’t illegal? Tell me how Xanax is *any* different than weed.”

“How about the fact that the dosing is consistent! You have no idea what you’re really getting with weed.”

“Explain,” said Draco, who wasn’t following, and so Granger explained the differences between muggle recreational drugs and prescription drugs.

“Besides,” she added. “Getting Xanax is simple. We just break into a muggle pharmacy or confund a pharmacist.”

“Oh because breaking and entering isn’t illegal,” muttered Potter, rolling his eyes. “Not to mention theft.”

“Well how do you propose we get weed then?” she asked huffily.

“Dudley. Obviously,” said Potter, giving her a look like she was dense.

Draco felt his mouth twitch at that but said, “We need to try them both.”

Potter and Granger both stared at him.

“I’m serious. I’ll talk to Snape about it, but I’m sure he’ll agree. We need to see what they feel like.”

As it transpired, Snape did agree after Draco told him about the discovery in Lily’s books.

“We need to test her underlying theory too,” said Snape. “I’m sure she’s right about it, but we need to see how it actually feels.”

Draco relayed this back to Potter and Granger, who huffed but said, “Fine then.”

Potter then left with his invisibility cloak to pay a surprise visit to his aunt and uncle, who he learned had been hidden in Bath of all places.

“That’s good though,” said Potter. “Bath is fairly large. I’m sure Dudley has found a dealer there by now.”

“Oh for heavens’ sake,” said Granger.

Granger, of course, swiped the vinewood wand, took a swig of polyjuice, and had Tippy apparae her to the nearest muggle pharmacy. She was back within thirty minutes with enough Xanax to tranquilize an elephant and any number of other muggle medications to test the underlying theory.

Then she got to work as Draco kept monitoring *felix*. She brewed a singing solution that often caused a cough if the acromantula venom was a little too light. Sure enough, muggle cough syrup seemed to help the cough and did nothing at all to return her singing voice to normal.

She brewed a baffling draught that caused headaches as a side effect. Muggle aspirin seemed to improve the headache but did not change her bewilderment.

And finally, they recreated Lily Potter’s own experiment with the pepperup potion and sleeping pills, and it worked exactly as she described in her notes.

“I’m fine,” said Granger with interest, as her ears smoked. “I’m not overly tired or wide awake. I feel pretty normal.”

It seemed that Lily Potter and Hermione Granger both knew what they were about when it came to mixing magical potions and muggle drugs.

Still, Draco was feeling a bit nervous as Granger passed out the Xanax for everyone to try. Based on everything Granger had told him about muggle drug culture, he couldn't believe he was about to do drugs with Snape and Potter of all people. Having Granger and Weasley there too was almost as unbelievable.

"One dose," she said and then swallowed.

Draco followed and then the others, and it wasn't long before Draco felt a keen sense of relaxation settle over him. This was the best he had felt in weeks. It seemed to calm his anxiety about *felix*.

"I could use a drink," said Potter with a lazy grin.

"Harry James Potter you will not drink while using prescription medication that's not yours. Sit down right this instant."

Potter just rolled his eyes but did as she said, and Snape actually cracked a small smile.

"You don't seem any different Granger," he commented.

"I'm feeling less agitated about trying Harry's ridiculous idea now," she said, rolling her eyes. "Though I'm certain my feelings about that will return to normal soon enough."

Weasley just had a contented look on his face. "Why have we never taken this before Hermione?" he asked. "This could have helped with some of our adventures."

She rolled her eyes. "It's illegal. And it's not a good idea to abuse it. Besides, it can slow your reaction time down just a little bit. The whole point of taking it with *felix* is to calm you down and help counterbalance the overexcitement you get with *felix*."

After several hours most of the effects finally wore off, and Snape looked at Granger thoughtfully. "That could work, Granger. It might not be a perfect neutralization, but it should dampen at least some of the excess energy that *felix* seems to cause. Any improvement there would help."

Granger looked smug. "Yes, I rather thought so. Like I said, it's really for anxiety but I think the calming effects would improve it somewhat."

"Alright my turn then," said Potter.

Granger huffed but said, "Fine," as she slammed a small plate of brownies on the coffee table in the Grimmauld Place sitting room. Draco saw there were five brownies, one for each of them.

"What are these then?" asked Weasley curiously.

"Brownies laced with weed," she grumbled. "Though obviously I can make no representations about the quality or efficacy of whatever Dudley Dursley is buying on the streets of Bath."

They all took one and ate. They waited. And waited. And waited until...

"*Niiice*," said Weasley, grinning appreciatively. "Did Tippy make any more?"

Granger just closed her eyes and said nothing as she leaned back.

Draco had to admit, Potter might be onto something here. This was different. This was even *fun*.

"Fuck Horace Slughorn," said Potter suddenly, his eyes also closed.

Draco just snorted. "Tell me about it. That fucker has a whole cauldron of *felix* just sitting in Gringotts."

Granger opened one eye. "He's selfish," she said. "I don't even understand what he's saving it for."

"Leverage," said Weasley, which Draco thought was oddly observant. "Though I agree. Malfoy's been killing himself with that potion."

Draco was oddly touched.

They were silent for a long moment until finally Snape spoke.

"Did you do this a lot then Potter?" he asked a little hazily. "Living with Petunia... I would have. That bitch."

Potter just raised an eyebrow lazily. "I didn't realize you knew her professor."

"Oh yes, I knew her," he said quietly. "I told Dumbledore he was making a mistake by giving you to her. Lily never would have agreed to it. But Dumbledore wouldn't listen."

And with this surprising announcement, they all stopped talking and just allowed themselves to feel.

Thank goodness Granger had the foresight to alert Tippy to what they were doing, because Draco lost all track of time, and Tippy had been ordered to keep an eye on the clock for them. Granger had made sure to time these trials around simpler tasks with *felix*. Draco would only have to stir while high. Granger said she didn't trust him to use a knife.

"I love you baby," he said as he gave her a lazy smile after he returned from a brief trip to the Manor with Tippy.

She just opened one eye. "You've never called me that before."

“Mmmm maybe it’s because I want you to have my babies,” he said as he lowered himself onto the sofa next to her. “All my babies. So many babies.”

“For fuck’s sake Malfoy, can you not? Please?” asked Weasley.

“For once I agree with Weasley,” chimed in Snape.

Draco and Snape both learned that the effects of Tippy’s brownies mixed with Potter’s weed lasted longer than the Xanax. By the time it finally wore off, Draco was due back to prep another ingredient for the *felix*. But with that task complete he returned to Grimmauld Place to debrief.

“OK, so I’ll admit I liked the weed more,” he said. Granger’s jaw dropped in disbelief as Potter looked positively delighted.

“*But*,” he said, stressing the word, “I think it’s too unreliable. It takes too long to start, and it lasts too long in the system once it begins. The really undesirable effects of *felix* seem to wear off on their own starting around the half-way point. Given that each dose will be good for eight hours, we only need about four hours or maybe a bit more of a muggle calming drug.”

“So Xanax it is then,” said Granger, with a look of satisfaction.

Draco couldn’t help but grin at the look of disappointment on Potter’s face. But what had he expected really? Granger was a genius, they all knew that. And when it came to potions, at any rate, Potter was... not.

“Yes,” said Draco, now taking a packet of pills from her. “We’ll go with the Xanax.” He turned to Snape now. “And sir, I want to talk to you about the best way to do it.”

With that, Draco and Snape both left Grimmauld to return to Hogwarts, where Draco turned to look at Snape.

“I think we need to use it. But I wonder – will the potion guild accept it as a valid modification?”

Snape raised an eyebrow. “Surely that doesn’t matter Draco,” he said.

Draco felt a lurch of annoyance. “I know it doesn’t. Not really. But I want to know. It’s a drug manufactured by muggles. Will they consider it cheating if we add it in since it’s not a raw ingredient, and I didn’t make it myself? Because if so we could always have Granger pass out a dose beforehand and not put it into the potion itself.”

Snape pursed his lips as he thought about this. Finally he said, “I suspect they would accept it if you added all the component ingredients of the Xanax into the potion separately. There is plenty of precedent for adding muggle chemical compounds to magical potions. I remember Lily once telling me that even water is a chemical compound. So is salt. So is almost anything muggle. She told me there are less than 120 substances in the muggle world that *aren’t* compounds. So in theory, I think that adding in the ingredients separately would

be acceptable. Adding them in in their manufactured form as Xanax is probably a step too far though, and the potions guild wouldn't consider it to be your own work."

Draco nodded slowly, as he pulled out the pills and read the label. As he surveyed it, he read that Xanax contained only a single active ingredient. Evidently the things that turned it into a pill weren't needed for the efficacy of it. It simply binded the active ingredient together in a way to make it easy to consume by muggles.

"I need to find alprazolam then," he said quietly as he stared at it. "That's the only active ingredient."

This led Draco to question Granger carefully about muggle drug manufacturing methods, and he wasn't terribly surprised to discover that she knew something about it. "Well my parents were dentists, you know," she told him.

Under the guise of wanting to learn more about the drug, Draco convinced Granger to take a trip to a muggle library for some research, while polyjuiced. She returned with some interesting news.

"Well it was originally made by a company called Upjohn, but they merged with a company called Pharmacia in 1995. They manufacture things all over the world, but they used to have their global headquarters here in England. They moved it to the United States earlier this year."

This piece of news led Draco to take a brief trip to a nondescript office building that was surprisingly small for the global headquarters of a major drug company. Thankfully the move was recent enough that the premises hadn't been taken over by another company yet, so Draco had an easy time disabling the muggle alarm and letting himself in to have a look. He saw it had been largely cleaned out, though much of the furniture remained. He supposed it wasn't feasible for muggles to ship furniture overseas for something like this. So as he poked around the mostly-empty file cabinets and the desks that had been left behind, Draco did discover some papers at the bottom of a drawer, informing him that Xanax was first manufactured in Germany decades earlier.

"I need you to go to the old manufacturing facility in Germany and see if you can find any alprazolam sir," said Draco after this discovery. "I can't take the time away from *felix* for it. And it's under something called a patent, which means I can't just go to any muggle lab to get it."

Snape gave Draco his hardest stare, but Draco didn't back down.

"Draco, the *felix* is going to be done in a week," he said. "You want me to take an international portkey to Germany and search an old muggle plant for this ingredient and leave you to prep the final steps all by yourself? When we could just pass out the pills Miss Granger has already procured?"

Draco bit his lip. "Yes. We've practiced all the final steps. I can do them. So if you could try sir... I would appreciate it. Just the one trip. It shouldn't take more than a day. If you can't find it, I won't ask again, and we'll pass out the pills."

Snape stared at him a moment longer before finally sighing. "Fine," he said. "But just the one trip."

"Yes sir, thank you sir," said Draco with relief.

Snape nodded and three days later called Draco back to his office.

"I have it," he said, holding out a vial. "I don't know how old it is, and I don't know if it's still effective, but I found it."

Draco's heart leapt as he took the small vial from Snape and stared at the liquid inside of it. "Perfect, sir. Thank you. I've already worked out how much we need to add."

Snape studied him. "I'm not inclined to waste a dose by testing it in advance to see if the alprazolam is still effective," he said slowly. "We will already be taking the equivalent of five doses to present for your mastery. Every dose we have could save a life in the final battle."

"Don't worry about that sir," said Draco quickly. "There's a... step I'll have to do first. On my own. I'll be the first one to take the *felix*. If it's too old and doesn't neutralize the side effects, then we can pass out the pills. They'll be a back-up."

Snape stared at him hard again. "What is this final step?"

Draco just shook his head. "I can't tell you that sir. It's better if you don't know. But I promise you, I'll be taking my dose before anybody else does."

Snape nodded once. "Very well then," he said. "Go ahead and put it in whenever you're ready. I'll add it to the report for the guild."

"Thank you sir. I just... thanks for everything. Really," said Draco.

Snape gave him a small smile. "I've never taken an apprentice before Draco. I must say, the experience has been... unexpectedly gratifying."

Draco felt himself turn red, but he smiled at this. It was the nicest thing Snape had ever said to him.

"I'll see you in a few days for the final step then?" asked Draco.

Snape nodded. "I'll be there. Send Tippy to collect me when you're ready."

Four days later Draco was standing in the small lab, surrounded by Snape, Granger, Potter, and Weasley. Tippy had come to collect all three of them, and for the first time Potter,

Weasley, and Snape got to see where Granger had been staying for the previous months.

Snape did not seem particularly phased by it, thanks to his familiarity with other parts of Malfoy Manor. Potter and Weasley, however, had gaped.

“Damn Hermione, you could have invited us to come stay here instead!” said Weasley, as Potter threw him a glare for the implied insult to Grimmauld Place.

“I think Tippy would have tattled until recently,” said Granger, as she smiled at them.

They all stood back as Draco sprinkled in the dust from the goblin gold.

As soon as the dust hit the potion it started to froth. Draco glanced around and saw they were all watching it with rapt attention, and then he picked up a spoon to stir it four more times counterclockwise with his left hand, while he held the vinewood wand in his right and pointed it to the potion. “*Parum fortuna!*” he shouted, and suddenly there was a flash of blinding light. Draco instinctively recoiled and shut his eyes, but when the dots of light behind his eyelids cleared, he looked back and stared down at a beautiful gold potion that was jumping in the cauldron as though it was joy itself.

Draco looked at it in disbelief as Granger and Weasley whooped, and even Snape’s face broke out into an enormous smile. The effect it had on his face was nothing short of transformative.

“Excellent, Draco. Truly superb,” he said. “Now just the final thing, and it should be ready to go.”

Grinning broadly now, Draco nodded and stirred in a premeasured dose of the alprazolam.

“What’s that?” asked Granger curiously.

“We just liquified the Xanax,” said Draco casually. “We did it the muggle way so it wouldn’t affect the potion.”

She looked curiously. “Are you sure it will still be effective?”

“It ought to be,” said Draco. “But if not, then you’ll pass out the pills. We just thought it would be easier to drink it,” he said smoothly.

She gave him a curious look, but to Draco’s great relief she dropped the subject. Sure enough, the alprazolam didn’t seem to change the consistency of the potion at all. It simply disappeared.

“We will need to tell people that we’re drugging them,” said Granger slowly. “I don’t think it’s right to just lace the potion with it and not inform anybody who takes it what we did.”

Draco gave her a sharp look.

“They wouldn’t know, Granger. Nobody but you three and Weasley’s sister has ever taken it.”

“Draco,” she said firmly, with that look on her face that told Draco she would fight him on it.

Draco sighed. “Fine. You can tell them we modified it with a muggle substance to reduce the exuberant side effects. That’s nothing short of the truth.”

Granger chewed on this for a moment, but finally nodded. “Fine. We’ll do that then.”

“How many doses do we have?” asked Weasley.

“Severus and I have calculated it, and it should be enough for forty-five people to have eight hours of luck,” said Draco, though he knew the real answer was fifty. He was going to have to skim five doses for his mastery.

“That should be plenty,” said Weasley. The Order isn’t that big.”

Draco nodded. “I’ll get these bottled then.”

“Come to Grimmauld when you’re done mate,” said Potter. “We’ll celebrate.”

Draco looked at him quickly. He had never heard Potter call him that before, but then he grinned.

“I will. Go raid the wine cellar of Grimmauld Place while you wait for me.”

“I’ll do one even better,” said Potter. “I’ll get Tippy to make more of those brownies.”

The others laughed, though Granger looked a bit scandalized, and they started to clear out with Tippy. Draco exchanged a knowing look with Snape, and as soon as he was alone he quickly measured out five doses and placed them in a vial that he slipped into his pocket. A few moments later Granger returned, and together they bottled forty-five separate doses.

“This is amazing, Draco. You should be proud of yourself.”

He couldn’t help but smile. “You helped too.”

She gave him a skeptical look. “Not really. You worked incredibly hard on it.”

Draco didn’t say anything more to this, but he worked quickly to separate out the doses. Then he turned to her and said, “I’m going to go to Hogwarts for a few minutes to talk to Snape about the next thing we need to do for the defenses. We put it on hold for *felix*. I’ll come by Grimmauld once I’m done. It won’t take long.”

She nodded and gave him a kiss, and he moved to his room and threw some floo powder into the fireplace. As he stepped out he saw Snape chatting with the portrait of Dumbledore, evidently giving Dumbledore an update on what they had just done.

“My boy,” said Dumbledore, beaming at Draco and addressing him for the first time ever. “You are truly exceptional.”

Draco broke into a broad smile. “Thank you sir.”

"And you Severus," said Dumbledore. "You trained him. I always knew you were an excellent teacher, despite the.... err... complaints I received over the years."

Snape rolled his eyes, as Draco snorted.

Then Snape turned to Draco and said, "Do you have it then?"

Draco just grinned and pulled the vial out of his pocket to hand to Snape. "Here," he said. "This one is for the guild." Then he pulled another, much smaller vial out. "And this one is your dose. I know I'll see you tomorrow to go over the defensive plan, but just in case."

Snape nodded and pocketed both vials. "I'll prepare the report, but I'm going to wait to send it to the guild until after Potter draws out the Dark Lord. The guild is discrete, but we don't want to risk it getting out that you were successful. It's fairly common to see a mastery application list *felix* to start, and they are always revised once the applicant sees how difficult it's going to be. Nobody at the guild would expect you to complete it."

Draco nodded. "Fair enough sir."

"I'll keep the report and potion in my desk at my home while we wait," he said. "It's under the fidelius, so it won't be searched. You can collect it and send it in yourself if something happens to me. My address is 412 Spinners End, Cokeworth."

Draco was a bit taken aback by this, but he nodded. "Yes sir."

"Now then, Draco. Why don't you go celebrate with your friends? You've earned it."

My friends, Draco thought with a bit of wonder. Granger was obviously very important to him, but had Potter and Weasley also become his friends through these mad couple of months? Yes, he realized. *Yes they have*.

Chapter End Notes

Note: marijuana is obviously legal for medical use in certain forms in the UK now, but it was not in winter of 1998 when this story took place.

Also, I am no chemist so please forgive any scientific liberties taken. That being said, the merger between Upjohn and Pharmacia and the move of their corporate headquarters from the UK to the US is all real.

Chapter 33: Gringotts

Draco

Dear Journal,

We're almost to the end now. My trip to Gringotts is all arranged, and once it starts we won't have any choice but to finish it.

Granger wants a couple more planning sessions, but then I'm going to press the issue and just do it. We're as ready as we can be.

In the meantime, I'm going to make every moment with her count. She always wears the necklace when we're alone together, and seeing her naked with it around her neck and the dragon on her hip is the best thing in the world. I can't wait much longer to be able to acknowledge her as mine in public, but I'll only be able to do it if he's dead.

Wish us all the luck felix can give us. It's time to end this.

Christmas was approaching, which meant Draco's wedding was as well. His mother had been able to push it to the first weekend in January without raising suspicions, using the excuse that Astoria was on break from Hogwarts during that time. Draco had refused to see or communicate with Astoria a single time since the engagement party, and yet she *still* had not called it off. Draco was incredibly annoyed about this, but then again, it was his way in to Bellatrix's vault.

"Aunt Bella, if your offer still stands, I'd like to select something from your collection for Astoria as a wedding gift. I understand from mother she will need a few weeks to make any necessary adjustments to her dress to accommodate my choice."

Bellatrix approved of this plan and had arranged to meet him the following day. He was meeting with Granger, Potter, and Weasley to go over the plan one last time at Grimmauld Place, and now they were in full-blown preparation mode just in case it all hit the fan while he was there.

"Remember, you *don't* have to steal the horcrux this time," said Granger tensely. "You can just scope things out and then tell Bellatrix you need to go back to pick something else because Astoria didn't like it."

"I'm getting the horcrux, Granger," he said firmly. "I may not get another shot."

She sighed and worried her lip. “Fine. But if anybody notices it missing...”

“I’ll handle it. And Potter, you sent one of Granger’s sickles to Lupin didn’t you? So he’ll know to alert the Order if it all goes to hell, and you don’t have time to go to him directly?”

Potter nodded, looking a bit worried. “Yes, we’ve tested it. It works.”

Granger opened her beaded bag and started pulling things out. “OK, if we’re really doing this...”

She pulled out four galleons. “These are four-way. So we can all communicate with each other. Harry, Ron, give me the other one I gave you so you don’t mix them up.”

Potter pulled a galleon out of his pocket and stood to swap it with a new one from Granger. Weasley and Draco each took one too, and Granger put the fourth in her pocket.

“Now Malfoy...” and now she pulled out a small drawstring bag. “This is like my beaded bag. It has an undetectable extension charm on it. I was thinking we could do a blood ward on it so we are the only four who can get in. But you know more about blood wards than I do. I only know the wards I used on my own bag.”

He furrowed his brow. “Blood wards are tied to magical family lines. You and Potter are the only ones from your families, so your blood won’t expand access to anybody else. If you used a blood ward on your bag that’s why it’s keyed only to you. I can do a double blood ward for the House of Malfoy and House of Black like we did on the door to your room... but my mother will still be able to get in because she’s also part of both Houses. And Weasley’s entire family will be able to get in as part of the House of Weasley, including Fleur since she married in.”

Granger bit her lip. “We’ll have to risk it,” she said. “Anyway, all of them are on our side so...”

“Wait, your mum is on our side?” jumped in Weasley, now looking at Draco. Draco saw Granger wince, and he sighed.

He briefly considered obliterating them and then decided they could know. Their occlumency was good enough to protect her, and if he and Granger both died and his mother needed help...

“Yes,” he said. “It was actually her idea to rescue Granger in the first place. She came up with the original plan, though obviously things... took a turn.” He glanced at Granger as he said this last bit.

“*I told you!*” said Potter, now turning to Weasley. “I told you he didn’t do it all by himself! I knew Narcissa had helped him!”

Weasley was looking disgruntled, and Draco couldn’t help it. He started to chuckle. Granger shot him an apologetic look, but seemed relieved that he wasn’t upset by it.

“Now that you know this, I trust you’ll both occlude it.”

“Of course,” said Potter immediately. “She’s like you, isn’t she? Nobody can know yet.”

“Right,” said Draco, relieved. “And if something happens to me and Granger...”

Potter and Weasley both gave him sympathetic looks. “Nothing will happen. But don’t worry about your mum.”

“She’s already in my memories,” said Granger, quietly.

“Your memories?” asked Draco curiously.

Potter nodded. “The three of us have saved our memories of the people who helped us from the other side – you, Snape, and your mum. They’re in the safe here at Grimmauld Place. If we all die but the Order still wins, they’ll exonerate you. I’ve given Andromeda the address for Grimmauld Place, and she knows to come here and open it if we are all gone. I’ve left a letter in the safe with instructions for her. She won’t be fighting – she is supposed to take care of Teddy.”

Draco stilled, as a flood of emotions suddenly hit him. They were protecting him. All three of them were in on it. And they weren’t only protecting him, but his mother and Snape too. And they were entrusting the secret to Andromeda – his aunt, who also happened to be an occlumens. It was brilliant.

“I...” he said. “Thank you.”

Potter just nodded, as Granger smiled a little.

“Alright, back to the bag then. You should take it with you to carry supplies and the horcrux. It should be small enough to slip into a pocket in your robes. But I really think all four of us need to be able to get into the bag just in case something happens to you. And we probably need to expand the blood wards on my bag for the same reason – you three need to be able to get into it just in case.”

“Fair enough, though your anti-Death Eater ward will still keep me out of yours,” he said wryly.

She just grinned at this, as Draco stilled and quickly thought of the wards they would need. He talked them through the spell, and soon all four of them were slicing their palms open and adding blood to the bag, while Potter and Weasley also added blood to Granger’s bag. Draco did it twice to ward out both his father and Bellatrix.

“So if I had known this, could I have added a blood ward to my door to let me escape?” asked Granger curiously.

Draco shook his head. “No, we did a variation on it that would have prevented you from adding your own. Don’t think I didn’t consider that. I’m actually surprised you never asked Tippy for books on wards.”

He smirked at her, and she just wrinkled her nose at him as the others laughed.

"Moving on then," she said with a bit of a huff, and she pulled out several vials of muddy brown liquid. "Polyjuice," she said. "We'll each contribute some hair in case you need to look like one of us for some reason. And you still have the random muggle hair from collecting *felix* ingredients."

Draco chewed his lip. "I don't know if I'll use it, but fine."

Granger nodded, and then gestured to Potter and Weasley who each pulled out a few hairs. Granger bagged them all separately for him and attached a neat label on each.

"Harry, give me your glasses," she said.

Potter looked at her in confusion but handed them over.

"*Geminio*," said Granger, tapping her wand on the glasses so a duplicate pair appeared. "Take these too, in case you decide to turn into Harry. His eyesight is horrendous."

"Hey!" said Potter, but Granger just rolled her eyes.

"I've turned into you before, in case you've forgotten," she said. Then she looked at Draco. "You really won't be able to see a bloody thing without them."

Draco smirked but took the glasses and added them to the bag.

"Also this," said Granger, now pulling out a sheaf of paper. "My notes on how to destroy horcruxes."

"We use the Sword," said Draco in confusion.

"Yes, that's ideal," said Granger. "But there are a couple other methods. Emergency use only, mind you. None of them are as easy as the Sword."

"Should I take the Sword too?" Draco asked.

Now Granger bit her lip and shook her head. "I don't think so, no. The Sword is supposed to appear to worthy Gryffindors. I felt a sort of... acceptance when I used it on the diadem. I don't think it will work for you since..."

"I'm a Slytherin," he said.

"Right," said Granger. "In any event, we're supposed to meet up once you have it. We'll take the Sword in my bag, and one of us can destroy the cup before we draw him out."

Draco felt a twinge of disappointment at this. A small part of him really wanted to be the one to wield the Sword and destroy the cup if he managed to actually steal it. He rather felt that Potter had earned the diary by fighting in the Chamber of Secrets. Weasley had earned the locket with the emotional torment it put him through, along with his search to find his friends again before saving Potter in the pond. And Granger had truly earned the diadem with the many hours she had poured into research and her willingness to trust Draco with her memories. The cup, however, would feel like his. The plan for Gringotts was his idea, and

the execution was going to be entirely on him. He wanted to see it through to the end and destroy it too. But he forced himself to push past it. There was no point in dwelling on this with everything else they needed to do.

“Alright and last...” started Granger, but suddenly Potter collapsed and began to scream as he clutched his scar.

“Harry!” shouted Granger, as she leapt to her feet, racing over to Potter.

She and Weasley hovered, but she gave Draco a look that told him there was nothing to do but wait it out.

“He can’t occlude these,” she said worriedly. “He’s never been able to.”

Again, that dark and very dangerous thought crossed Draco’s mind, but he refused to dwell on it. There was no way *Potter* could be a...

No. It didn’t even bear consideration.

Finally, at long last, Potter stilled and opened his eyes.

“What is it, Harry?” asked Granger tensely. “What did you see? Is it the horcruxes?”

Potter just shook his head as he rubbed the scar.

“No, it’s... well, it’s the Elder Wand.”

“*What?*” asked Granger in shock.

“The Elder Wand,” said Potter quietly. “He found it.”

They all gaped at him, and Draco felt like a giant pit had just formed in his stomach. The Dark Lord had finally acquired the most powerful wand in the world. And he did it the night before Draco was going to steal the last hidden horcrux before they went for Nagini.

“Where did he find it?” asked Granger in a soft voice.

“Dumbledore’s tomb. Dumbledore was its last master.” Potter was talking in a hollow sort of voice now. “And of course, he never told me. He never told me any of it.”

Draco heard the bitterness in Potter’s voice, but he couldn’t help but watch Granger. She had gotten an odd expression on her face, as she stared off into the distance, her mouth hanging open just a bit.

“What is it?” prompted Draco, and this caused Weasley and Potter to turn to stare at Granger too.

“It’s just... I wonder... I can’t be sure, but...”

"Any day now would be great," said Weasley, and Draco glared at him, but Weasley was looking distinctly green.

"I think Harry's the master of the Elder Wand," she finally said in a quiet voice.

Now all three wizards stared at her, and Draco hardly dared to hope. "Explain," he said. "Please," he added at her annoyed look.

She furrowed her brow. "It's just... well you told me to read up on wandlore, didn't you? To prove your point that my wand is temperamental?"

Draco nodded. "Yes, the Manor library has a whole section devoted to wandlore. We're one of the few private libraries that does. It's one of the features that makes the Malfoy library so well-regarded."

She nodded. "Yes, and I admit I got sucked into it. I had lots of free time, and it's an absolutely fascinating topic that's not really taught except through very exclusive apprenticeships. I must have read over a dozen books about it."

"And?" asked Weasley eagerly.

"And wand affinity starts by the pairing of a wizard's magic to the wand's own properties. Any wizard can force a wand to channel *some* magic, but it won't feel right or be easy unless there is an affinity. Wands are... passively sentient, if that makes any sense. Wands can sense that initial affinity, though some wands are more sensitive than others. Regardless, it's always the wand that chooses the wizard for that first pairing and not the other way around."

Here, Draco eyed the vinewood wand. The wand had always felt more than a bit sentient to him. Even though it worked flawlessly for him now, he could still sense it.

"After that initial selection, wand affinity can pass from master to master through certain acts. Or it can be shared. Friendship increases affinity. That's probably why Harry was able to share my wand after his snapped, though it wasn't always perfect for him. Acts of bravery can enhance affinity. That's probably why my wand worked well enough for Malfoy after he saved my life. And acts of love also increase affinity – lovers can often share a wand rather well." She went a little pink at this and studiously ignored her own wand. "But the thing that actually *transfers* wand affinity from one master to another is an act of force. That's why the Elder Wand's affinity has been passed down over centuries. It's always been forcibly taken from its previous master."

"Through murder though," said Weasley. "Isn't that its whole deal? I mean, they even call it the Deathstick, right?"

Granger narrowed her eyes as she thought about this point, but then Potter jumped in.

"Dumbledore didn't murder Grindelwald. He defeated him, but he didn't kill him. He was in Nuremgard for decades. I read about it in Skeeter's book that you stole from Bathilda Bagshot's house."

Granger's eyes lit up at this. "Yes, you're right Harry. Of course. Then I'm almost *sure* it's you!"

"But how?" he asked in confusion. "I never took the wand from Dumbledore."

"You didn't..." she said slowly. "But Malfoy did."

Draco and Potter's eyes met, as they realized what she was saying at the same time. Then Draco spun to stare at Granger.

"You think *I* was..."

"The master of the Elder Wand, yes," she said. "You disarmed Dumbledore, and then he died. Then Harry took your wand from you at the Manor."

"But Snape was the one who killed him!" said Draco.

"But it's the method of the taking that matters," said Granger simply. "And the intent of both parties matters. Snape killed Dumbledore, but it was arranged. He didn't intend to do anything to Dumbledore that Dumbledore hadn't consented to. That made it no different than practicing disarming in Defense class. You might be disarmed during practice a dozen times, but it won't transfer affinity unless it's done against the will of the master and the person doing the disarming wants to truly incapacitate the master. When *you* disarmed Dumbledore, you wanted to incapacitate him. You didn't kill him, but it was only because you got cold feet at the very last second. The moment you disarmed him, you meant for him to die. And I don't think Dumbledore wanted you to be the one to do it. He wanted it to be Snape, but you got there first. So you did it against his will. That should have been enough for the wand's power to pass to you."

Draco felt the oddest sensation at this. He didn't like being reminded of his plan to kill Dumbledore, but then again, she was absolutely right. He had meant to kill Dumbledore. He had even wanted to in a way, in order to keep his family safe. But he chickened out at the last minute. Once he was holding Dumbledore's wand, he could no longer do it.

"And at the Manor," she continued, "I'm not certain what happened because I had already passed out. But Harry said he took your wand from you, and it works perfectly for him."

"I grabbed it out of his hands," said Potter. "I physically grabbed it from him. Malfoy fought back, but... I don't know, adrenaline or something... I was able to get it from him."

"And you meant to incapacitate him when you did it," said Granger.

Potter furrowed his brow, but nodded. "Yes, I mean, in the sense that I didn't want *any* of the Death Eaters to have wands. It was a self-preservation thing, and I wasn't trying to kill him, but yes... I took Malfoy's wand against his will to protect us and incapacitate him."

Now Potter held up Draco's old wand. It was odd seeing it. He hadn't felt tempted to ask for it back since adapting to the vinewood wand.

"And it works for you?" asked Granger.

“Perfectly,” said Potter. “Ever since the day I took it.”

Granger nodded. “Then that means the affinity should have transferred. You’re that wand’s master now, and Malfoy is not. But there’s an easy way to check. Let Malfoy try a spell with it.”

Potter shrugged and stood to hand the wand back to Draco. He palmed the familiar wood handle, but the normal spark wasn’t there. He looked around and tried to summon a book on the coffee table, and it died halfway across the room.

“It doesn’t feel right,” he said quietly. “Not anymore. The vinewood wand feels a lot better than this one.”

Granger nodded, with a small smile. “Then there you go.”

“But I didn’t take the Elder Wand from Malfoy,” argued Potter. “I took this hawthorne one from him.”

“That shouldn’t matter, in theory,” said Granger. “Remember, it’s the *acts between masters* that changes wand affinity. And when you were at the Manor you incapacitated the Elder Wand’s master by force, against his will. All of Malfoy’s wands should have passed to you.”

At this Potter got a broad grin, and Draco realized he was grinning too. This was the best piece of news Draco had gotten since Granger informed him she was in love with him. Potter actually stood a chance now. But then Potter’s face fell.

“Can a wand be used against its master?” he asked. “Assuming You-Know-Who can channel some of the wand’s power even though he’s not its master, can he use it against me?”

Granger bit her lip as she thought about this. “I think he’ll have some trouble with it. Not to say it’s impossible, mind you, because he *is* very powerful. And every other Death Eater could still kill you. But I suspect the wand won’t fully cooperate if he’s trying to *Avada* you, and you don’t consent to it.”

And with this Potter stood up and strode to the sideboard. “Drinks!” he said. “I’m bloody celebrating!”

They all laughed, but accepted a drink and sat around speculating about the wand and how long it would take the Dark Lord to figure out the wand wasn’t anything special for him.

“Oh I almost forgot!” squeaked Granger as she and Draco rose to leave. “For your bag, Malfoy.... healing potions. And your does of *felix*, and a backup Xanax.”

She pulled out a number of different vials and pushed them toward him, which Draco slipped into the bag. “What about healing potions for you?” he asked.

“I have plenty for us. Tippy helped. And I’ll be bringing the rest of the *felix* and Xanax in my bag.”

Draco gave a relieved nod.

"And you're taking my wand with you tomorrow," she added.

Draco shot her a look.

"*Please,*" she said. "We will rendezvous later, and if you... handle Bellatrix like you've implied her wand's affinity will pass to you, and I can take mine back when we draw out You-Know-Who. But you're going to be the one in the most immediate danger with her, and you need a wand that works for you. I have plenty of wandless magic if I need it. You know I've been practicing defensive spells."

Potter and Weasley were both nodding their agreement at this, and Draco felt some anxiety settle in, but he knew she was right. Her wandless magic was advanced, but his was not. And Bellatrix was formidable. He wouldn't stand a chance against her without a working wand. Besides, Bellatrix recognized the vinewood wand now. It would be suspicious if he didn't have it.

"Fine, but we're meeting up here straight after," he said firmly. "You'll take your wand back, we'll destroy the horcrux, and then the next step will be based on whatever I had to do to get it."

The others nodded, as Draco and Granger rose. They called for Tippy, and several moments later they were back in Draco's room, and then he was kissing her frantically.

"I've already ordered Tippy to take your rose necklace and a copy of the key to my vault to your room at Grimmauld Place tomorrow morning. They will be waiting for you there if anything happens to me."

Her eyes were huge. "Draco, I..."

"Hush, just let me say this. I'm going to make you the beneficiary of my vault tomorrow morning before I meet Bellatrix. I would have done it already, but I didn't want the news to get out too early. The heir's share is not the entire Malfoy fortune, but... it's plenty, and I control it. Going through Gringotts to change the beneficiary designation should override whatever is in that blasted engagement contract with Astoria. I've triple checked."

"It could blow your cover," she said softly.

"That's why I've waited to do it. But if I pull off a miracle and don't blow my cover tomorrow, everything will come to light very soon anyway, once you lot draw him out. I want you to have it if something happens to me."

"I... OK," she said softly.

"And tonight... I want us to both remember tonight."

"Yes," she said eagerly, and then he was kissing her again, trying to make sure that she would always remember the feel of his touch and his lips on her and memorizing that feeling of her in return.

He removed her clothes and fastened her necklace around her, and he committed her to his memory just like that – his beautiful, tiny, powerful witch dressed in diamonds and nothing else. That night she gave herself to him with reckless abandon, until finally she said, “Imperius me.”

“I... what?” he asked, his own body aching for her, and his brain fuzzy from want.

“Do it, and... be you. I want to feel what it’s like when you’re generous to me while I’m under it. And I want you to take what you need from me for tomorrow. I’ll never *ever* trust anybody else to do that to me. Just once, just in case...”

His blood heated, and he did as she asked, but very little actually changed once she was under it. He was already giving her blinding pleasure, and she was already beautifully spread out before him to give him just what he needed in return. Draco buried that knowledge deep in his heart – that even when their greatest desires were compelled through magic, it was nearly identical to what they naturally did to each other entirely under their own volition. Truly the only thing he could identify that was different about the imperius that night was her ability to have unstimulated orgasms on command. He gave her two for good measure, as he sat back and watched.

He finally released her from it, and the smile on her face told him she had realized the same thing he did about the curse. He knew that if they both survived this, they would only use it in the future as a novelty. They didn’t need it to enhance the pleasure they gave each other.

At long last, he finally allowed himself to come inside of her, while he whispered words of praise and love to her. And as they climaxed together, he again made his magic touch hers one last time, though he still wasn’t exactly sure how he did it. It was just instinct, but it made him nearly breathless as he watched, and he wondered how the whole world didn’t already know that he was in love with Hermione Granger.

And then he pulled her to him – his legs twined with hers, his arm securely around her waist, and her head on his chest as he buried his nose in her hair to smell her. In the early hours of the morning they drifted off to sleep like this and awoke hours later in exactly the same position: clinging to each other, hoping beyond hope that this wasn’t the final time.

Dear Journal,

I’m taking you to Gringotts with me. If I don’t make it today, I want Granger to have you. She’s my world.

Darling, if you’re reading this please know that with the obvious exception of the cruciatus curse, I would never change a single thing. I would do all of it for you over and over again just for the months we’ve had together.

I love you, and I always will.

Draco arrived at Gringotts a couple hours early to change the paperwork on his vault to name Hermione Jean Granger, muggleborn witch, as his sole beneficiary of any vaults under his control with Theodore Remus Lupin as his contingent beneficiary in case Granger predeceased him. He had never met baby Teddy, but he would be the last surviving Black if Draco died without an heir. Draco derived some dark amusement from the notion that the child of a half-blood and a werewolf would inherit the Potter fortune and a considerable share of both the Black and Malfoy fortunes if Granger predeceased him, and then he and Potter both kicked it in the final battle too. Andromeda herself would probably die from the shock of it.

He had picked a goblin who was weighing gems a little set off from the others to help him with the paperwork, and it gave him the chance to subtly oblige the goblin once everything was complete. He knew the news that he had changed the beneficiaries would spread when the next statement of accounts was released. His father received a copy of the statement, as the head of Draco's House. But that wouldn't be for a few more weeks, and everything should be over by then one way or the other. Draco had timed this strategically.

Draco had then taken a cart down to the main Malfoy vault. He could not touch the gold there – that was reserved for Lord Malfoy and his wife. Draco's own share of the gold was similarly kept separate in the heir's vault for his exclusive use. But Draco could touch and remove the *objects* that were in the primary Malfoy vault as a member of his House. Goblin laws had always treated objects differently than gold.

Draco surveyed the objects to see if any would appeal to Granger. He removed their pensieve first, along with several rare books and manuscripts that were too valuable to be kept in the Malfoy library, and the very few pieces of Malfoy jewelry that Draco could actually envision her wearing. He ordered the goblin to then take him to the heir's vault, and he deposited everything there. From the satchel Granger had given him, Draco also pulled out his journal and a large, squat box that was filled to the brim with vials of his memories of their time together. He had been inspired by what she, Potter, and Weasley had done to protect him and the others after the war, and he wanted to do something similar in case he was gone. She would have her own memories to view in the pensieve, but she would be able to see everything from Draco's perspective too.

He knew that Lucius could get into the heir's vault at any time and take objects out of it, just like Draco could do in the main Malfoy vault. But if Draco died today, the vault would magically transfer to Granger. It would no longer be tied to the House of Malfoy, and Lucius would be out of luck. And just like the change in beneficiaries, Lucius wouldn't be informed that the objects had been moved from one vault to the other or that anything new had been added to the heir's vault until the next statement of accounts appeared. Draco had bought himself a few weeks.

With those tasks complete, Draco had opened his vial of *felix* and discretely swallowed it as he made his way back up to the surface of Gringotts.

He stilled as he felt the most curious sensation wash over him, which he had only ever felt secondhand in other people's memories: confidence. Utter confidence. Draco knew he was feeling some exuberance too, but he soon felt that initial burst of excitement ebbing as the muggle drug entered his system and calmed him down. It didn't fully disappear, but now he simply felt optimistic and somewhat upbeat, instead of ready to launch himself directly into Bella's path the moment he saw her.

Fucking hell, it worked, he thought in slight disbelief. He still didn't know exactly *how* he was going to get the horcrux, but he was absolutely certain he would be successful. He received a nudge from *felix* to wait in the lobby, and he did so, casually checking his watch.

"Draco, you're early," said Bellatrix as she appeared several minutes later.

Felix told Draco to roll his eyes. "Yes, I had to make a trip to my own vault first. I'm afraid mother has run up a rather large bill for me at Twilfit and Tatting for those bloody wedding robes."

Bellatrix just snorted at this, but seemed to believe his explanation, just as Draco was sure she would. Then she led him over to the counter.

"I would like to visit my vault. My heir Draco Malfoy will be joining me."

The goblin seemed to recognize her because he cowered, but he quickly checked their wands for identification and then hurriedly called over another goblin to assist.

"Bogrod will take you and your guest to your vault, Madame Lestrange," he said, as he bowed.

Bellatrix said nothing to this, but gave him an imperious glare, before striding after the little goblin that Draco recognized as the one who had helped him when he retrieved that ugly ring for Astoria.

Draco knew he should be nervous, but he wasn't as he calmly followed Bellatrix through the door and got into one of the carts with her and the goblin.

The ride to Bellatrix's vault was nothing short of dizzying. She had moved it to an even lower level of Gringotts than where the Malfoy vaults were housed.

"I have ordered the top security for my treasures. Nobody can get in without my orders, not even that ridiculous husband of mine."

This news made *felix* nudge Draco, and he sat up a little straighter.

"Rodolphus can't get in?" he asked in a casual voice.

"Bah," said Bellatrix. "He was good only for his blood. He was an acceptable match for me. But he never had a head for any of it. He has enough to live comfortably that's under his control, but the bulk of the Black and Lestrange fortunes are mine. I took the Lestrange settlements and my own marital share and grew them. When I die it will become yours, not his. I may bear the name of Lestrange, but I am loyal to the House of Black."

Draco felt a thrill of awareness at this, and *felix* started to light a path for him, though he still could not fully see where it would lead. Still, he buried this information in the back of his mind as they turned a final corner, and Draco nearly gasped at what he was seeing.

It was a dragon. A real life dragon was guarding his aunt's vault. Draco wasn't afraid of it. *Felix* told him he was safe. But Draco was still stunned to see it. Bellatrix smirked at the look on his face.

"Like I said, I pay for the best security."

The goblin nervously exited the cart and started making a clanging noise that caused the dragon to cower and back away. As Draco stared at it, he didn't recognize the breed at first. It was a yellowish-white, and ironically, nearly the same color as his hair. He couldn't recall a single kind of dragon that was bred to be this color. But as the dragon moved back, Draco caught a look at the ridges on the back and the arrow-spiked tail. When Draco finally looked at its violet eyes, he inhaled as he knew what he was looking at for the first time.

A Hebridean black. Then he felt a little jolt from *felix* that told him he was right.

Draco looked at the dragon and the dragon looked back at him, and he suddenly felt a frisson of awareness. *She's magnificent*, he thought, for he knew it was female. He experienced an odd moment of understanding that told him everything about her. She had been born in Scotland, with this unique coloring. Her scales were naturally goldish white instead of black like her nest mates, and it meant she was more easily spotted and had been captured as a youngling. Her eyesight was poor due to extended exposure to the conjunctivitis curse, but it wasn't permanent and could heal with enough time and proper care. She had been locked in Gringotts guarding various vaults for years, and what she wanted, more than anything else, was to escape.

You will, he thought. *I'll make sure of it.* The moment he had this thought *felix* reassured him that he could do it.

As he stared at her he knew she accepted him. She connected to him. They were paired. He knew, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she was his dragon, and she would guard him with her life. A plan to retrieve the horcrux finally solidified in Draco's mind, whether planted there by *felix* or not, he couldn't be sure, but a calmness settled over him as he knew exactly what to do. He sensed that the dragon understood it as well. He tore his gaze away from her now to focus on Bellatrix and the terrified goblin who was stroking the door to make the vault open.

"Come along," said Bellatrix firmly. "The vault is not yours yet, so you will not be able to touch anything. Be cautious you don't bump into anything. There are duplication and flagration charms on every piece of treasure in here, and you will activate them and bury us in burning gold if you aren't careful. I am the only one who can safely touch anything in here. You may stand with me while I open the boxes, and then you may tell me your choice."

"Of course, Aunt Bella, and I thank you for the warning," said Draco as he stepped cautiously into the vault, with *felix* helping him avoid any of the treasure. He looked around curiously. The sheer volume of treasure was rather astonishing, but then again, he knew that

Bellatrix had always favored what she called “liquid wealth.” The Malfoy fortune was far more extensive, but much of it was tied up in properties and business interests that were not so easily converted to gold. His mother had once told him that after her marriage to Rodolphus, Bellatrix had stripped her own properties of everything valuable and then sold them, and that was why she moved in with the Malfoys at the Manor. Looking around at the piles of galleons, sickles, and knuts, Draco knew this must have been true.

He carefully weaved through the treasure, glancing around to see if he could find *anything* that looked like the cup he had seen in Potter’s memories.

Felix told him to make appreciative noises as Bellatrix opened box after box of jewelry, though his eyes darted around the room every time she bent down to retrieve another. And finally, at long last, he spotted it.

There. He saw it, in the corner, high up on a shelf. It was Hufflepuff’s cup.

Satisfied, *felix* nudged him now to give all of his attention to Bellatrix.

“I think the ruby necklace, Aunt Bella,” he said. “It should go well with her ring.”

Bellatrix raised her eyebrow at this. “Rubies are rather like a Gryffindor are they not?” she asked.

Draco gave her his best smirk. “Actually, I was thinking about that saying about a virtuous wife being rarer than rubies. I can’t recall it exactly, but I thought Astoria might need a reminder.”

Bellatrix gave him a slightly confused look at this, and Draco nearly winced as he remembered why: it was a muggle saying he had heard from Granger once. But Bellatrix evidently accepted his explanation because she pocketed the ruby necklace as she led the way out of the vault, where Bogrod was waiting for them near the entrance, still making that awful clanging noise now and then to keep the dragon at bay.

Draco let *felix* lead the way now as he slowly picked his way back through the treasure after her, making a show of going very slow so he wouldn’t trip over anything.

“Come along, Draco, the goblin can’t close the vault until you are out of it,” she snapped.

“Sorry, Aunt Bella, I’m trying not to touch anything,” he said, as he kept one eye on his feet and the other eye on her.

Bellatrix huffed a little, but crossed the threshold outside of the vault and then started to turn to wait for Draco. As soon as she cleared the door, *felix* nudged him, and Draco came to a halt.

She gave Draco a look of confusion when she saw that he had stopped walking, but Draco just gave her a very slow, *very* satisfied smile. Her eyes widened for a split second, and he could see her start to reach for her wand, but before she could mutter a spell, she was flung back and screaming as she was engulfed by the dragon’s flame.

On and on it went, and Draco just watched as the witch who had tortured Granger was burned alive. The smell of her skin crackling and her hair igniting was pungent, and it made him hold his robes over his nose in disgust, but he didn't tear his eyes away. He made no move to help her, he simply watched it happen, taking in the moment as something in his soul settled to know that Granger's attacker was gone. Nor did he stop the dragon from turning on the goblin once Bellatrix had finally expired. *Felix* told him he didn't need to stop it, and Draco could feel his dragon's rage toward those who had imprisoned her. He felt no inclination whatsoever to halt her revenge. He understood the urge all too well.

Curiously, Draco was able to identify the precise moment Bellatrix died. Something in the air shifted just the slightest bit, and Draco instinctively knew what it was. Gringotts' magic had sensed that she was gone, and her vault now belonged to him, her heir. This was the thing that *felix* had been nudging him about on the cart ride down: he was the heir so he could actually inherit the horcrux if she died. He had had this thought before of course, but he was never sure if Bellatrix had made it legal, and he also knew that he couldn't be the one to kill her if she had.

Murder would void a Gringott's beneficiary designation, every good pureblood heir knew that. And so he had always considered other alternatives: a deep imperius curse, the cruciatus curse until her brain liquified, or even a powerful obliviation spell similar to the one Granger had used on her parents. He had prepared for all of them, figuring he would use whatever worked best in the moment. But when he heard that he was truly the legal beneficiary and not Rodolphus, and then he saw his dragon, *felix* knew there was another path forward, and it would be beautifully simple and so very permanent. He was happy to discover that Gringotts' magic evidently did not require a beneficiary to *prevent* an act of death that was being inflicted upon the account owner. He simply couldn't be the one to do it.

He looked around the vault, now alone, and he picked up a galleon near his foot. Nothing happened. *Felix* was right then: her vault was his, and he could touch everything in it. He was tempted to give Granger and the others an update, but *felix* gave him a nudge as he had the thought, and he knew he shouldn't waste any time. He had no idea if the death of an account owner within the vaults of Gringotts triggered some sort of alarm, but *felix* seemed to think it might. He shouldn't delay.

He hurried toward the horcrux and raised Granger's wand. "Accio horcrux!" he shouted. Nothing happened. Evidently there was an antisummoning charm on the vault.

Shit, he thought as he looked at it, and then turned to *felix* for a solution. He felt another prod, and then he saw the broom in the corner: it was an early prototype Nimbus, and Draco ran over to it and climbed on as he holstered the wand. He wasn't surprised to find the broom still worked, though it wasn't as smooth as the newer models Draco was accustomed to. But it still did a credible job of getting him in the air, and soon he was plucking the horcrux from its shelf. He felt the same sinister darkness radiating from it that he had felt from the diadem, and he knew he had found it.

He opened his bag and dropped the horcrux in, just as he heard a distant sound coming from outside of the vault. *Felix* pushed him hard now, and he grabbed some polyjuice out of the

bag and the selection of hairs as he tried to make up his mind. *Felix* told him to use Potter's hair, so he dropped one strand in the potion and then watched as it frothed for a moment and turned a clear gold before drinking.

He felt his skin bubbling, his features changing, and his eyesight getting significantly worse. They were about the same height, though Potter's shoulders and chest were a bit narrower than his. Still, he didn't take the time to adjust his robes. They would fit well enough for this. He pulled the glasses Granger had given him out of the bag, relieved that she had thought of this problem in advance, and then he closed the bag and shoved the whole thing deep into a pocket of his robes.

He whipped the broom around to leave the vault, but as he passed another ledge, a familiar ruby-encrusted hilt caught Draco's eye, and *felix* prodded him so hard he nearly fell off his broom. He paused for just a moment to grab the fake Sword of Gryffindor and held it aloft in one hand, as Granger's wand fell out of his holster into the other. He flew out of the vault, grateful that his years of quidditch training meant he didn't need his hands for balance, and then he saw the goblins arrive. The vault sealed itself the moment its owner had emerged, and Draco looked around, seeing the dead body of Bellatrix, the goblin, and, shockingly, Bellatrix's wand near the door to the vault. In a lucky break, she must have dropped it when she felt the first burn, but it appeared to be intact. Draco wasn't terribly surprised that *felix* had arranged this for him, but he still had to retrieve it. He whipped the broom around and dove, and then he wrenched his broom back up as soon as he grabbed it. *Felix* nudged him again as he pointed both wands to his dragon's bindings to finally release her.

The bindings broke apart with a deafening CRACK! and she gave an almighty roar of pleasure. She sent fire toward the goblins who had imprisoned her, and they ducked in unison to avoid her flames. She turned and spread her wings, and Draco felt a thrill as she finally launched herself into the air, heading straight for the high rock ceiling above them. He heard shouts of "Potter!" and "Sword!" below him, and suddenly spells were coming at him.

So this is what it feels like to be Harry Potter, he thought, as he ducked and dove on the broom, guided entirely by *felix* and shooting a few spells back at them, but not taking the time to aim.

Then, to his utter shock, a spell caught the end of his broom, causing it to jerk sideways, and he overcorrected and started to slip off the front of it. He had the briefest flash of realization that this was it. He had managed to retrieve the horcrux, only to plummet to his death moments later, and he wondered what the hell had gone wrong with *felix* when it suddenly seemed to kick on again. He saw a white flash, and his dragon dove straight down beneath him. *Felix* nudged him to abandon his broom, and he dropped to land on her hard. Luckily, her back was broad, and she was steady as she rose again, though she did pause to send a jet of red hot flame toward the goblin who had dared threaten her master.

Draco pulled himself up shakily, seeing that he had somehow managed to hang on to both the fake sword and the wands as his dragon rose higher, and now Draco knew they were out of range of the goblin's spells. He felt a broad grin split his face as *felix* gave him another small

nudge, and he held the sword aloft in triumph, giving them one hell of a show as Harry Potter escaped on the back of the blonde Hebridean black.

He turned his attention to his dragon now, *felix* telling him that she needed his help, and he again used both wands to explode rock in front of her, as she used her fire to burn a wide enough hole for her to crawl through. Slowly, but surely, they made progress until finally she clawed through the marble floor of the bank's lobby itself, and Draco blasted the front doors open for her as goblins and visitors alike dove out of her way.

He heard more shouts of "Potter!" before she was out in the air, and Draco felt a fierce joy come from her as she rose higher and higher into the sky, heading toward Scotland and Hogwarts, because she sensed from Draco, who sensed from *felix*, that was where she needed to go.

Still on her back, he flipped Granger's wand back into its holster and then carefully pulled out the bag from his pocket, before slipping the fake sword and Bellatrix's wand into it. He smirked as he pulled out the four-way galleon. He had news to report.

Chapter 34: Flight

Hermione

Hermione was doing her best not to hyperventilate from nerves. Malfoy had left her early that morning after giving her a searing kiss, and she hadn't heard from him since. The moment he was gone she called Tippy, who helped Hermione move. Hermione cleaned the bathroom out of healing potions, she added the vials of *felix* and Xanax to her beaded bag, and then packed a few changes of clothes and provisions. Meanwhile, Tippy took multiple trips between the Manor and Grimmauld Place with the rest of Hermione's things and all of the spare potions ingredients. Together, they cleaned house and made it appear that Hermione had not been there for months, just as her memories would show. Tippy even made a special trip with the rose necklace and the second key to Malfoy's vault, along with the actual roses he had given her all those months ago. Tippy returned to tell her that Kreacher had placed those items in the Grimmauld Place vault for safekeeping, and then Hermione herself was whisked away.

Ever since, Tippy had been unpacking for Hermione upstairs, while Hermione paced the sitting room with a tense Ron and Harry, holding both her sickle and her galleon like a lifeline.

"It's been more than two bloody hours," she said. "I haven't heard a peep."

"He's being watched. You know he can't communicate until he's out. He'll be fine," said Ron. "He's taking *felix* beforehand."

"But how will we know if he..." she trailed off. She couldn't even bear to say it out loud. It was too awful to contemplate.

"We talked about this," said Harry calmly. "Tippy will know. She's keyed to his House."

"Right," said Hermione. "Right."

Tippy had said nothing at all to indicate that Malfoy was dead. She just prayed the little elf hadn't gotten so distracted by her packing and unpacking that she had failed to notice.

At long last, Hermione felt the galleon burn, and all three of them jumped simultaneously.

DM - I have the horcrux and Bellatrix's wand. Bellatrix is dead. I'm safe.

Hermione felt lightheaded with relief as Harry and Ron whooped and jumped up in excitement. Then she felt another burn as he sent a second message.

DM – Felix works perfectly but needs 15 minutes for Xanax to start.

HG - Noted on the felix. What happened with Bellatrix then?

DM - My dragon killed her for me.

This news was sufficiently diverting that Harry and Ron stopped what they were doing, and they all stared at each other before turning back to their galleons.

HP - What are you on about?

DM - I bonded with the dragon that was guarding her vault. She took care of Bellatrix.

HG - Let me guess, she's a Hebridean black.

DM - You're correct. She's beautiful and fierce. She reminds me of you, love.

RW - Not necessary Malfoy.

DM - Granger likes it. I bet she's blushing.

Hermione felt her face burning as her two best friends gave her exasperated looks, but they were both grinning at her. Of course Malfoy was correct.

HP - Did they notice you leaving after Bellatrix died?

DM - Seeing as how I escaped on my dragon while polyjuiced as you, I would say they probably noticed.

Hermione stared at Ron and Harry now, whose eyes were huge.

HG - Are you telling me you're FLYING right now?

DM - I am. The view is excellent from up here. And felix approves.

Harry and Ron started talking about this new development when Hermione felt her sickle burn, and she glanced at it.

Tell me how you want it, darling.

Her jaw dropped as she tapped back.

Surely you can't be serious.

I have a lot of power between my legs right now. I'd love to show you.

Malfoy, I'm not having sickle sex with you while we're getting ready to take down You-Know-Who.

You call it sickle sex? That has a nice ring to it. And now I'm randy.

Down boy. I have to concentrate.

Fine, but just know that I'm fantasizing about fucking you in the air right now.

To Hermione's frustration, she felt her body betray her as she read Malfoy's final message, but she couldn't help but smile a bit. She could tell he felt like he was on top of the world right now, and she supposed he was. He was literally flying on a dragon to Merlin-knew-where, and he was under the influence of *felix felicis* while he was doing it. This thought pulled her attention back to the plan as her galleon burned.

HP - Do we need to alert the Order?

DM - Soon. Felix hasn't nudged me about it yet. We probably have a few hours before they tell the Death Eaters that Bella is dead.

RW - Will they know that you were with her?

DM - If they check the records, yes. But I flew out as Potter, waving the fake sword around.

HG - So we may have time before they look to see if you took anything else.

DM - That's my hope. I'm flying to Hogwarts now to meet you all.

HP - Not Grimmauld?

DM - Where the fuck would I park my dragon? Your garden is not that big.

HP - You could fly to the Manor first and park her there.

DM - I'm pretty sure somebody would notice. Besides, felix thinks you're going to want her in the fight.

RW - You can control her?

DM - We bonded. She burned Bella and a dozen goblins to a crisp for me. She's powerful.

RW - Bloody hell. Bring her along then.

DM - That's the plan. It will be a few hours before I get there.

HP - We'll alert the Order to get ready while we wait.

DM - Good. Granger, collect my mother. I'll let you know when my Mark burns or if I get a nudge from felix.

HG - Will do. Be safe.

Hermione took a deep breath and stared at Harry and Ron.

"We're really doing this then," she said.

Both of them nodded, looking a little green. But then Harry stood and seemed to shake himself off.

"It's past time to finish this. And now that he has the horcrux and Bellatrix is gone, it's only a matter of hours before he's exposed. We can do this. *I can do this.* And we have our secret weapon. I can't believe he broke out of Gringotts with a bloody dragon."

Hermione and Ron both smiled at this a little before they turned serious again.

"We'll be with you, mate," said Ron, and Hermione nodded in agreement.

Harry gave them both a tight smile. "I know. Alright, Hermione, you heard him. Here," and Harry shoved a piece of paper in her hand with Grimmauld's address on it. "You can bring Narcissa back here to wait. I'll send a message to Remus and then head to the Tonks's to alert Andromeda. Take a couple vials of *felix* with you just in case, but don't use it yet unless you need it."

"What about me?" asked Ron.

"Go to Shell Cottage and the Burrow," said Harry. "Let Bill and your dad know. Between them and Remus, we can reach most of the Order quickly."

"And I have this," said Hermione, now digging into her beaded bag and pulling out Harry's original galleon. "It's yours from the D.A. It should still work."

"Brilliant," he said, grinning. "I'll send the message out when it's closer to time. We'll see who shows up."

"Stay in touch with the four-way galleons," said Ron. "If anybody catches trouble, drink your *felix* and let the others know."

Hermione nodded as she handed a vial of *felix* to each of Harry and Ron before putting a couple vials in her pocket. The boys slipped out the back door to apparate to their respective destinations. Then she took a deep breath and called, "Tippy!"

Tippy appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Take me back to the Manor, Tippy. We need to collect Narcissa."

Tippy's large eyes got even wider, but she bobbed her head and grabbed Hermione's hand. A moment later Hermione was back in the familiar room, looking oddly bare without the flowers or her other personal effects.

"Tippy will get Mistress. Wait here, Miss," she said, and then she disappeared, and Hermione started pacing while she waited, trying to talk herself out of drinking the *felix* already. She wanted to wait as long as possible to do it.

Within ten minutes Narcissa was coming through the door, and Hermione let out a breath of relief.

"Hermione, dear, what's going on?" she asked with concern, but then she stopped and looked around, seeing the room bare.

“It’s time, Narcissa,” she said quietly.

“Time?” asked Narcissa, pulling her attention back to Hermione.

“Time to leave, just for a little bit. We have a secure location for you.”

“Where’s Draco? What’s happening?” she asked nervously.

“Just come with me, and then I’ll explain everything, I promise. But before you leave, can you take down the wards on my door? It’s possible somebody will be by to investigate to see if I was recently here. That’s why all my stuff is gone.”

Narcissa shot her a concerned look, but seemed to steel herself as she nodded her head and moved to the door. Hermione heard her muttering a string of incantations, and she watched as the door turned blue for a moment.

“They’re gone,” said Narcissa softly.

Hermione nodded and pulled out the scrap of paper. “Good. Then read this, quickly.”

Harry Potter’s address is located at 12 Grimmauld Place, London.

Narcissa sucked in a breath and looked at Hermione with wide eyes. “It’s under the fidelius charm,” said Hermione. “It’s safe. Let’s go.”

Tippy held out her hand, and soon she was pulling both Hermione and Narcissa through the darkness to Grimmauld Place, where Narcissa looked around in amazement.

“It’s been years since I’ve been here,” she said quietly.

Hermione nodded a little. “Feel free to have a drink and make yourself at home. Tippy will set up a spare room for you upstairs until we’re past this.”

“Harry Potter knows about me, then?” she asked.

“He’s an occlumens now. Draco trained him,” said Hermione simply.

Narcissa gave a small smile at this. “I was hoping you would say that. I will admit, I had my suspicions.”

Hermione nodded again.

“And Draco?” she pressed.

“He’s safe right now,” said Hermione. “Though that reminds me....”

She pulled out the galleon and tapped it.

HG - Narcissa is at Grimmauld with me.

DM - Thank you. Tell Mother I said hi.

Hermione smiled and flipped the galleon around to Narcissa to read, whose eyes got big.

"There are four of them," explained Hermione. "Protean charm. Harry and Ron have the other two so we have to identify ourselves. They've come in handy."

"I'm sure..." said Narcissa with some disbelief. "But where *is* Draco?" she asked.

Hermione bit her lip and then thumbed the galleon.

HG - Narcissa wants to know where DM is.

DM - Tell her I'm enjoying the sounds and sights of the lake district with my new pet.

Hermione just rolled her eyes but showed Narcissa the galleon. Narcissa looked more confused than ever. "Lake district? New pet?" she asked.

Hermione sighed. "Draco seems to have acquired... a dragon," she said. Narcissa got an appalled look on her face, and Hermione just forced herself to finish it. "More specifically, the Hebridean black that was previously guarding Bellatrix's vault in Gringotts."

Hermione winced as she waited for the explosion, and then Narcissa yelled "*WHAT?!*"

Hermione opened her eyes and gave Narcissa an overwhelmed look. "I know! It wasn't expected. He went to Gringotts this morning to get something out of Bellatrix's vault, and while they were there he... bonded with the dragon. His patronus is a Hebridean black, you know. He does have an affinity for that species. Magical patronuses are exceptionally rare."

Narcissa just sank into the sofa, looking a bit faint. Finally she asked, "And he what... released the dragon to bring her back to the Manor?"

"In a manner of speaking," said Hermione nervously. "We're about to draw out You-Know-Who, and he's flying his dragon to Hogwarts to meet us first."

Narcissa turned pale and shut her eyes.

"He's going to be in the middle of it, isn't he?" she said softly.

"I think so, yes," said Hermione. "I... I'm sorry. For the role I played in that. I really wish he wouldn't."

Narcissa just gave her a tight smile. "He's in love with you my dear. That much is very obvious to me. He has no choice. It's his nature."

Hermione smiled at this and nodded as she opened her mouth to say something else when suddenly the front door opened and Harry walked in with Andromeda and Teddy. Andromeda came to an abrupt halt when she saw Narcissa.

The two sisters stared at each other, as though they had forgotten anybody else was there. Quietly, Harry took Teddy from Andromeda, who didn't seem to notice that her grandson had just been pulled from her arms. Harry jerked his head toward Hermione to indicate they

should leave the Black sisters alone for a moment, and they wandered into the kitchen. Harry held Teddy out for Hermione to take.

The baby looked at her curiously, and then screwed up his face and turned his hair into brown curls. Hermione couldn't help it. She let out a peal of laughter, and then she heard a voice behind her.

"You're Hermione, right?" asked Andromeda.

Hermione just nodded.

"I heard you had died..." she said quietly.

"I was injured," she said. "Narcissa saved me. And Draco."

Andromeda looked a bit shocked at this, but Narcissa had come up behind her, and she didn't say anything else.

There was an awkward pause, and Hermione handed Teddy back to Harry as she finally took a deep breath.

"Something you should both know... since you're here I mean... Bellatrix... well, she passed away this morning."

Both of the sisters' eyes got huge now, and then a curious thing happened. They both assumed nearly identical expressions of relief.

"How?" asked Narcissa finally. "We haven't gotten news at the Manor."

Hermione grimaced. "It was Draco's new pet dragon. She apparently... burned Bellatrix to death at Gringotts, along with a dozen goblins."

Their eyes got huge again, and Narcissa seemed to forget that Andromeda was there.

"And Draco is flying across England on that thing? Has he gone mad?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, he messaged us to say the dragon bonded with him. That means he's her master. She would never hurt him or anybody he cares about. Quite the opposite, actually."

"But... but..." said Narcissa weakly.

To Hermione's surprise, Andromeda spoke up. "If this dragon is letting Draco ride her, then Hermione is quite right, Cissy."

Hermione watched a flurry of emotions cross Narcissa's face at the nickname.

"Dragon's *never* allow a human to ride them unless they are bonded and the master permits it," she continued. "Bonded dragons can always find and identify their masters – it's thought they can literally sense their masters' magic. Dragon bonds are quite rare, but there are

records of it happening now and then. If Draco is really with his dragon, he's as safe as can be. She would guard him with her life. In fact, I imagine that's why Bella..."

Narcissa looked questioningly at Hermione, and Hermione just shrugged. "Draco didn't give us details. But you know Bellatrix... she could be..."

"Quite," said Narcissa shortly.

"Yes, well, Draco was in Bellatrix's vault to retrieve something without her knowledge. We need it to defeat You-Know-Who. I'm sure Bellatrix realized he was up to something. I suspect the dragon intervened for him once Bellatrix caught on."

"Merlin," breathed Narcissa. "Well I won't pretend to mourn her. I know she was my sister, but... the world is much better off without her. But a dragon... where in the bloody hell are we going to keep a dragon?"

The absurdity of this statement struck them all at once, and the tension broke as everyone laughed. Then it died again as the sisters looked at each other.

"I'm sorry Andy," said Narcissa suddenly. "Sorry for everything. I shouldn't have listened to Mother and Father. I shouldn't have gone along with Bella. I should have stuck by you."

Andromeda's face softened. "It's alright, Cissy. You were always caught between Bella and me, and honestly... well, all of us tried to shield you. You were the baby. You were the beautiful one who was going to make the best match of us all. None of us wanted you to know just how vile the world could be. Besides, based on what I'm hearing it sounds like you and Draco did come around. I'm glad for it."

Tears welled in Narcissa's eyes. "Me too, Andy. I hope... I hope we can connect again after all this. I fear I'm going to lose Lucius and Draco, and you'll be the only family I have left."

Hermione felt a lurch at these words.

"You won't," said Andromeda firmly. "You won't lose them. And I won't lose my Nymphadora. And we certainly won't lose each other. We're both staying here. Teddy needs his grandmother, and I'm sure he would like to get to know his great aunt."

Narcissa gave a watery smile at this, and then turned her attention to the baby who gave her a gummy smile. She smiled back, and then Teddy turned blonde. Narcissa looked back at Andromeda in shock.

"But he's... he's..."

"A metamorphmagus, yes," said Andromeda a bit wryly. "Nymphadora is too. She's always driven me mad with it. She favors pink hair, if you can believe it, even as an adult."

Narcissa gave her an incredulous look, and Andromeda just laughed. "We have a lot of catching up to do."

Suddenly Hermione's galleon burned, and she looked down to see a message, as she tuned out Andromeda and Narcissa.

RW - Bill and Dad know. Order is organizing. Heading back to Grimmauld shortly.

HP - Remus knows too. Andromeda and Teddy here at Grimmauld. Family reunion in progress.

Hermione gave Harry a pointed look and saw his eyes twinkling back at her.

DM - Fucking hell, felix just nudged me about that. Somebody get ready to intervene.

Hermione couldn't help it, she let out a small snort of laughter.

HP - They're actually doing better than I thought they would.

DM - Keep an eye on it. The Black sisters all have famous tempers.

She opened her mouth to say something to Harry, but then stopped as a silvery doe patronus flew through the window and spoke to them in Snape's voice.

"Granger, get to Hogwarts now. My office," and then it dissolved.

Hermione just stared at it before springing into action. "Tippy!" she called, and Tippy appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Tippy, I need you to take me to the Headmaster's office at Hogwarts," she said. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Narcissa and Andromeda's eyes widen.

"Wait!" shouted Harry. "You don't have a wand! Malfoy was supposed to bring you one!"

"I have wandless magic, Harry!" she said with exasperation. "This isn't part of the plan! Snape must have a reason for calling me!"

Privately, she knew what that reason must be, but she didn't want to worry Harry with it.

"Hermione, Malfoy will literally kill me if I send you there without a wand," he said firmly.

"Take mine," said Narcissa quickly. "I'll stay with Andromeda here until this is over. She has a wand. We'll be fine." Hermione looked at the proffered wand and hesitated.

"Are you sure?" she asked.

"Very," said Narcissa firmly. "Draco would want this. And it should work rather well for you, my dear, given how close you are to my son."

Hermione exhaled, but then took it from Narcissa and felt a light warmth that told her Narcissa was correct. "Thanks."

She grabbed her bag, shoved it into her pocket, and then held her hand out for Tippy. "I'll see you all. Harry, let Malfoy know, please. I'll message when I can so we can rendezvous

for... you know."

He just nodded, as she was pulled away and appeared a moment later, facing Severus Snape.

Draco

Despite the fact that he had almost died, despite the fact that he might *still* die in the next twenty-four hours, Draco couldn't help but feel free as he flew through the air toward Scotland. The polyjuice had worn off a while ago, and the Xanax was starting to wear off too, and now he was just himself, though still under the lucky potion. He had cast a few warming charms around him, conjured a sort of saddle to sit on, and then carefully settled himself in for a nice long ride.

He had always loved being in the air. Though Potter's talent on a broom had always outshone everyone around him, Draco knew he was good at it too. Flying came naturally to him. He had been doing it since he was a young child. But this... well this exceeded every prior experience in the air tenfold.

And Draco couldn't help but smirk as he thought of Potter. Sure, Potter rode broomsticks and thestrals, and even bloody hippogriffs. But he had never ridden a dragon. That part of Draco that had always loved getting a rise out of Potter sincerely hoped Potter was burning with jealousy back at Grimmauld Place. Their new friendship didn't change the fact that Draco was dying to one-up him.

Draco had created a little divot in the saddle where he could set his galleon and sickle to keep an eye on things as the day moved along. He had read with relief that his mother was safe. He didn't think she would be immediately missed and if she was... well, she was under the fidelius now. Nobody would be able to find her. Then a short while later he read that the Order had been alerted and *Andromeda* of all people had come to Grimmauld Place too with baby Teddy. Draco didn't know whether to laugh or grimace at the fact that the sisters were being thrown together in a safe house during the final battle. They hadn't interacted with each other in over twenty years. Then again, maybe now was the time to make amends. They might not get another chance. And then his galleon glowed red again.

HP - Snape called Hermione to Hogwarts.

Draco felt his heart nearly seize, and he wondered if the *felix* had somehow worn off already. This wasn't part of the plan. But then again, he and Snape hypothesized that a single dose of *felix* wouldn't necessarily change the course of the whole battle. It would be cumulative. And right now, Draco was the only person on it. He yanked out his wand to get more information.

DM - She doesn't have a wand yet!

HP - Narcissa gave her wand to Hermione. She has one.

Draco felt something unclench just a little at this. He didn't like the notion of his mother being wandless, but then again, she was in a safe house. Granger definitely was not.

DM - Does Andromeda have a wand?

HP - Yes, and apparently she's a rather good shot. Tonks says she gets it from her.

Draco felt a bit better at this, but he still needed to check on one more thing.

DM - Who knows where Grimmauld is?

HP - Four of us, Snape, Andromeda, Narcissa, Teddy, Remus, Tonks. That's all.

Draco felt himself fully relax at this. His mother would be safe. Sending her wand with Granger was the right thing to do. But then he thought of Granger again, and he started to get concerned. He wasn't terribly surprised that Snape had called Granger first, but he hadn't gotten a burn on his Mark yet. It felt too early. And again, *felix* was being oddly silent about it, presumably because Draco wasn't there yet.

DM - Why was she called already? My Mark hasn't burned.

RW - I assume there is a complication with the wards.

Draco went pale at this, knowing what Weasley was saying. A "complication" must mean that Granger was needed. That meant that McGonagall had already died. And that meant the Dark Lord might already know of Draco's betrayal, even though his Mark hadn't burned yet. Draco suddenly wished he could fly faster. To his surprise, the dragon surged forward and picked up speed.

Draco continued to fly, hoping beyond hope that the entire plan hadn't just been shot to hell.

Hermione

When Hermione landed in Snape's office, she felt an odd jolt. It was something deep in her body, something unexpected and yet entirely familiar. It seemed to penetrate the very source of her magic, and she felt a keen sense of recognition, as though she was being welcomed home.

The wards, she thought, her heart sinking as she knew she was right.

"Where the hell have you been?" Snape snapped. "I sent that patronus ten minutes ago."

“Well it had to get to London,” she huffed. “And then I had to procure a wand before I came here. Now what is going on?” she asked, though she already knew the answer to this.

Snape looked strained. “I’m sure you know. Evidently Minerva got a call from the Order to begin evacuating the students. She was caught by the Carrows.”

Hermione felt desolate.

“So she’s...” she trailed off. She couldn’t bring herself to say it out loud.

He gave a grim nod. “Yes, unfortunately. The defenses are now yours.”

She felt her heart breaking. Her favorite professor... But then she snapped back to attention as Snape continued to speak.

“I assume that stunt Potter pulled at Gringotts was intended as a means of distracting the Dark Lord?” asked Snape tersely. “Because I was not informed.”

Hermione gave him a surprised look. “It was Draco, actually. Polyjuice. And he was there to retrieve a horcrux. You’ve already heard?”

Snape looked stunned at this news. “It’s been all over the wireless that Potter was seen leaving Gringotts on a dragon and waving the Sword of Gryffindor. Of course I’ve heard. Everybody’s heard. But then... Draco must have gone to Bella’s vault... and a *horcrux*... So the Sword was just a ruse....”

Hermione nodded.

“The horcrux – did Draco get it?” he asked urgently. Hermione nodded again, and a look of sheer relief crossed Snape’s face.

“Good. And did he use the *felix*? ”

“Yes, he said it worked perfectly, though the Xanax needs about fifteen minutes to start counteracting the boisterous effects.”

He looked thoughtful, serious, and Hermione was sure he was quickly reviewing the plan in his mind.

“That’s good. Are there any other horcruxes then?”

She narrowed her eyes, realizing Draco had never told Snape everything. But she supposed he knew enough. It was time.

“Just the snake. The cup that Draco took from Gringotts isn’t destroyed yet, but he has it. He’s riding that bloody dragon all the way to Scotland and should be here within a few hours. Once he brings it to us we can destroy it with the real Sword. Then only the snake will be left. And then You-Know-Who can die.”

An odd look crossed Snape's face. "Of course. Well it's only a matter of time then. If he was in Bellatrix's vault, the Dark Lord is going to know soon. I'll do my best to delay him to give Draco time to get here but we may not have any choice but to fight while we are waiting."

Hermione swallowed and nodded, as she tried not to think about how long this could go on if Draco didn't get here with the horcrux soon.

"You need to stay here to secure the wards and hold the defenses. You can't leave the premises, and I don't want you to even leave this office. It's critical you stay out of sight. Draco and I made some... additions. But you have to be here and alive for them to work."

"But I'm supposed to get the *felix* to the Order..." she started, and then trailed off at the fierce look he was giving her.

"OK, fine," she sighed, already trying to reorganize the plan in her head to exclude herself. "One of the boys can do it I suppose. What are these additions then?"

"They should be instinctive when you call the defenses."

"But I don't know how to..." and then she paused. She actually *did* know how to call them. It had just come to her, exactly like McGonagall had once described. She felt another moment of sadness as she thought of her mentor and favorite teacher.

"Nevermind," she amended. "I can do it."

Snape gave a nod, a look of relief on his face.

"And there's also this," he said, shoving a vial into her hands. Hermione looked at something swirling in it that she recognized as a memory.

"This is for Potter. He's still coming through the floo to draw out the Dark Lord, yes? He needs to watch this as soon as he gets here. He can use the pensieve."

Hermione stared at him. "What is it though?"

"It's confidential. Just for Potter. And don't bother trying to open it. The vial is blood warded so only Potter can get in."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "But when did Harry give you blood?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "Oh please. Potter has bled all over the castle for years during his escapades. Dumbledore must have collected an entire pint from him."

Hermione stared in disbelief. "Dumbledore?"

Snape just raised an eyebrow. "Don't tell me you're surprised."

"I..." she just stared at the vial again, wondering what on earth this could be and how it might change their battle plan.

"I need to go now," said Snape tersely. "I need to handle the Carrows and evacuate the younger students. I'll try to delay the Dark Lord too if there's time once that's done," he said. "Stay here. Wait for my signal before activating the defenses. I have to get the students out first. We don't want the Carrows to notice and call the Dark Lord too soon. And give that vial to Potter the moment he comes through the floo. It's a short memory but once the floo from Grimmauld Place lights up he won't have much time. You all should take your *felix* as soon as Potter and Weasley come through."

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded. Snape started to turn and then she said, "Wait!" and she dug the original galleon she had paired with Harry and Ron out of her beaded bag. "Take this. You can tap your wand to it and send me a message when it's time for me to activate them. It's a protean charm, and your message will appear on mine and the galleon will burn. You can even do it wandlessly with a tap of your finger if you have some wandless magic. That way you don't have to send me a patronus and reveal yourself."

He gave her a swift look but took the galleon, nodded, and pocketed it."

"And you have your own vial of *felix* already, yes?" she asked.

He just nodded, and she gave a huff of relief as he turned and strode out of the room.

Hermione sighed and sank down on a chair, looking around the office. She would be stuck here until further notice then. She pulled out her four-way galleon and tapped it.

Draco

His dragon was flying now, no pun intended, and he could see the scenery start to change below him as he crossed into Scotland. Hogwarts was in the northern part of the region so he still had a ways to go, but he was getting closer.

Suddenly his galleon lit up.

HG — I'm in the headmaster's office. Carrows caught McGonagall evacuating students. She's gone.

Draco felt a lurch at this. That was a blow, there was no question about it. But that meant Granger controlled the defenses, and oddly enough, *felix* kicked back on at that very moment and told him that this was a good thing. He knew he should feel sorrier for McGonagall than he did, but now Draco was sure Snape would lock her away. If he was being honest with himself, he would rather have McGonagall dead and Granger safe than McGonagall alive and Granger fighting, even if she was using lucky potion while she did it.

HP — Shit. That's awful.

HG — I know. Snape needs me to stay in his office to control the defenses. I won't be able to help fight.

Draco was distinctly relieved by this and felt another surge of confidence. He was sure she would be safe there. But now he had questions of his own.

DM — Does the Dark Lord know?

HG — Not yet. But Snape says soon. Your escape is all over the wireless.

Draco shrugged to himself. He knew it was inevitable, and he was sure that's why *felix* told him to grab that sword as a distraction. He knew it should buy them a little time before they checked the records to see what else he took. He just hoped it would be enough until he got there with the horcrux.

He watched the galleon lighting up as Granger, Potter, and Weasley discussed last minute changes now that McGonagall was gone and she was banished to Snape's office. He kept one eye on them and another on the scenery as it continued to grow increasingly wild. Then something on the galleon caught his eye.

HG — Snape left a vial with a memory for Harry. He says you have to watch it the minute you get here.

Draco furrowed his brow at this.

HP — What is it?

HG — He wouldn't tell me. He says it's critical though. Just for you. I put the vial next to the pensieve in the office just in case something happens to me.

Draco felt *felix* sending alarm bells to his brain as he thought about this. Snape knew something. And it was something he would only tell Potter. But then he was distracted by his Dark Mark. It started to burn.

“FUCK!” he shouted. He was still too far away, but he had to let the others know.

DM — Dark Mark just burned. He's calling us to the Manor. It won't be long now.

RW — How far away are you?

DM — In Scotland. Hopefully not much longer, but can't be certain. Rose seems to know where she's going.

At this his sickle lit up, and he looked at it.

You named the dragon Rose?

Yes, it seemed fitting.

You're going to have to change her name.

Why's that?

I already named our daughter that.

It was a good thing the dragon's back was so broad because Draco nearly fell out of his seat with shock. At that moment everything they were doing — the fact that he was in the air on a bleeding dragon of all things, the fact that he had taken lucky potion a few hours ago, the fact that he had watched Bellatrix be burned alive, the fact that they were about to face the Dark Lord — completely disappeared from his mind. He could only think of one thing, and that was Granger with a baby. *His baby*. He was both absolutely terrified and utterly thrilled. And then that very strong, nearly overwhelming protective streak in him reared its head. If Granger was carrying his child, she was going to get the hell out of there *now*. Fuck the Hogwarts defenses. Fuck the war. Fuck everybody but her and his baby. He just needed her to tell him straight to make sure he wasn't mistaken.

Are you telling me you're pregnant?

No, of course not. Tippy put me on that vile contraception potion the morning after our first time.

Draco felt such a strong sense of disappointment that he was stunned. *Surely* he should feel relieved. He was only eighteen, and she was nineteen, and they were hours away from being either dead or free. But they had both grown up so quickly. He was engaged to be married in a matter of weeks with every expectation that he *would* produce an heir within the next year or so. He wouldn't stay engaged to Astoria, but all the talk of weddings and babies had normalized it for him. So instead of feeling relieved, all he could feel was sadness that he had misunderstood her and a fierce wish that it had been true. He knew now, more than ever, that this is what he wanted. Then his sickle burned again.

It's the journal. I always wrote to your kids, and then eventually I realized they were probably my kids too.

At this, Draco's mind calmed as happiness built in him. He understood her now. He understood her perfectly. She wanted it too. She had become so sure it would happen if they both lived that she wrote to Rose in the journal. Draco couldn't wait to get back and read the entries.

And you named one of our kids Rose?

Yes, our firstborn. It will be a girl.

But Malfoys always produce boys. It's for the title.

That's a load of sexist bullshit, and you know it.

It's true. Check the family records.

Well you're the one who said you're going to do things differently. Maybe this will be different too.

Fair enough. If you want a girl, I'll give you a girl.

I want both, all, many.

Stay alive for me, and I'll give you whatever you want darling.

I'll try. But the plans are changing.

Draco grimaced as this message brought him back to reality. The plans *were* changing. They were down two fighters before the battle had even begun, not that Draco was too torn up about it. But his Mark had also burned, and very soon the Dark Lord would know Bellatrix was dead. He would also know that Draco wasn't there. And soon Potter would draw him out for good, but Draco still had the bloody horcrux. They needed more time.

He sensed the *felix* in his system starting to get antsy as he thought about this and continued to fly. He thought about what they could do. There had to be another solution, *surely*. Then the answer came to him, with the help from *felix*. He remembered the notes Granger had stuffed in his bag the night before.

Emergency use only.

He wouldn't declare a state of emergency just yet, but he felt that telltale nudge suggesting that one might be approaching. And he was still in the air for Salazar knew how much longer. He truly had nothing better to do. Taking a deep breath he opened the bag, pulled out Granger's notes, and began to read.

Chapter 35: Lord Malfoy

Hermione

Hermione was pacing, waiting for some message about *something*. After a frantic rejiggering with Harry, Ron, and Malfoy it was decided that she would stay in Snape's office until Malfoy arrived. Then Harry and Ron would come through the floo to draw out Voldemort, and Hermione, Malfoy, and Ron would try to destroy the cup in the Headmaster's office while Harry watched Snape's memory in the pensieve. Then Malfoy and Harry would go for the snake while Ron took the *felix* to the Order, and Hermione stayed behind to maintain the defenses.

Malfoy, evidently, planned to park the dragon in a clearing in the Forbidden Forest and then call Tippy to bring him to the Headmaster's office the moment both feet were on the ground. He'd then bring the dragon out of hiding in a surprise move to separate the Death Eaters from Voldemort and the snake. They hoped this would give them and anybody else in the Order who could join them a clear shot without any interference. Malfoy assured them she would only be dangerous to the Death Eaters, and the Order members would be spared.

That was the plan. The new plan. And truly, even though they would be a man down going after the snake since Ron would be meeting up with the Order first, the addition of the dragon was a huge boon and worth the last-minute scramble if they could actually pull it off. Malfoy's dragon would be positively terrifying, and she solved a major issue they had never fully worked out: what to do about the fact that Voldemort was *always* surrounded by his loyal followers. They had always been relying on *felix* to sort that problem for them in the moment, so it was comforting that they now had an idea for it in advance. This new, improved plan could work. It *had* to work. Malfoy and his dragon just had to get here before Voldemort did.

The Order, she knew, was currently assembling in the Room of Requirement. Remus had arranged it with Aberforth Dumbledore weeks in advance, which had been a surprise to Hermione. She had no idea that Aberforth was the barman at the Hogshead or that Remus knew he was in the Order. Hermione had never seen Aberforth before. But apparently Aberforth *was* part of the Order and had been in the first war too. Remus reached out to him and discovered a new entry directly into the heart of the castle that Aberforth was sure was only known to certain students in the former D.A. like Neville Longbottom who had used it the previous school year before going into hiding for good. The Death Eaters had no idea it existed.

Harry had already activated the other D.A. galleons, though they weren't sure how many would show. But the message was clear.

Taking down You-Know-Who very soon. Apparate directly to the upper floor of Hogshead in Hogsmeade if you can fight.

Hermione just hoped it would be enough. And she hoped Malfoy would get here soon.

Suddenly she sat up as she heard an odd noise. It sounded like shouting. It was coming from outside the Headmaster's office, though she couldn't be certain.

She glanced at the paired galleon she had sent to Snape, and it was still blank.

What was going on? Was he handling it? Or had Voldemort acted without telling him?

The final possibility was terrifying. Snape was one of the most trusted in Voldemort's inner circle. Her brain started speeding up as the shouting got louder and then something that sounded like a pounding echoed up the staircase and through the door.

Malfoy's Mark burned, but he didn't join Voldemort. Snape was evacuating students. What if he didn't go either?

It became clear to her what was happening. The Death Eaters had been sent to the castle, and neither Malfoy nor Snape had been told because they hadn't joined the call at Malfoy Manor. There were Death Eaters at the entrance to the Headmaster's office, and they were trying to get past the stone gargoyle to come search it.

"Shit!" she hissed, as she grabbed both galleons and sent the same message to each at the same time.

I think the Death Eaters are here.

She scrambled off the chair and tried to think quickly. She considered simply floo'ing to Malfoy Manor, but she didn't dare. She had to hold the defensive wards, and that meant she had to be here. Her brain went on autopilot as she remembered the last time she was caught.

First, hide the bag.

Hermione yanked open her beaded bag and pulled a vial of *felix* out of it and then shoved it under the couch cushions. Harry and Ron would both be able to get into the bag without her.

Second, separate the coins.

She was wearing muggle jeans, and she put her galleon with Snape in her right front pocket, the four-way galleon with the boys in her front left pocket, and her sickle in one of her back pockets. She would be able to keep them straight without looking at them.

Third...

But she never got to the third thing because she heard a triumphant shout and footsteps running up the stairs. She threw herself behind the Headmaster's desk just as she heard the door burst open and a familiar, drawling voice said, "Search it then if you must, Alecto. He wants us stationed in Ravenclaw Tower, and I'm only agreeing to this little detour because you *insisted* that Snape is somehow culpable in Potter's escapade at Gringotts. Though, how you expect to convince the Dark Lord of that is beyond me. Snape sent the Sword to Bellatrix's vault nearly a year ago."

Hermione's heart seized. It was Lucius Malfoy.

Her brain kicked on at warp speed. She clutched the tiny bottle of *felix* and yanked the stopper out and drank. She just hoped that the unfortunate side effects would wear off quickly because she knew that she reacted very poorly to it. But then again, Draco might actually kill her if she didn't take the potion, so she had to risk it. She just had to get through the next fifteen or twenty minutes without totally screwing it up.

As *felix* flooded her veins, she felt that odd sense of exuberant excitement turn on. She almost flung herself out from behind the desk to announce her presence, but something in her brain told her that Draco would probably kill her for this too, so she refrained. Instead, she followed the nudge from *felix* that told her to put down the wand she was holding very slowly and place it on the ground under the desk. *Felix* told her that if Lucius Malfoy saw her with Narcissa's wand, he would think Hermione had harmed Narcissa, and she would be dead before she ever got a chance to explain herself.

"I don't take no orders from you!"

"Yeah, you aren't in charge here Malfoy!" said another voice.

Felix nudged her again to communicate something to the boys. The four-way galleon had been burning, but Snape's galleon was still silent. That meant he was still getting the students out. She couldn't take the time to read what the boys were saying, but she slipped her hand into her pocket, tapped a finger on it and sent a message to them.

HG – They're in the office, don't come help me, follow the plan. Beaded bag is under the couch cushions.

HG - Lucius, Alecto, one other. I took felix.

Then she heard shuffling and knew they would find her at any moment. She shoved her hand into her back pocket and tapped her sickle.

I love you more than anything in the world. Never forget that.

And then she muttered a spell against the sickle just as a pair of hands grabbed her and hauled her out from behind the desk.

"Look! Look what we have here!"

She was dragged out from behind the desk and was staring at the shocked face of Lucius Malfoy, a Death Eater she assumed was Alecto Carrow, and one other whom she thought must be Amycus, though she couldn't be certain. She had never seen the Carrows before.

"Who's this then?" asked Alecto, as Amycus put her in a headlock.

Lucius walked toward her slowly, as though in a trance.

"Potter's Mudblood... the one who is supposed to be dead," he said softly.

“The Dark Lord!” said Alecto. “We need to inform him!”

“Not yet,” said Lucius, and Hermione’s heart leapt, though mercifully Lucius didn’t seem to notice. “We will take her to Ravenclaw Tower, and I will get answers from her first. You know he is waiting on the report from Gringotts before making his next move, and he sent me here to join you and Snape in Ravenclaw Tower until our orders change. We should not call him away from that unless we are certain she knows something valuable.”

“But she’s Potter’s Mudblood! Surely she knows how to get to him!” said Alecto.

“Yes, and that’s my *point*,” said Lucius, with a magnificent eye-roll and tone of exasperation that was so reminiscent of his son Hermione had the oddest urge to laugh. The potion had gone to her head now, and she was feeling practically giddy. She struggled to keep her reactions under control. “We need to be sure of it before we call the Dark Lord away. Now come.”

Lucius moved forward and grabbed Hermione’s arm, and she walked with him willingly. Her four-way galleon hadn’t stopped burning, but she didn’t risk touching it just yet. *Felix* was illuminating the way for her now, and it told her that Harry and Ron would come through the floo soon. *Felix* was urging her to get out of the Headmaster’s office before they floo’d straight into the Death Eaters.

She breathed a sigh of relief as the door to the Headmaster’s office shut behind them. She had done it. She had planted the memory and her beaded bag and had gotten the Death Eaters out of the office. Now she just needed to wait for Snape’s signal and not die. That was it.

“Alecto, go find Snape and tell him he is to join us in the Tower,” said Lucius, in what Hermione considered to be a lovely stroke of luck.

Thank you, felix.

“But the girl...” she started.

“I’m certain your brother and I can manage a wandless mudblood. Go. We all have our orders.”

Alecto grumbled a little, but split off from the group in search of Snape, and Hermione felt her confidence bubbling up again. True, it certainly wasn’t *ideal* to be captured by Death Eaters, but it wasn’t so bad, really. It was only two against one. And she had powerful magic if she wanted to use it. Once Snape was found, she would be fine. Just as long as the boys didn’t screw it up.

Lucius frog marched her down the corridors, which Hermione was pleased, but not terribly surprised, to see were entirely empty.

Snape must be nearly done, she thought.

Before she knew it she was staring at a door with a bronze knocker shaped like an eagle's head. She waited for them to knock in order to activate the eagle's question, but Lucius looked at Amycus expectantly.

"Well?" he said, "What's the password? Or are you unaware of this one too?"

Hermione couldn't help it. She snorted at his stupidity.

Lucius evidently heard her. "Have something to say little mudblood? Maybe you know the password then?"

"Oh *honestly*," she said. She knew the situation was dire, but this was really too much, and *felix* was giving her all the confidence in the world right now. "It's all in *Hogwarts, A History* if anybody would bother to actually read the bloody book. You have to use the knocker, and it will ask a question."

Both Death Eaters paused and eyed her suspiciously. But then Lucius reached up and knocked, and Hermione felt them both jump in surprise as the eagle head came to life.

She couldn't help it. She rolled her eyes.

"Where do vanished objects go?" asked the eagle.

Hermione waited expectantly for one of them to answer the question, nearly bouncing on her feet with eagerness. They were both fully qualified wizards after all. But as she sat there the silence grew longer, and finally *felix* nudged her that she would have to be the one to do it. She looked up at Lucius in disgust.

"*Really?* Are you telling me that neither one of you knows the answer to such a *fundamentally basic question* like this? How on *earth* did either of you get through your Transfiguration O.W.L.? I know for a fact that Draco is not that clueless."

Hermione wanted to curse *felix felicis* the moment the words were out of her mouth. The part of her brain that wasn't totally under the control of *felix* remembered what Malfoy had always told her about situations like this. She was supposed to be passive. She was supposed to be meek. The Death Eaters were sure to underestimate her. She needed to get them off their guard and then strike when they were least expecting it.

Mocking them for their stupidity was not part of the plan. But then again, vanishing objects wasn't even N.E.W.T.-level. Hermione had been doing it confidently since third year. And *felix* was nothing if not confident.

"Mouthy little mudblood aren't you?" said Amycus. "Why don't you tell us girlie, if you're such a know-it-all."

See, that could have gone worse, the *felix* part of her brain seemed to say. Still, Hermione tried to focus. This reckless need to be a know-it-all would surely be passing soon.

Now is really not the time, felix.

“Vanished objects go into nonbeing, which is to say, everything,” recited Hermione.

“Perfectly stated and a direct quote from page 487 of *An Intermediate Guide to Transfiguration*. It’s a shame you weren’t sorted into my House, my dear,” said the eagle a bit dolefully as the door swung forward to admit them entry.

Felix got the last laugh as Hermione couldn’t help but smirk at Lucius as she walked in.

Her smirk slid off her face as she took in Lucius’s thunderous expression. The overwhelming exuberance of *felix* was finally tapering a bit as Hermione felt the calming effects of Xanax kick in. It wasn’t a perfect neutralization to be sure, but she was finally feeling calm enough to appreciate just how reckless she had been.

Lucius said nothing, but pointed a wand at her that Hermione recognized as Ron’s and shot ropes around her to bind her. She gulped, but stilled, and *felix* nudged her to focus now on what was coming next.

Lucius grabbed her and roughly flung her in a chair in the Ravenclaw common room as he turned and pointed the wand at her face.

“Amycus, you should make yourself comfortable. This could take some time,” he said. “Now then, let’s see what happened to you, shall we? Because my son watched you die.”

Hermione stilled. She didn’t even need the little nudge from *felix* to know what was coming next. She felt the briefest moment of indecision. Should she tell the truth or lie? But then *felix* nudged her again.

Lie, it said.

She closed her eyes as he said, “*Legilimens!*” and then a presence was in her head, strangely familiar but rougher than Draco and far more clumsy. She could sense he was searching for how she survived, and she subtly pulled him to Malfoy Manor.

Unlike Draco, Lucius wasn’t as accomplished at hiding his feelings and reactions to what he was seeing. She felt his shock as he watched Tippy wake her up.

“Miss is healed now, but Miss must bathe. I has my orders, Miss.”

Hermione pushed forward and showed herself in the bathtub in the lady’s suite.

“Tippy, do you have my wand?”

“Tis my master’s wand now, Miss. Master Draco’s.”

Felix gave her a little nudge to tell her that Lucius was transfixed by what she was showing him, and he didn’t even notice she was leading the memory. She was in control for now. She pushed forward again to their first staged encounter, as Hermione burst through the bathroom door and found Draco lounging there with that dark smile on his face.

“You giant prat!” she screeched as she strode toward him. “You took my wand!”

She reared back and smacked him, but then he pinned her against the wall. She felt Lucius watching this in disbelief.

“You dare touch me, you filthy little mudblood?” he snarled.

“When you take my wand, yes! You complete arse! What am I even doing here anyway?”

“Ah, you see, your blood traitor friend Weasley rescued you so gallantly. I was absolutely sure you were dead. But my elf had the foresight to follow and bring you back to me when Weasley’s back was turned. It turns out you weren’t dead after all, and she healed you and then surprised me with you. I sent her back for Potter and Weasley of course, but they had already disappeared. So it’s just you I’m afraid. Now that you’re here... well I should probably turn you in. I will eventually. But first... I find myself in need of some... entertainment.”

He gripped her throat and pressed her head back to the wall before running his hands down her body and squeezing her breast hard.

She felt Lucius’s discomfort as he watched, but the lightest nudge from *felix* – so light she was sure Lucius wouldn’t sense it – told her to press on.

“How would your elf know...?”

“Ah, she’s heard all about Potter’s mudblood,” he said. “And she knows I’ve been... stressed. She’s an excellent servant and thought this might relieve some tension. Have you enjoyed getting to know her?”

“Malfoy, I...”

“I suggest you call me ‘sir,’ or ‘my Lord,’ unless you want to make this harder on yourself.”

“Never,” she snarled, and he raised his hand back to her throat and held it there.

“That’s a shame, Mudblood. I like my women compliant. And I can be benevolent when I get what I want.”

She sensed Lucius growing increasingly uncomfortable but then she felt his anger surge when Hermione spat in Draco’s face.

“Have it your way then. *Imperio!*?”

And now Lucius was truly stunned. She sensed his disbelief as he felt the imperius curse in her head, and he listened to Draco’s questions before he finally ordered her to take her robe off. Then oddly she felt Lucius trying to push along just as she reached up to part her robe. Evidently he didn’t want to see her naked.

Tough shit, she thought, but a nudge from *felix* told her to let him push her along, so she subtly pulled him into the memory in the bath, and he watched as Draco imperiused her and told her to rise. Again, Lucius pushed, and Hermione let him, and now she was in bed, and Malfoy was groping her before imperiusing her yet again. Just as she was offering to take off

her clothes, he pushed, and then Hermione showed herself in the teddy, finally willingly submitting to Malfoy without the curse. At this she felt the oddest sense of relief from Lucius, and she had a brainwave.

Lucius doesn't approve.

She might be a mudblood, but Lucius didn't want his son to coerce sex from her. She herself felt some relief at this. Lucius Malfoy wasn't completely without morals.

But still he kept pushing, and now she got the sense he was looking for something else, though what exactly she couldn't be sure. Still, *felix* lit the way as he started scanning memories faster.

Hermione gave him flashes: Hermione serving Draco food in lingerie while he squeezed her arse; Hermione on her knees in front of Draco, sucking him off; Hermione bent over the bed while he took her from behind. Through all of it she felt disgust and revulsion and a growing sense of horror at what he was seeing, along with an odd dose of skepticism.

He can't believe what he's seeing. He doesn't think Draco is capable of this, she realized with a nudge from *felix*. He must be looking for an explanation for his son's behavior. That was the cause of his growing frustration.

He finally got to the last memory, and paused here longer. Hermione was naked on the bed, and she got the oddest sense that Lucius was trying not to look at her, but he knew he had found her escape, and he needed to watch it.

“The Dark Lord is redoubling his efforts to find Potter. And I know just the thing to make Potter show his face.”

“But sir... You said I was here to pleasure you. And you wouldn't....”

“I told you that I would give you to the Dark Lord when I was finished with you. I'll admit you have entertained me longer than I thought possible. It's been an enjoyable few weeks. But it's time.”

“Please.... No...” she said.

“Yes. It will be inconvenient to find another plaything, but it's no matter. If I can train one mudblood bitch I can train others. And the Dark Lord needs you now Granger. Far more than I do.”

“My lord...”

He placed a firm grip on her throat. “I'm going to have you like this one last time Granger. Something to remember me by, yes? Then I'll be calling the Dark Lord.”

She felt Lucius's confusion here. She could tell something else was bothering him, other than the obvious things his son was doing. But she didn't know what it was.

“No....” she said.

“Stand,” he commanded.

“No!” she shouted. “No! That’s not our agreement!”

“Agreement?” he scoffed. “There is no agreement. Now stand!”

“No!”

“Playing the hard way then? Suit yourself. *Imperio!*”

Lucius felt Hermione’s mind go blank, and now she could see he was really agitated. He pushed forward past their sex until Draco was pulling out of her as she was bound to the chair.

“You’re going to stay tied to that chair until I’m ready for you Granger. I think I’ll take you downstairs just like this. I’m sure the Dark Lord will be more appreciative of my gift that way.”

Draco strode off, as Hermione began to panic and then wandlessly unbound herself. Now she could see Lucius watching with rapt attention as she threw on Harry’s robes and went to the bathroom to clean up, grab her bag, and then went into Draco’s room to polyjuice herself into him. He watched as she dressed and then floo’d to Hogwarts, and now he was pushing forward, and Hermione brought him to the fabricated memory with Harry, purportedly just after her escape.

“He’s definitely a Death Eater. Malfoy, I mean,” she said.

“He saved you though...” said Harry hesitantly.

“No, his elf kidnapped me while your backs were turned and healed me,” she said firmly.

“He was just keeping me there for...” she trailed off and blushed.

“Sex?” asked Harry hesitantly.

She gulped and nodded.

“God Hermione, I’m so sorry,” said Harry. “Do you... want to talk about it?”

“No. You don’t need to know the details. And please don’t tell Ron,” she whispered. “He’ll go mental.”

“I won’t, I swear it,” said Harry.

“I got away,” said Hermione firmly. “I got away and that’s what matters. And I’ve had a lot of time to think while I was locked away in Malfoy Manor. I’m worried the Sword we have is a fake. I know the goblin we overheard talking to Dean and Ted said the one in Bellatrix’s vault is a copy, but what if he’s wrong and the real one is in Bellatrix’s vault? The goblin who identified it at Malfoy Manor said *ours* was the copy. I don’t know if he was helping us or not. I just... I don’t know Harry. I think we need to get into her vault and steal the one that’s in there. We need to have them both, just in case.”

This clearly piqued his interest, and he pushed for memories of the Sword, but *felix* intervened and told her to send him to the prophecy instead, so she did.

Harry was standing in the bedroom at the Burrow with Hermione and Ron. He looked at them both and said, “Dumbledore heard it. The exact wording was, *‘The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the weapons of their forefathers shall meet in a final battle... but only he who harnesses his true power shall prevail.’*”

Lucius pushed for more. She sensed he was trying to understand how the prophecy should be interpreted and whether the Sword had anything to do with it. *Felix* confirmed this, and she pulled him to the moment the trio was sitting in the boys’ room at the Burrow, just after Dumbledore’s will was read.

“Shame we couldn’t have the Sword though,” said Weasley. “Why do you reckon Dumbledore wanted to pass it to you?”

They thought for a moment until Hermione had it. “It’s because we need it to defeat You-Know-Who! That must be the weapon from the prophecy! Harry, are you related to Godric Gryffindor?”

“I don’t know... but Hermione, why wouldn’t he have just given it to me then? I was in his office the night he died...”

“Maybe he wanted to keep it safe for you,” she said.

“Or maybe...” said Ron, “You have to earn it. It came to you in the Chamber of Secrets, didn’t it?”

Harry nodded. “Yeah, Dumbledore told me that only a true Gryffindor could have pulled the Sword out of the Sorting Hat.”

“There you go then. Maybe it won’t work properly unless you’re being all heroic when you take it.”

“Yes,” breathed Hermione. “Ron! That’s it!”

Ron looked pleased until his brow furrowed again. “What about You-Know-Who’s weapon though? We’ve never really focused on that part.”

“It must be related to Slytherin,” said Hermione, “since Harry’s is related to Gryffindor. Maybe it’s his ability to speak parseltongue.”

“Nagini,” said Harry suddenly. “I’ll have the Sword in the final battle, and Nagini will be there too. He will try to kill me with Nagini, and I’ll try to kill him with the Sword. That’s how we’ll know it’s time. We should try to kill Nagini before she can kill me first. Then I’ll go after him.”

Suddenly Lucius released her as Hermione heard the door to Ravenclaw Tower opening. But she didn’t look to see who was coming in. She was staring at Lucius, and he was staring

back at her, giving her one of the most intense looks she had ever seen. She saw him study her rose and diamond stud earrings and then look down at her necklace with the rose pendant as his eyes narrowed, and Hermione felt herself pale as he looked her in the eyes again.

He knew.

He knew Draco had let her escape. How could she have been so stupid? Why didn't *felix* stop her? It had been helping her guide him through her memories, and yet it didn't stop this?

She had just shown Lucius Malfoy that she could walk through the door to Draco's room. He was the only Death Eater — the *only* one who would have caught the flaw in their story, but he did. Of course he did. It was his home. He controlled its wards. He knew that nobody could walk through that door except the lords of the Manor and their ladies. And even if he wasn't certain about the necklace's powers, she was obviously wearing very expensive goblin made jewelry. It was distinctive. It sparkled with an inner fire that didn't exist in muggle jewelry. Somebody like Lucius Malfoy would be able to identify it in an instant. And how many young, muggleborn witches wore something like that unless they were romantically involved with wealthy pureblood wizards?

He said nothing as he rose and turned to the new arrivals, and now Hermione looked too to see Snape and Alecto walking in. Snape spared her only the briefest glance. As he did so she felt the galleon in her right pocket burn, communicating to her that it was finally time.

She forced herself to push the complication with Lucius Malfoy out of her mind and waited until Snape distracted them for her as they started to argue about whether to call the Dark Lord about her reappearance. She cast a final glance at them as she closed her eyes and focused. She felt her bindings loosen ever so slightly, and she slipped her hand into her front pocket with the four-way galleon.

HG – I'm activating Hogwarts' defenses now.

And then a rush of wind blew through the window as Hermione felt her power connect.

Draco

I think the Death Eaters are here.

HG – They're in the office, don't come help me, follow the plan. Beaded bag is under the couch cushions.

HG - Lucius, Alecto, one other. I took felix.

I love you more than anything in the world. Never forget that.

Draco was flying through the air with tears streaming down his face. Even under the influence of *felix*, the four messages he had received from Granger in rapid succession had sent him into a spiral, as he realized she was cornered, about to be captured, and then finally caught.

And not just caught, but caught by his *father*. Draco didn't know if this was luck or not. His only shred of hope was the knowledge that his father didn't like to get his hands dirty, and after the fiasco at Malfoy Manor he would be careful when he saw her again. He would want answers. Draco hoped beyond hope that Lucius would search her, and Granger would show him the truth.

But we've never discussed this, he thought, as he identified this massive hole in their plan. *We never talked about what to do if it was Father who caught her.* Draco was mentally beating himself up about it. He was supposed to identify every point of weakness, every loophole that needed to be closed. The fact that they didn't have a contingency plan for this was a shocking moment of failure that could condemn her if she didn't handle it correctly.

But she had felix, he told himself desperately. She had taken it. And as long as the potion didn't send her spiraling in the first fifteen or twenty minutes, he had to trust that it would help her know what to do.

But then he remembered she had Narcissa's wand. If there was one thing that would cause Lucius to lose control and just kill her, it would be seeing Narcissa's wand. Lucius was nearly as protective over Narcissa as Draco was about Granger. He might snap and do something rash.

Fuck, thought Draco as he frantically tried to message her back.

DM – Don't let Dad see your wand. Tell him to search you and show him the truth about us.

But there was no response from her. Potter and Weasley were messaging rapidly too.

HP – Do you need us? We can come now.

RW – Hermione, answer us.

HP – What the fuck should we do? Go get her? We can help her.

RW – You saw her message.

DM – I don't know. The Carrows are idiots, and Father doesn't like to kill.

HP – That doesn't give me much confidence, Malfoy.

DM – Hermione, PLEASE answer us if you can.

RW – I hate to say it, but we have to sit tight. You saw her message. She wants us to follow the plan.

HP – Fuck the plan.

RW – Harry, I swear to Godric I will stun you myself if I have to. Hermione and I had a deal about this. You have to wait until we’re called. It won’t be long.

Draco just closed his eyes as he remembered that memory he once watched of Granger and Weasley committing to leave the other behind if they had to in order to get Potter to the finish line. Weasley had done it once before at the Manor, and he was preparing to do it again. He was broadcasting it on the galleons for Draco’s sake. The very tiny part of Draco’s brain that was still rational knew that Weasley was right about this. They could still work the plan if she was caught. But that rational part was rapidly becoming overwhelmed by the emotional part as he felt his fear and anxiety for what was happening to her at this very moment.

Not knowing what else to do, Draco tapped the sickle with her wand to send a message back.

“I’ll always love you too,” he tried to write. But nothing happened. He tried again, and still nothing happened. He realized that she had deactivated her sickle. His sickle was fixed on her final message to him. She was saying goodbye.

He felt a sob well up at this, as something primal erupted from him – that need to be with her, to protect her, to know what was happening to her, stronger than ever. His dragon, which he had just renamed Scylla, sensed it, and she let rip a stream of fire from her mouth that caught some trees near a mountain.

Draco wrenched his eyes open, as he stared at the forest fire Scylla had just started before she soared past it. Draco couldn’t bring himself to care. If he lost her, he would never recover. He was sure of it.

Draco wasn’t sure how much time passed as he got closer and closer to Hogwarts. He was nearly numb now with his anxiety for Granger, and his *felix* wasn’t giving him anything either. But then miraculously, the galleon glowed red, and he caught a glimpse of the message.

HG – I’m activating Hogwarts defenses now.

Draco felt relief bloom inside of him that was so strong he thought he was about to levitate off of his seat. She might still be in danger, but whatever was happening she must have a way of communicating with Snape. That meant she had an ally. And she was secure enough to work her end of the plan.

Then Draco remembered the *felix*. She had taken it and would be under the improved effects of it by now. The *felix* had worked, and she hadn’t screwed it up in the first few minutes of the potion. Draco had never been so happy in his life that he had finished it and modified it.

Scylla felt his relief and made a shockingly beautiful sound that echoed across the valley they were flying over.

But then his heart jolted again as he suddenly felt his Dark Mark burn. He was being called to Hogwarts, even though Potter and Weasley hadn’t come through the floo yet. His own *felix* turned on again and gave him a flash of insight. The Dark Lord knew. He knew that the fake sword wasn’t the only thing that had been taken out of Bellatrix’s vault. And if he had

checked those records, he would surely know that Draco had presented his wand to the goblins to be let in and not Harry Potter. If he was assembling the Death Eaters at Hogwarts, then he must also know that the locket was missing. And now he was going to the school himself to secure his last hidden horcrux and possibly kill Lucius for Draco's betrayal.

He tried to push his fear for his father out of his mind. Lucius was rather adept at getting out of tight spots, and he would be able to sense the Dark Lord's rage the moment he was near. Besides, a small part of him had always known this could happen. He desperately hoped it wouldn't, but he knew his father would be at risk the moment Draco was exposed. He had done it anyway to help Granger, and she had gotten his mother to safety. That would have to be enough. He couldn't allow this to distract him.

DM – Dark Mark burned and is calling us to Hogwarts. Felix thinks he must know what I did. It's time for you to go and watch the memory and meet the Order. Don't wait for me.

HP — What about the cup?

DM – We'll have to execute Plan B for the cup. Drink your felix and go now.

HP – What's Plan B?

DM – You'll see.

Chapter 36: Avada Kedavra

Hermione

Hermione felt the power swelling through her and barely noticed the four Death Eaters around her clutching their arms or the burn from the galleon in her left front pocket. She didn't even notice the *felix* anymore because this feeling was so much stronger. It was almost intoxicating, as she reached out with her magic and called Hogwarts to respond.

A thousand years of magic answered her, and it flowed around her, over her, under her, and through her as it recognized her link to the wards and began to activate. She thought it must be like touching a live wire that cranked on while she held it. It started with a small jolt and then ramped, quickly, until she was nearly shaking from the effort of it.

It was using her magic, just like McGonagall had told her it would. She felt both indescribably powerful and incredibly weak as it took everything out of her. Hogwarts was channeling itself through her, and her magic was the conduit. She only hoped her magic was strong enough as it pushed her to the brink.

She was hardly aware when she was pulled to her feet, arms still bound, as she was led out of Ravenclaw Tower. She didn't see that it was Lucius who was holding her or that Snape had maneuvered himself between her and the Carrows to block her from their view.

She barely registered their taunts about the scared little mudblood who had gone slack under Lucius's legilimency and was so terrified of the Dark Lord she was shaking. She simply locked onto the power to hold it in place as she whispered the words that came to her under her breath so that nobody would hear her do it.

"Sentire potentiam meam et audi vocationem meam. Lectiones conditores me doce. Da mihi virtutem et adiuva me ad pugnam. Da mihi sapientiam ut bene faciendum illud. Da mihi fidelitatem his qui me coniungun. Da mihi solertiam scire cui confidam. Responde mihi, Hogwarts, tempus est. Defende nos a malo et eos qui nos ledunt."

And with that, the castle turned itself on, and Hermione came back to the present, though she still felt the thrum of ancient magic running through her.

As she was jolted into awareness she realized that more Death Eaters had joined their group at some point, and she was now in the entry hall, moving toward the grounds. But the group came to an abrupt halt as a deafening roar came from the portraits and the suits of armor and statues all sprang to life and jumped off their plinths. The tapestries flung themselves from the walls and started to smother the nearest Death Eaters, and the floor of the entry hall began to shake violently to destabilize them. Hermione's *felix* went into overdrive as the large brass lanterns lowered themselves and started to swing over their heads in an effort to bludgeon the Death Eaters, and bizarrely, she saw the trophies from the trophy room whizzing through the air and then attempt to beat the Death Eaters into a pulp.

Unfortunately, Hermione was with them and was in the line of fire, but she had *felix* on her side, as she ducked and dodged, an awareness of what would come next hitting her just a split second before the castle's defenses did.

Hermione had no idea how much of this had been planned years in advance and how much credit could be given to Snape and Malfoy, but she didn't stop to question it. The castle was attacking the group of Death Eaters she was a part of viciously, clearly trying to purge them from the premises and move them to the grounds and away from the school.

Then suddenly there was a loud shout, and she turned to see that the Order had arrived, guided, it would appear, by the portrait of Sir Cadogan on horseback.

Then there was another mighty roar as Grawp's fist flew through a stained glass window above the door to the entry hall.

"There!" bellowed Kingsley, as he fired spells into the Death Eaters in the entry hall.

Most of the Death Eaters on the edge turned to fight the wave of Order members and the castle itself, and Hermione was scanning desperately to see if she could find Ron, Harry, or Malfoy in the fray. But Lucius gripped Hermione and shoved her head down as he dragged her through the crowd, with Snape close behind them. She saw the Carrows break away with Rowle, Rodolphus Lestrange, and Avery as well, as they all fled to the doors of the entry hall and burst out to find Grawp standing there, ready to strike.

Felix suddenly nudged her so hard she nearly stumbled. *Make the giant let you pass, it seemed to say.*

Instinctively, Hermione reached out with her magic.

Let us through. Fight the other Death Eaters who follow, and to the surprise of her and the Death Eaters around her, Grawp said, "OK, Hermy," and stood aside.

Hermione and the group of Death Eaters who had broken away hurried off into the grounds. Behind her, Hermione could hear the fighting spilling out onto the courtyard in front of the school, as Grawp roared, and she ducked as the gargoyles started hurling brick and stone from the highest towers at the Death Eaters and her, by proximity.

Felix was lighting the way for her again as the gargoyles took out at least one Death Eater, but she dodged and ducked.

She wondered briefly if she should go ahead and wandlessly magic herself out of the bindings and try to escape to run back to the Order, but *felix* told her to stay where she was. Besides, she remembered something Malfoy had once told her before they were ever together, before they even liked each other.

"You're a tiny, muggleborn witch. Most Death Eaters will assume you are terrified and vulnerable compared to them, especially if you are caught without a wand. That will make them lazy and off their guard. It's an enormous advantage. If a Death Eater holds you like

this, you're supposed to lull them into a false sense of security before you let it fucking rip and blast them to smithereens."

She was so tempted to take advantage of the castle's distraction and just do it, but a whisper of instinct and *felix* told her not yet. She had to fight like a Slytherin and not like a Gryffindor if she was going to get herself out of this alive and take Voldemort down too. In any event, they had separated her from the others. Snape was with her, but even with him on her side, they were surrounded and outnumbered. It wasn't time to show her hand just yet.

She kept her head down but her eyes and ears were peeled as they started to head toward the Forbidden Forest. On they went, making a tremendous amount of noise, and Hermione was suddenly reminded of the last time she did this. Sure enough, she glanced to the side, and wasn't terribly surprised to catch the slightest glimpse of a palomino body before it melted back into the trees. She glanced to the other side and thought she saw a shadow move before the flash of dead white eyes made her realize what it was: the thestrals.

The creatures of the Forbidden Forest were aware they were here. Hermione took a deep breath and allowed herself a brief moment to study that connection with the Hogwarts' defensive magic, and she knew she could summon them, just like she had instinctively summoned Grawp. Hermione was now hit with the absolute, undeniable knowledge that they all knew who she was and what role she had been given. She also knew, beyond the shadow of a doubt, that nothing in the Forbidden Forest would harm her. She had called the castle's defenses, and they would be a part of it.

But unlike the castle, many of the creatures in the Forbidden Forest that she had called were sentient. And just like her they were biding their time. With a small nudge from *felix* Hermione exhaled as she tried to communicate her needs.

Wait. Just wait and see what happens.

As she was dragged through the undergrowth she heard more footsteps behind her, and she realized a few more Death Eaters must have broken away and made it past Grawp to join them. She didn't turn to look. It didn't matter. She had a strong feeling she knew who she would be seeing next.

Sure enough, as Hermione entered a clearing, she saw Voldemort in the flesh. It was the first time she had ever seen him clearly, without the chaos of a battle or a frantic escape to distract her. She knew she should feel more afraid than she did. She was bound, wandless, surrounded, and she was pretty sure they still had two more horcruxes to go. But for some reason a stillness settled over her. Maybe it was the *felix* or maybe it was the knowledge that this would be over soon one way or another. She had to trust her training. She had to trust her magic. She had to trust Draco Malfoy and Severus Snape.

And she did. She trusted everything.

"Good evening Mudblood," said Voldemort with a hiss.

Hermione didn't respond, but dropped her eyes to the ground.

“I do wonder if you might enlighten me about something. Either you or Lucius.”

He knows, Hermione realized. She didn’t even need *felix* to tell her this.

She had felt her galleon burning in her pocket on and off all afternoon. She couldn’t read the messages between the boys, but she knew what must have happened. Voldemort had figured out that Draco took the horcrux and not just the fake sword from the vault. He had figured it out before Harry and Ron used the floo to draw him to Hogwarts. He was here to guard the diadem and the snake, which Hermione saw was slithering in a circle at the base of a throne he had erected in the middle of the forest. And he may have already discovered the locket was missing.

Draco would be dead the moment he arrived, but at least he wasn’t here yet. Lucius was the one who was in real danger, maybe even more so than she was.

No, she thought. She had no real love for Lucius Malfoy, but he was Draco’s father and Narcissa’s husband. She would have to protect him if she could. Hermione felt *felix* register this desire, and it told her to stay very still and wait.

“No?” he asked in a dangerously soft voice. “Nothing to say? Very well. I don’t need you to say it. You will show me.”

Hermione braced herself and then her head was ripped open.

He was powerful, she realized. Far more powerful than anything she had felt from Malfoy. And the revelation that he knew Malfoy had the cup meant that it was pointless to pretend they didn’t know about the horcruxes.

But he doesn’t know we found the others.

She started to storytell on the fly, trusting *felix* to help her. She decided in a split second to use the things she had prepared, but make small tweaks, hoping that she could do it, hoping that everything Draco had taught her would stick.

“Dumbledore heard the prophecy. The exact wording was, ‘*The one with the power to vanquish the Dark Lord approaches... born to those who have thrice defied him, born as the seventh month dies... and the weapons of their forefathers shall meet in a final battle... but only he who harnesses his true power shall prevail.*’”

She sensed Voldemort pause as he thought about this, but she lightly pulled him to the moment the trio was sitting in the boys’ room at the Burrow, just after Dumbledore’s will was read.

“Shame we couldn’t have the Sword though,” said Ron. “Why do you reckon Dumbledore wanted to pass it to you?”

They thought for a moment until Hermione had it. “It’s because we need it to defeat You-Know-Who! That must be the weapon from the prophecy! Harry, are you related to Godric Gryffindor?”

"I think so... through my dad."

"I wish Dumbledore hadn't kept it in his office," she said. "But then again, I suppose he needed it to destroy the locket."

"Except the one we found was a fake. He died for nothing. We don't even know what it *looks* like," said Harry woefully.

Ron sighed. "And what about You-Know-Who's weapon? We've never really focused on that part."

"It must be related to Slytherin," said Hermione, "since Harry's is related to Gryffindor. Maybe it's his ability to speak parseltongue."

"Nagini," said Harry suddenly. "I'll have the Sword in the final battle, and Nagini will be there too. He will try to kill me with Nagini, and I'll try to kill him with the Sword. That's how the prophecy will be fulfilled."

Voldemort pushed her for memories of necklaces.

She showed herself in her parents' bedroom, as she placed her jewelry in her mother's jewelry box. Then she pulled out a necklace with a rose on it and a pair of matching earrings as she began to cry.

Voldemort pushed her. That wasn't what he cared to see.

The slightest nudge from *felix* told her to show the three of them sitting in Grimmauld Place staring at Regulus's locket, as they all gave each other baffled looks. They had no idea where the real locket was.

"Twas my master's" croaked the voice of an old house elf. "Twas Master Regulus's."

Voldemort latched onto this and pushed her for memories of Regulus Black. She had almost none of course, but she showed them cleaning out his bedroom decked out in Slytherin silver and green the summer before fifth year. One of them had just found a locket in a chest of drawers. They were passing it around, and it wouldn't open. Finally they shrugged and threw it in a rubbish bag, which Sirius Black told Kreacher to take to the curb.

Voldemort seized on it and pressed for any more memories of that specific locket, and Hermione showed him the Ministry of Magic.

"It's me," whispered Harry from behind her. Hermione was polyjuiced as Mafalda Hopkirk, and she jumped so violently that Umbridge turned to look at her. She was wearing the locket.

"What is it Mafalda?" she asked.

Hermione cast around for something to say to distract Umbridge. "That's a pretty necklace," she squeaked.

"Thank you. It's from the Selwyn family. I descended from the Selwyn's, you know. Indeed, there are few pureblood families to whom I am not related."

Hermione just gave her a tight smile and turned back to the proceedings.

"Have you found the Sword?" whispered Harry.

She just shook her head slightly. "I haven't either," he whispered. "I even went to Umbridge's office, and there was nothing. I don't think it's here."

Hermione immediately jumped to her feet. "Must be going!" she yelped, as she hurried down the steps.

"Wait! Stop!" said Umbridge, but then Harry stunned her, and her patronus disappeared. Hermione showed them escaping from the Ministry, leaving Umbridge and her locket behind.

Hermione sensed a fierce pleasure coming from Voldemort as he started to push her for memories about Ravenclaw.

"It must be something of Ravenclaw's," said Harry.

"But the only thing I can find is the lost diadem. And Harry, it's been lost for *centuries*."

Voldemort pushed her on this, and Hermione showed him page after page of the books she had read as she groaned in frustration. Over and over again Hermione read that it was lost.

Another push, and now she was talking to Harry again. "I really think it's at Hogwarts, Hermione," he said. "There must be one at Hogwarts."

"That's impossible Harry," she scoffed. "When would Voldemort have had a chance to plant one under Dumbledore's nose? And where would he have done it? There's no way – no *possible* way it could be at Hogwarts. And besides, we don't even know what we're looking for."

Then Voldemort was looking for the cup, and Hermione was on the floor screaming.

"I'm going to ask you again! Where did you get this sword? *Where?*"

"We found it – we found it – PLEASE!"

But then Bellatrix cast the spell on her again, and the rest of Hermione's explanation was lost to the pain and screams.

"You are lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, *tell the truth!*"

And now he was pushing for more about this and also Draco Malfoy. With *felix* to guide her, Hermione improvised wildly as she brought him back to Grimmauld Place and a conversation with Harry.

"He's definitely a Death Eater. Draco Malfoy, I mean," she said.

"He saved you though..." said Harry hesitantly.

"No. He thought I had died, but his elf followed us and kidnapped me while your backs were turned. She's the one who healed me," she said firmly. "He was just keeping me there for..." she trailed off and blushed.

"Sex?" asked Potter hesitantly.

She nodded convincingly but then got a glint in her eyes.

"What?" asked Harry. "What else?"

"Before I escaped I stole my wand back while he wasn't looking just for a moment, and I took a leaf out of Malfoy's book."

"What do you mean?" asked Harry with wide eyes.

"Well, he imperiused me for sex. So I imperiused him back to go collect a horcrux for us once we work out how to get it. And I left one of my paired sickles behind to give him instructions. That bastard's going to pay for what he did to me."

"Which horcrux?" asked Harry breathlessly. "Where?"

"I'm not sure which one, but I'm sure it's at Gringotts," said Hermione. "It's in Bellatrix Lestrange's vault. She gave it away when she tortured me. She asked me what else we took other than the Sword. So we need to get into Gringotts to get the Sword, and I think there's a horcrux in there too. Who better to do it for us than Draco Malfoy? Hell, Bellatrix would probably let him in for us."

Harry nodded, his eyes shining. "Brilliant Hermione. You're absolutely brilliant."

Then he pushed for scenes with Draco, and once again she gave up the memory of their first meeting. He watched curiously as they fought, Hermione slapped him, and then spit in his face. And then Draco imperiused her, and she took her robe off and sucked him off. He watched the entire thing, and Hermione forced herself to feel nothing while she saw it too, and finally they reached Draco's parting shot, just before Hermione collapsed.

"I'm not going to keep you under it all the time, Mudblood," he said. "I want you to know what you did to me."

He pushed for another memory and Hermione showed him the time in the tub. Again, he watched the whole thing as Malfoy imperiused her, she kissed the Dark Mark, served Malfoy firewhiskey, and then rode him.

Now she sensed he was looking for proof that she had imperiused Malfoy. She presented their final encounter together, as he approached her naked and told her he was about to offer her up to the Voldemort.

Again, Voldemort watched the entire encounter as he imperiused her, bound her to the chair and had sex with her before walking out. Hermione sensed Voldemort was nearly spellbound as he watched, and she modified the next part of the memory on the fly. She unbound herself, threw on Harry's robes, and went to clean up. But as she approached the door, she heard Malfoy still inside. This time she snuck in and saw he had his back to her. She spied her wand on the dresser just inside of the room. She grabbed it, pointed it from behind and recalled that feeling of casting the curse that one time she had ever done it.

"*Imperio*," she said, and that rush of pleasure flowed through her as the curse connected.

Malfoy stiffened and straightened up.

"You will follow my instructions," she said.

"Yes."

"You will not stop me from escaping."

"No."

"You will use the sickle on the dresser to communicate with me and follow my orders."

"Yes."

She imagined him staying just like that as she ran into the bathroom and picked up the memory from there. Just as she was about to floo away, she imagined turning back to him and placing her wand back on the dresser.

"You will act normally. You will tell nobody. You will not attempt to release yourself from the curse. You will procure another wand for me as soon as possible and send it to me by owl."

"Yes."

Then she stepped into the floo and Voldemort released her, as he contemplated her for a long moment. She could sense Snape's eyes boring into her, but she forced herself not to look at him. *Felix* told her to wait.

"Well Lucius," he said softly. "There's no question that your son was very stupid. He allowed the Mudblood to imperius him, did you know that? He did it to her for his own selfish pleasure, and she did it back to him out of revenge. I wouldn't have thought a mudblood would ever think of something like that, but then again... this one is known to be rather bright. I watched the whole thing in her mind. Evidently she directed him to break into Gringotts earlier today to steal a couple of... artifacts of mine. He must have used polyjuice to look like Potter."

Hermione felt Lucius inhale next to her – whether from rage or relief, she wasn't sure.

Voldemort continued. "He will be punished most harshly for his stupidity Lucius, though I can see he did not betray me as I initially thought. He even made her kiss his Dark Mark, did

you know? And she was so lovely and... exposed while she did it too.” His lip curled in an evil smile and she heard several of the Death Eaters around her laughing. Lucius, however, was silent.

Revulsion made bile rise in Hermione’s throat, but she forced herself to keep her eyes down on the ground.

“Yes, I can see why he may have allowed his baser instincts to take over. She may be muddy, but she is a rather pretty little thing, especially when she’s docile like that. In any event, I can see he intended to hand her over to me. He miscalculated though and allowed her to escape, and she imperiused him on her way out.”

She felt Lucius’s grip tighten on her arm, and she got a nudge from *felix* that Lucius had certainly picked up on the inconsistencies in the memory of her escape. He had not seen Hermione imperius Draco when he watched it. He must know Hermione was an occlumens now, though he wouldn’t know which story was true.

Better him than Voldemort, whispered *felix*.

“I will spare you and your wife this time, Lucius. But if anything *ever* happens like that again your entire family will pay. Do you understand me?”

“Yes my Lord,” muttered Lucius.

“Very good. And in any event, it appears I may have to thank Draco for his very public escape today. It alerted me to their plan. I know what they have done and what they are trying to do. But they miscalculated and drew my attention with him. And now that I have the mudblood... well, I feel certain that with a little patience, Potter will come to find her, and then I’ll end him once and for all.”

Hermione felt Lucius tense next to her, and then Hermione tensed too as she heard the voice of her best friend.

“You won’t have long to wait.”

Harry pulled off the cloak and stepped forward, carrying the Sword of Gryffindor with him.

Hermione felt the very air around them still as he glanced toward Snape first and then Hermione, and in a flash of understanding that only comes in the rarest of moments, Hermione understood. She didn’t think it was *felix* this time. It was her own recognition of all the clues she had seen over the years and all the visions she had watched in his head. The last piece of the puzzle fell into place for her.

He had brought the Sword for her. He wouldn’t be finishing it, because Voldemort had to finish him first. Voldemort had to kill that bit of soul that had connected him with Harry for nearly all of Harry’s life. But what Harry didn’t know was that this final act would finish her too.

At least Snape’s here, she thought with some detachment. *Snape will know what to do.*

And then the enormity of what was about to happen hit her. Oddly enough, she wasn't afraid for herself, but she felt her heart break for Draco as she looked up in the sky. And there, as though she had called him to her, she finally saw a white speck flying closer and closer until she could make out his dragon in the distance. He was right that she was beautiful. Hermione wished she knew what Draco had decided to name her.

Hermione turned her attention back to the forest, and still nobody was moving. *Felix* was telling her to stay still, and she obeyed. She had to. What was the point in fighting this? It was necessary. She only wished Draco wouldn't be here to see it.

Voldemort cocked his head at Harry who did nothing to defend himself.

Because he can't, she realized. *He's the master of the Elder Wand, and he won't be able to die unless he consents to it.*

Harry had accepted it and Hermione had too. It would be any second now.

Slowly Voldemort raised his wand to Harry, and still Harry did nothing. The other Death Eaters watched with bated breath.

His mouth opened, and she barely heard the words. The last thing she saw was a flash of green light, and then a sky filled with orange flames as Draco's dragon roared.

Draco

Draco knew she was still alive when he felt himself cross the wards. He had been watching the galleon for the past hour, and other than her final message that she was activating the defenses, there was nothing else from her. After the initial elation wore off, Draco was growing uneasy again until he made it to the outer boundaries of the spells. He and Snape had extended them beyond the Forbidden Forest, all the way up to a cave where he had seen Potter once visit Sirius Black in his memories.

The Headmaster, they had learned, had some rather useful powers, even when he wasn't the one responsible for activating the defenses. He could shrink their parameters to leave the grounds exposed, though he couldn't remove them from the castle itself. Alternatively, he could extend them to a rather astonishing degree to protect the village of Hogsmeade and the creatures in the Forbidden Forest as well. Draco and Snape had opted to do the latter, because incorporating the Forbidden Forest would mean that the creatures in it would be called to fight for them. Of course they had both lied to the Dark Lord and told him the defenses would extend only to the castle itself.

They were hoping to lure the Dark Lord into the Forest, where they would have the advantage of surprise.

There were other tweaks the Headmaster could make when he couldn't call the defenses. He could add to them but not subtract from them. Again, they had lied and informed the Dark Lord that Snape could remove some, but not all, of the defensive spells, and they would be diligently working on that task.

Instead, when they reviewed the file Snape had compiled containing everything he thought might happen when the defenses were called, he and Draco had taken their time considering every other spell they could incorporate. Snape had been the one to embed *piertotum locomotor* into the call so that the armor would come to life. And Draco had been the one to modify *wingardium leviosa* so that the heavy brass lamps that hung from the ceiling would fly through the air and hit the castle's opponents on their heads. He had taken inspiration for that one from both Granger's experience with the Malfoy chandelier and the first memory she voluntarily showed him when Weasley decked that mountain troll with its club.

They had carefully planned it out so that every asset of the castle that they could think of would be called to their side. Snape, in particular, had had some rather alarmingly creative ideas. Draco still wasn't sure it was a good idea to teach Moaning Myrtle just enough parseltongue to reopen the Chamber of Secrets during the call, but Snape had had the idea after seeing Potter do it during a memory in occlumency training. Snape had gone into the Chamber himself to place a spell on the old basilisk skeleton to reanimate it when it was called. Myrtle would be able to let it out and unleash it on the Death Eaters, which would be terrifying at a minimum and possibly deadly. It was only now as Draco was flying through the air with a horcrux and no way to destroy it that Draco wished he had told Snape to pick up a spare fang while he was down there.

All in all, Draco knew that Granger would have her work cut out for her when she controlled that magic all at once, but he knew she was strong enough to do it, and he hoped he would be able to feel her in it.

He was relieved to find out he could.

The moment he crossed the wards, something unusual happened. He felt Scylla answer Granger's call too and start to steer them toward a different part of the Forest than Draco had intended. *Felix* nudged him at the same time, and Draco let her do it. It appeared that the wards recognized her as an asset to Granger, and he sensed that she knew exactly where Granger was located.

Draco thought about what he needed to do next because the cup was still a horcrux.

There were three methods that Granger had identified to destroy a horcrux: basilisk venom, fiendfyre, and *Avada Kedavra*, but the last method only worked if the horcrux was a living thing. Draco had read that fiendfyre was nearly uncontrollable and immensely destructive. And as far as Draco knew, none of them had ever attempted the killing curse, though he thought he could muster enough hate for the Dark Lord to do it.

Of the three, basilisk venom was by far the easiest method, especially in the form of the Sword. Draco had decided to put off Plan B until there was truly no alternative.

As Scylla circled the Forest, Draco looked down at the scene below him, and what he saw made his blood run cold. The Dark Lord was sitting on a throne of all things, at the edge of a clearing. Snape was to his right, as Nagini circled him. Granger was bound and being held by his father, while a half dozen other Death Eaters milled around, and Harry bloody Potter had just pulled off the invisibility cloak and was doing nothing at all.

Draco went cold as the thing he had never allowed himself to contemplate became clear, and he didn't even need the nudge from *felix* to know it was true. He had seen it in Potter's head, after all. There was a part of Draco that had always known it ever since he began training Potter. And perhaps that was why everything with Granger had felt so desperate and doomed for the last couple of months.

Harry Potter was a horcrux.

Potter knew it now because Snape knew it. Snape must have told him with that final memory. But Snape had never told any of the rest of them that Potter would have to die. And Draco had never told Snape Granger's biggest secret.

"NOOOOOO!" he bellowed as he saw the jet of green light explode from the Dark Lord's wand and barrel toward Potter's chest. Without warning, Scylla echoed his horror and roared as she lit up the sky with flames.

Draco watched in agony as his witch fell too, caught by a surprised Lucius Malfoy, who suddenly looked up at Draco.

Exchanging a single look, he was sure that Lucius knew. Lucius had figured out everything. He didn't know if Granger had shown him or if Lucius could simply read his only child that well, but as Draco watched, Lucius gently lowered Granger to the ground and gave Draco a slight shake of his head.

Automatically, Draco dissociated.

This pain was worse than the cruciatus. He couldn't think, he couldn't even breathe, and he had to separate himself from it or else he wouldn't be able to finish it for her. So Draco's mind split in two: one part that was sheer devastation for what had just happened to Granger and the other part that could still function but was fueled entirely by rage.

Scylla was clearly channeling his rage, shooting streams of fire at random targets and setting the Forbidden Forest on fire. He wanted to burn it to the ground, every fucking bit of it. He was going to make sure the Dark Lord paid for this, and he didn't really care who or what he hurt in the process, as long as Granger's body wasn't harmed.

Once again, as it had done so many times in the early months of its use, the vinewood wand acted for him. His arm nearly wrenched out of its socket as an unusually strong pulse of magic sent a shield spell he didn't recognize toward Granger's body. And then at the last second he sent the same shield over Potter too, just in case.

By now, the rest of the Death Eaters and even the Dark Lord were watching, as if in a trance, as Draco Malfoy opened his bag to pull out the cup and shout, "*IGNES INFERNI!*" He felt a

tremendous, terrifying power surge through the vinewood wand as a fiery dragon even larger than Scylla burst from it and began to fly straight down toward the ground.

As soon as it erupted, Draco threw the cup through the air and into the fire. It exploded with a deafening bang, and then Draco turned with some dark satisfaction to watch the show. Most of the Death Eaters were scrambling to get away from the fire dragon, and as they did so Draco watched several of them run straight into a herd of angry centaurs and thestrals that had been lying in wait. Another small group turned and launched themselves onto the path out of the clearing to race back to the castle. Draco snarled as he twisted his wand and sent the fire dragon after them, engulfing one who tripped and sending two others straight for the lake nearby.

Only Lucius, Snape, and the Dark Lord himself remained behind, covered in their own shields as Scylla sent her own, very powerful fire toward the Dark Lord.

Draco watched as his fire dragon chased the two Death Eaters who pelted for the lake. He didn't care about them. He felt nothing for them, except for a hope that they would both die. He wanted all the Death Eaters to die, every single one, because Granger was gone and they all deserved to pay. He had to focus on his rage because if he didn't then all he would feel was devastation.

He watched with cold, almost dead eyes as they arrived at the lake and jumped in to avoid the flames, only to be pulled under the water by the ghostly green arms of the merpeople whom Granger had called. They didn't emerge again.

It was only then that Draco registered the fact that the Hogwarts defenses were still engaged. And as soon as he had the thought *felix* gave him an almost violent nudge.

He whipped around to stare at Granger, and then to his utter shock he saw her begin to stir. A fierce hope leapt within him that it wasn't over yet. Perhaps, just maybe, she could still be alive. Maybe they had gotten lucky, and the exchange for Potter's life hadn't cost her her own.

But then even more remarkably, Potter stirred too, and now Draco didn't know what the hell to think. But now he knew they had a real chance at finishing this, and his mind that had been momentarily split in two fused together again as he sprang into action.

"THE CUP IS GONE! I SENT IT THROUGH THE FIENDFYRE!" he bellowed to them, and he turned Scylla to fly closer to the fiendfyre as it started to send billows of steam over the lake. He focused with all of his might on the countercurse from Granger's notes, and he felt his, Granger's, and Potter's powers merge together to quench it. Then he circled one more time on Scylla back toward the clearing.

He flew toward them, and what he saw made his heart stop. The Dark Lord was now talking to Granger with his wand aimed directly at her. She looked like she was being propped up by his father. Granger, who had just come back from the dead. Granger, who was still bound. Granger, who... *oh*.

She had been waiting for the perfect moment to strike, just like he taught her.

Good girl, he thought with a rush of fierce pride, as he saw her magic burst out of her to vanish her bindings. She leapt lightly to her feet and sent a barrage of wandless spells toward the Dark Lord, whose eyes widened in surprise and then with the slightest bit of fear when Snape turned and began to help her duel him two on one.

Draco was just about to open his mouth to tell Potter to get the snake, when to his shock he heard his father shout, “*AVADA KEDAVRA!*” and the spell went straight for Nagini.

Lucius’s aim was true, and the Dark Lord’s anger was explosive as Nagini fell. Granger and Snape were blasted back with the force of it as the Dark Lord turned his rage on Lucius.

“NO!” shouted Draco, but Granger had already acted.

She rolled to her stomach and shoved her fingers in the dirt, and suddenly a wall of earth rose in front of Lucius, just as the Dark Lord sent a jet of green light toward him. The earth caught the spell and diffused it before falling harmlessly back to the ground.

Elemental magic, he realized with awe. He had only ever read about it, he had never seen anybody use it in real life. But he and Snape both thought the Hogwarts defenses included it, and Granger seemed to know how to wield it while they were active since she was in control.

“IT’S TIME HARRY!” she shouted from the ground as Lucius and Snape jumped forward in front of her and started to duel the Dark Lord again. “IT’S TIME TO END IT!”

“KEEP HIM HERE WITH ME!” Potter shouted back.

She scrambled to her feet, and then she closed her eyes, and Draco felt her call Scylla, who breathed a string of fire for her. Draco watched in awe as she pulled the fire element down from the air, perfectly in control and quickly circled Potter and the Dark Lord with it, cutting Lucius and Snape off. All three of them watched now as she made the flames grow bigger and brighter so that they were both trapped in the ring of flames together with no escape or help for either one of them.

“TELL US DRACO!” she shouted at him from above the roar of flames. “TELL US WHEN IT’S DONE!”

Draco realized she was still holding her palms out toward the fire, keeping the flames intact until she got Draco’s signal. Draco knew that he would be the only one to witness the end.

I’ll be sure to let Granger in my head so she can see it too, he thought with a smirk.

“YOU KNOW I’LL DO ANYTHING FOR YOU, LOVE!” he shouted back, and he saw his father’s face turn up to look at him now in amazement while Granger just grinned and held the magic.

As Draco flew over them he saw Potter and the Dark Lord were circling each other and talking, but Draco couldn’t hear what they were saying to each other over the rush of the flames. Draco scanned the edge of the forest, and suddenly felt another violent nudge from

felix as he saw Alecto Carrow break away from the herd of thestrals and start to run toward the circle of fire.

She was heading straight for Granger, and none of the others had noticed. Draco himself was out of range, and he felt Scylla drop like a rock to try to get him closer to intervene.

“GRANGER!” he bellowed as Alecto’s cry of “*AVADA KEDAVRA!*” ripped through the air.

Snape’s head jerked around, and he automatically launched himself in front of Granger as he caught the spell for her. He dropped like a puppet whose strings had been cut.

All the rage that had been snuffed at Granger’s reappearance emerged again as he stared down at Alecto. She had just tried to kill Granger. And she had actually killed Snape. Draco didn’t even realize how much he cared about Snape until he knew that he was gone, but in that moment Draco understood that Snape had been added to the very short list of important people in Draco’s life. They were the Death Eaters who had fallen in love with muggleborn witches. They had turned toward the light. And they had spent hours, days together as they tipped the scales for the final battle in their favor.

Draco pointed the vinewood wand at Alecto and cried, “*AVADA KEDAVRA!*” and the killing curse he had never before tried to cast exploded from the wand and went straight for her heart, just as *felix* told him it would.

He remembered what Bellatrix had once told him about the killing curse: you had to mean it. You had to *want* it. And in that instant Draco had never wanted to kill anybody as badly as he wanted to kill Alecto Carrow: not Dolohov, not Bellatrix, not even the Dark Lord whom Draco thought had killed Granger by proxy just a few moments ago. No, Alecto Carrow managed to directly threaten the person he loved and kill his mentor with a single spell, and he wanted nothing more than to watch her go down.

The exchange he felt from the dark magic the moment he cast it was not unfamiliar. There was an unsettling joy that leapt in him – a dark satisfaction that would forever change him and push at the boundaries of what he was willing to do. It was similar to what he felt when he saw Dolohov dead in that hallway and Bellatrix burn to death hours earlier. But this was more intimate because unlike those two, he had directly done it. He knew he would never be the same. But as he watched Alecto fall, Draco decided it was worth whatever price he paid for it.

Scylla now turned her master’s fury toward Alecto. With a giant roar she unleashed her fire, and Draco watched with satisfaction as her body was burned to a crisp. Nobody would ever know what Draco had done except for his father and Granger.

Seeing his father was now actively guarding Granger while she held the ring of fire, he turned back to the Dark Lord and Potter. He heard them shout spells at the same time.

“*EXPELLIARMUS!*” cried Potter as the Dark Lord shouted, “*AVADA KEDAVRA!*”

Potter’s disarming spell caused the Dark Lord’s to rebound and then it was done. He was dead.

"IT'S DONE! POTTER DID IT!" shouted Draco, and he watched as Granger immediately doused the flames. She went sprinting toward Potter and threw herself in his arms while Scylla circled for her landing. The minute she touched firm ground Granger released Potter and turned toward him.

Her smile was nothing short of blinding, and Draco knew he wanted to let the world know, just as Granger had once taught him. *Expecto patronum!* he thought, along with the message he wanted to send, and the giant Hebridean black patronus erupted from the wand to fly toward the castle and announce the news. His father watched it in shock as it sped past him.

"VOLDEMORT IS DEAD! POTTER KILLED THE BASTARD!" came the echoing voice of Draco Malfoy, and he heard cheers rise in the distance.

But he didn't pay any attention to the celebratory noises he could hear because Granger was running toward him, and she launched herself on him. He picked her up, and she wrapped her legs around his waist as he spun her around and kissed her hungrily.

"OI!" shouted a familiar voice, and they broke away to see the smiling face of Ron Weasley hurrying into the clearing.

The smile on his face fell when he noticed Snape. He looked at Draco, with a sincere expression. "I'm really sorry mate," he said softly. "I never liked having him in my head, but I know you two were close."

"I'm sorry too," said Potter. "And we'll make sure his story comes out. He helped us save a lot of lives today."

Draco felt a small lump in his throat, as he just nodded. He felt Granger nestle into him a little, and he squeezed her. He felt totally wrung out by the range of emotions he had felt today: stress, fear, devastation, relief, joy. As he held her though, everything else disappeared except for love, and he made himself focus on that. She was here. She was safe. She had made it. *They* had made it together.

Weasley seemed to gather himself. "The Order is just clearing up the rest of the stray Death Eaters. Your defensive spells for the castle were out of control, by the way."

Draco felt the lump in his throat finally ease and just shot him a small, appreciative smile before turning back to kiss Granger again.

"OK, really, if you two can't keep your hands off of each other, then Harry and I are going to make Hermione move back to the Manor. We don't want to see it," said a disgruntled Weasley.

They just laughed as Granger and Draco broke apart, and Draco finally caught his father's eye. To his surprise, there was a faint smile playing around his lips as he just raised one eyebrow.

"I suppose I should call the solicitors tomorrow to break it off with Astoria," was all he said.

"Oh thank Salazar," groaned Draco in relief, as the others laughed. "If you hadn't, I was going to sic Granger on her."

"You prat!" she said, and the others chuckled as she smacked his arm lightly. Draco just smiled down at her.

Then Granger seemed to remember something. "Tippy!" she called, and the little House Elf appeared in the clearing with them, much to Lucius's amazement.

"Yes Miss?" she said, before turning around and squeaking at the sight of dead Voldemort. Tippy immediately turned and hugged Granger around the middle. "Miss did it! Miss did it!"

"Actually, Harry did it. The rest of us helped," she said kindly, as she hugged the little elf back. "Tippy," she said again as Tippy pulled away with watery eyes. "Could you please fetch Narcissa for us?"

Lucius's eyes widened, as Tippy disappeared and then reappeared a moment later with Narcissa. She looked around in the clearing, her eyes filling with tears as she saw her husband, her son, and Hermione all safe and sound.

"Oh my dears!" she cried, and she pulled Draco and Hermione in for a hug together. Lucius was in a state of disbelief.

"Narcissa!" he demanded.

She turned toward him and raised an eyebrow in question.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, gesturing toward Draco and Granger.

"Because you never wanted to learn occlumency from the House of Black, my dear. As I've always said, our methods are superior to yours."

Lucius just rolled his eyes and huffed, but the others grinned at this. "Narcissa, your wand is under the desk in the Headmaster's office," said Hermione. "I erm... opted to leave it there for safekeeping."

Lucius's eyebrows flew up again, as Narcissa just patted her cheek. "No matter dear, I'm sure Tippy can retrieve it for me. Now then, why don't we go join the others? I may be needed for healing. And we should take Severus..." she trailed off sadly, as Lucius stepped forward and levitated Snape's body.

Narcissa and Lucius moved off, as Tippy left to get her wand. And then Draco was just left with Granger, Potter, and Weasley.

"Your dragon was fucking epic, mate," said Potter, giving him a lopsided grin.

"I changed her name to Scylla," Draco replied. "And you weren't half bad yourself."

Potter grinned at this and then turned to Weasley. "How was it with the Order?"

Weasley just shook his head and looked at Draco. "Most of our casualties were early, before the defenses were active and I got there with the *felix*. There was another small group that got caught at the Hogshead at the very end. But overall our casualties were limited. Everybody who took *felix* made it. My family is safe and Remus and Tonks are too."

Draco was thrilled to hear this even though he had never met his cousin. He had a feeling he would finally be getting to know her now that the war was over. He could see similar relief reflected on Granger's and Potter's faces.

Weasley continued, "The castle fought so well for us we didn't have as much to do as I thought we would. I have no idea where the bloody hell you and Snape came up with some of those ideas, but I've never seen anything like it. Fred and George told me it's going to be their inspiration for a new line of pranks at the shop. I think they're going to want to bring you on as a consultant, mate. And of course the *felix*... well just like the last time it was like we knew what was coming a split second before it did, but this time we weren't as wired while we did it. It was brilliant, truly."

Draco couldn't help but grin at this. "Most of the ideas for the castle actually came from Snape. I got him drunk one night, and he confessed that he used the Marauders' pranks for inspiration because they had always been rather effective at causing utter chaos."

Potter and Weasley grinned at this, as they turned to make their way out of the forest. Draco pulled Granger to him and gave her one more, lazy kiss before pulling her over to Scylla.

"Darling, meet my girl," he said.

"Which one of us are you talking to?" asked Granger in amusement, but she reached out a tentative hand, and Scylla nearly purred in contentment at Granger's touch.

"She's beautiful, Draco," she said softly.

"So are you," he said, as he looked at her.

"And you know what this means," she added.

"Yes, it means I'm taking you out on a date Friday night. I won't take no for an answer."

Granger beamed at this and scooted in for another kiss. "We're going to do this for real, aren't we?"

"We are. And I can't fucking wait."

Chapter 37: Victory

Chapter Notes

This is the end! It's a bit of an epilogue, but long enough to be a standalone chapter so I have named it that way.

I really enjoyed writing this, and I appreciate all of the kind words and encouragement from those who read it.

Again thank you! I love fanfiction, I love this genre, and I love this community. You all are the best.

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

Hermione

If you had asked Hermione about her favorite moment in the days and weeks following the final battle, it would have been a hard choice.

Maybe it was her reunion with the Weasleys in the Great Hall right after they emerged from the Forest. She and Malfoy slowly made their way back hand-in-hand, and when they finally walked in Ginny took one look at her and shrieked with joy before pelting toward her.

“Hermione! You’re alive! And Harry said you’re with Malfoy! Oh my gosh, is the sex as hot as I always thought it would be?”

Unfortunately both Harry and Malfoy had overheard this, and Harry gave his newly-reinstated girlfriend a look of utter disgust while Malfoy assumed the smuggest look Hermione had ever seen on his face.

Or maybe it was when she, Ron, and Harry had hauled Kingsley Shacklebolt, the new Minister of Magic, into the Headmaster’s office and briefed him on the horcruxes and everything the Malfoys, and especially Draco, had done to help. The fact that their story was corroborated by Dumbledore’s portrait had certainly helped, and Shacklebolt looked at them all with incredulity, which transformed into amazement, and finally thoughtfulness. He then called in the Malfoys, and Hermione noticed he studied Draco in particular as he spoke to them.

“Very well,” he said. “I can’t speak for how Gringotts is going to react to the damage of course, but after speaking to Harry, Ron, and Hermione, I’ll provide a pardon for all three of you. You won’t be facing Azkaban. We would, of course, appreciate your cooperation with access to the Manor as we prosecute the other Death Eaters.”

“We would be very happy to assist,” said Lucius in his smoothest voice.

Or maybe it was the makeshift meal provided by the Hogwarts House Elves for the fighters when Lucius suddenly looked at Draco and said, “Draco, where do vanished objects go?”

Draco looked at him like he had lost his mind and said, “Into nonbeing, obviously. Or everything. Why?”

Hermione just raised her eyebrows and smirked as Lucius huffed.

Hermione had to admit that a strong contender for her favorite moment was the flight back to Malfoy Manor on Scylla. Scylla could have found her own way now that she was tied to her master’s magic, but Malfoy opted to fly with her and invited Hermione to join him. She agreed to do so and was hesitant at first — flying and heights had never really been her thing — but Scylla was so broad it required no real skill from her to stay on, and she intuitively sensed that she was as safe with Scylla as she was with Malfoy.

Hermione felt so safe, in fact, that after using her wand to modify the saddle Malfoy had conjured, she fulfilled Malfoy’s fantasy of a midair shag just as the sun was setting over Scotland. She did, however, insist that Malfoy tie her down first — for safety reasons, of course. This Malfoy did without hesitation, and he took Hermione to that special place for the third time, with nothing but open air around them. It was truly breathtaking.

When they finally arrived back at the Manor that night, it was very late. Malfoy parked Scylla near the ancient stables, which were unoccupied. He promised her he would fix up her accommodations as soon as possible, and she settled down for a rest, having had a small feast of deer en route. Malfoy then called for Tippy to take him and Hermione directly to his room, where they collapsed into bed and each other. It was only the next day, after Malfoy confirmed the Death Eaters weren’t there, that he let Hermione out to see the rest of the Manor for the first time.

The tour of Malfoy Manor competed for another one of Hermione’s favorite moments. He took her to all of his preferred haunts: the kitchens where she met the other the House Elves, the music room with an old piano that Hermione learned he could play rather well, and of course the library. Hermione felt she knew what to expect from the Malfoy library having had access to its contents for months, but she had been wrong. The doors opened to reveal a truly spectacular collection, and Hermione thought it must take up an entire wing of the Manor.

“It’s enchanted to never run out of space,” said Malfoy simply. “And many of my ancestors have collected or brought books with them when they joined my House, like my mother did.”

Hermione quickly located her favorite area — a window seat tucked away in the Transfiguration section that had lovely views over the grounds and would be a perfect place to curl up with a book.

Speaking of the grounds, Malfoy took her there too, and Hermione soon learned that the library window seat was actually her second favorite part of the Manor. The place that came out on the very top was Malfoy’s bench in his corner of the gardens, which was surrounded

by Gentle Hermione. Even though it was winter the gardens were enchanted to stay warm and bloom, and Hermione often found herself reading outdoors, in the bubble of warmth and fragrance, while snow fell overhead before melting just as it reached her.

While Hermione found refuge in the gardens and library, Malfoy made good on his promise to house Scylla more permanently, and he made modifications to the old stables between their outings. He took her out flying often, and Hermione occasionally consented to join him. Malfoy shagged her several more times in the air.

“Muggles have something similar, you know,” she said to Malfoy after returning from one of their Scylla shags. “They call it the ‘mile high club.’ It means you’ve shagged on an airplane while it’s in flight.”

Malfoy was so intrigued by this notion that he suggested they fly to Australia to find her parents instead of taking a portkey as they had originally planned. And after a moment of hesitation, Hermione thought about it and agreed, provided they portkey at least as far as some place in Asia first. Australia was bloody far away by plane.

So that led Hermione to another contender for her favorite moment: joining the mile high club while flying first class (“*obviously Granger*”) from Hong Kong after watching Draco Malfoy navigate a large, international airport for the first time.

He looked both terrified and entranced as he watched thousands of muggles looking bored or occasionally stressed as they waited for something that in their world was totally routine. It was the first time he had ever seen so many muggles in one place. It was the first time he had ever eaten muggle food. It was his first time seeing any type of muggle electronic, and he was absolutely spellbound by the concept of television. And of course it was his first time on a plane. The flight utterly fascinated him, though the pictograms showing emergency landing procedures made him turn a bit green. But all in all he couldn’t believe how large and comfortable a muggle airplane could be when compared to broomsticks, nor how fast it would go when he learned that they would be in Sydney in approximately nine hours.

Their shag in the first class loo was really just a bonus.

When Hermione finally found her parents, their reactions to what she had done to them were mixed. They were understandably angry at first and still had alarming moments of vagueness right after she reversed the charm. But after several weeks of talking about the whats and whys of it, they came to forgive Hermione. And Malfoy helped too, with hours of legilimency to find their memories of her and to bring back the things Hermione couldn’t reverse herself.

Yes, Hermione had many favorite moments during those first couple of months after the war, but she decided the thing that probably beat them all was finally completing her tattoo the day after she returned from Australia with her parents in tow. She went back to the same tattoo parlor to add the snake, the cup, and the dates of the final battle and her parents’ memory charm reversal. Hermione found it was just as satisfying as she had always imagined it would be.

There were sad moments in those months too of course. Hermione was nearly inconsolable at Professor McGonagall's funeral, and she was saddened to learn of the other members of the Order and the D.A. who had been killed before the *felix* arrived, as well as the group that was caught at the Hogshead before they could get to the Room of Requirement: both Creevy brothers, Ernie McMillan, Mundungus Fletcher, and Aberforth Dumbledore, among others. And it wasn't just Hermione's friends who had suffered. Theo Nott made it, but Pansy Parkinson did not, and Hermione was Malfoy's rock as he grieved.

The funeral for Snape was one of the hardest because the story of his role in the war hadn't fully emerged by the time he was buried, and he hadn't given much direction about his wishes in his will. "Do what you think is right," was all he wrote to Draco, who was startled to learn he was named the executor of Snape's estate. Snape left all of his gold to Hogwarts to establish a scholarship for needy muggleborns and most of his other personal items to Draco, though Lily's potions books were set aside for Harry. After much debate, Harry suggested burying Snape in the Godric's Hollow cemetery to be close to Lily, so that's what they did. The funeral was small, with just Hermione, the Malfoys, Lupin and Tonks, and a few Weasleys in attendance, along with Harry Potter of course.

But as the dead were buried and the healing began, Hermione found that the good moments outweighed the bad. Hermione was also relieved and a little surprised to find that her feelings for Malfoy and his for her didn't dull at all once they were no longer facing mortal danger together. She had known the war made them fall for each other fast, and she had always wondered if their feelings would be less intense once they finally had their whole lives ahead of them. But they weren't diminished at all. If anything, Malfoy seemed to be making up for lost time as he publicly dated her and spoiled her and showed the world that he was completely wrapped up in her.

Rita Skeeter was having a field day with it.

"Well I think you should just put her in a jar again," said Ginny a couple months after the final battle, as the confounded muggle hairdresser pinned her hair up. "She's horrendous."

"We really do need to find a solution my dear," said Narcissa.

"Agreed, she's getting out of hand," said Andromeda.

"Is she just rude about Hermione or is she rude about Draco too?" asked Mary, Hermione's mother, as she frowned at the witches in the mirror.

"Mostly Hermione," said Ginny. "She thinks Malfoy's handsome. She keeps calling him an eligible bachelor, even though he's not."

"Well he is handsome," acknowledged Mary, as Narcissa gave her a small smile.

"Malfoy has a theory that if we snog in front of her at every opportunity then eventually she'll give up," said Hermione.

"That explains it," said Andromeda with amusement, "though I suspect it fuels her fire."

Hermione shrugged, but grinned. “I don’t care about Rita Skeeter, but the hate mail was a challenge at first. The Manor has pretty good wards to screen for it now. I swear, Malfoy is so creative when it comes to protective wards it’s a bit scary. I didn’t even know you *could* screen for mail using wards.”

“It’s the dragon in him,” said Narcissa as her eyes twinkled. “He will always try to protect you dear.”

“There you go!” said Hermione’s hairdresser a bit vaguely. “What do you think, love?”

Hermione stared at herself in the mirror and a slow smile started as she looked at the curls that were piled on top of her head, with just a few stray tendrils down her neck. The makeup artist Narcissa had hired had already finished as well, and Hermione’s hazel eyes popped with smokey shadow, and her lips were a deep pink.

Malfoy will definitely approve, she thought.

“It’s perfect,” she said.

“You’re stunning dear,” said Narcissa as her hairdresser also finished, and she gave herself a critical look in the mirror.

“Thank you for treating us Narcissa,” said Mary. “This has been lovely.”

“Well I had no notion that muggle methods would be so enjoyable,” said Narcissa. “This is the most fun I’ve had in years. Magic is awfully quick, but I’m quite taken with the pampering that comes when you do it the muggle way. I rather think I will make this a regular thing.”

Everyone laughed as they rose.

“You’re father and I will meet you there tonight Hermione,” said Mary, giving her daughter a kiss before bidding farewell to the others.

“Me too,” said Ginny. “Andromeda and I are going to Grimmauld first to meet up with Harry, Remus, and Tonks. Teddy has a nursery there.”

Hermione nodded at this and gave her friend a hug.

“Narcissa, thank you for letting me ask Tippy to babysit tonight,” said Andromeda, as she turned to her sister. “I don’t know what we would do without her.”

“Tippy is thrilled,” said Narcissa. “She loves babies. Teddy will be in excellent hands with her.”

Andromeda gave her a swift smile, and then she and Ginny turned to leave, as Narcissa smiled at Hermione.

“Ready then dear?”

"Yes. But I want to echo my mum. Thank you for arranging this. It was really lovely."

"Hermione dear, I have waited for these experiences my entire adult life. Being surrounded by men at home and losing both of my sisters to blood politics means I'm long overdue for some witch time. We will do it again. And I meant what I said — the muggle way is quite enjoyable. I'm rather enamored with it, in fact."

"In that case we'll try a spa next time," said Hermione with a smile, as she and Narcissa headed back to the Manor.

Hermione slipped into her room to dress, pleased to see that Malfoy had listened to her and vacated it for her so she could finish getting ready alone. She pulled out her new wand — Malfoy still used the vinewood one — and canceled the notice-me-not charm over the gown in her closet before pulling out the gauzy frock. Hermione ran her hands over it. She knew it was going to make a statement, but she was the star of the show tonight, or one of them at any rate. All eyes would be on her.

She unbuttoned her blouse and slipped out of her muggle jeans and underwear as she pulled on the delicate lace that Tippy had picked up for her the previous day. The dress itself was muggle and couture. Her mother had absolutely insisted, and for once Hermione agreed it was the right time and place. Besides, she wanted to prove a point that muggle fashion could be just as good as magical.

She slipped it on and zipped it up before moving to the mirror in the dressing room that was their former potions lab. The dress fit her like a glove, the layers of sheer silver fabric nearly mesmerizing as it gathered at her bust and then dropped straight to the floor. It was both innocent and sexy, and it emphasized her petite figure. Hermione was sure she would scandalize them all with the strapless, sweetheart neckline that showed just the slightest hint of the curves of her breasts. Wizarding fashion would never be so daring. But she didn't care. The dress — as beautiful as it was — was really meant to be a backdrop for her rose necklace. She wanted her neck and shoulders bare so nothing would detract from it.

She pulled the necklace out of its case, and the familiar weight settled around her neck. Tonight would be the first time she wore it in public, and she thought it was perfect. She adjusted the rose and diamond studs in her ears as well. She took a final look at herself and smiled. She couldn't wait to see Malfoy's face.

She slipped on her heels, grabbed a small silver clutch, and took one last glance in the mirror before casting a warming charm against the February air and heading downstairs to meet Malfoy.

He was chatting with his parents in the foyer as they waited for her, and she heard the words die in his throat as he caught his first glimpse of her. Not for the first time it was like her world narrowed to include only him, and she felt herself blush at the stunned look on his face.

She carefully made her way down the stairs, and when she got to the bottom it was like Malfoy suddenly remembered where he was. He strode forward and immediately slipped his arm around her waist.

“Hermione... darling. You’re a vision. I think I forgot to breathe.”

She smiled at this as he leaned in to kiss her cheek, and then she turned to Lucius and Narcissa. Her relationship with Lucius had turned into an odd blend of warmth and prickliness. They were always trying to one-up each other. But tonight it seemed he could find no fault with her. “You look lovely, Miss Granger,” he said formally.

“Oh Hermione, you’re beautiful. I have never seen a gown like it. And that necklace...”

Hermione just smiled, thinking to herself that her dress probably wouldn’t be that unique in the muggle world. But wizarding fashion was so conservative Narcissa probably *hadn’t* ever seen anything like it.

And as for the necklace...

“Draco gave it to me several months ago.”

“Well it’s absolutely stunning. And you look perfect,” said Narcissa warmly.

“I did wonder if I would ever see it,” said Lucius with a smirk. “That necklace, I mean.”

Hermione quirked an eyebrow at him, and he just shrugged. “I get the statement of accounts from the heir’s vault. And the goblins who made it reached out to thank me too.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped as Malfoy just rolled his eyes.

“You knew,” she said. “You knew those memories I showed you during the final battle were staged didn’t you?”

They had never talked about this, but Hermione had always suspected. This practically confirmed it.

“I thought so, yes,” he said. “But I had to bide my time to help.”

“Of course,” she said with a small smile. “You had to fight like a Slytherin.”

“Naturally,” he said. “Now then, we should be going. They’ll be expecting you two soon.”

“Go on,” said Malfoy. “Granger and I will be along in a moment.”

Lucius and Narcissa nodded and headed to the floo as Malfoy pulled her aside and ran a finger down her neck and toward the edge of her dress. “You’re going to drive me mad tonight,” he said. “You’re so lovely.”

She smiled and leaned in for a kiss.

He broke away after a moment and said, “Yes, you’re almost perfect. But there’s one thing missing.”

She looked questioningly at him, and he pulled out a slim box.

"It's time to complete the set I think," he said, as he handed it to her.

Hermione opened it to find a matching bracelet.

"Draco, it's stunning of course, but it's too much."

"You say that every time, but it's not. Besides, now that Father has paid back the bank for the damage Scylla caused, the Gringotts goblins are quite keen to see you model new jewelry from their artisans in the press. I told them I would keep commissioning pieces from them, and you would keep wearing them as long as they stopped using dragons as security. I'm pleased to say, they have accepted my proposal. You will bring far more business to them than the fees they charged their clients for the dragon guards."

Then Malfoy pulled it out of the box and clasped it around her wrist. Hermione gave him an amused smile before looking at the circle of roses fondly. "Thank you," she said.

"I thought about giving it to you for Christmas, but..." he said.

"No, the memories you gave me were perfect," she said. "Truly, I can't believe you thought to do that."

He just smiled at her. True to form, Malfoy had removed the vials of memories he stored in his vault the day of the final battle and gave them to her anyway for Christmas, along with their penseive. Hermione had spent many happy hours reliving their encounters through Malfoy's eyes.

"There," he said softly, raising her hand so he could kiss it again. The diamonds glittered brilliantly, and Hermione found herself rather distracted by them. She could never see herself wearing the necklace or earrings unless she was looking in a mirror. But a bracelet was different.

"You're going to shine brighter than those diamonds tonight," he said.

She blushed at this. "Tonight is about you as well."

He just gave her a small smile and shook his head. "Ah but you see, Potter, Weasley, and I will all be in various shades of charcoal. We will just fade into the background. But you, my beautiful girl, will stand out. You're mine. I want everyone to know it."

She blushed at this, but gave him a smile, as he tucked her hand under his arm and led her toward the floo. "Shall we?"

She nodded, and he whisked her away toward the Ministry of Magic.

After an hour drinking champagne, gladhanding people whose names she couldn't remember, and posing for the press – which did not include Rita Skeeter – Hermione finally found herself on stage. She was sitting between Harry and Malfoy, who was very publicly holding her hand. Ron was on the other side of Harry, along with portraits of Dumbledore and Snape. As Malfoy had predicted, she stood out.

“And now,” said Kingsley, “I am deeply honored to present our next awards. As you may have read, the Wizengamot reviewed classified evidence from the Battle of Hogwarts from those you see on stage with me. And for the first time in history the Wizengamot agreed by unanimous vote to award the Order of Merlin, First Class to each of Ronald Weasley, Hermione Granger, Draco Malfoy, and of course Harry Potter for their critical roles in defeating Voldemort.”

An enormous cheer erupted, and Hermione felt herself grinning.

“Posthumous awards are also being presented to Albus Dumbledore and Severus Snape for their work as well.”

Another cheer rose.

“And now, before I give out these awards, I would like to make a few announcements to quell some rumors in the press.”

There was a surprised silence at this, and Hermione watched Kingsley curiously.

“First, as you all know Hogwarts has been closed for the spring term in order to repair the damage to the castle and allow students space to grieve loved ones. The teachers of Hogwarts, and especially its newest Headmaster Filius Flitwick, have been busy arranging correspondence courses for any students or former students who wished to continue their studies through the rest of the year and into the summer before classes resume again as normal on the first of September. I am exceptionally pleased to announce that Harry Potter and Ronald Weasley have both enrolled in their seventh year coursework, and they will be joining the auror department upon the completion of their studies at the end of the summer. We can’t wait to welcome them at the Ministry.”

There was a loud cheer at this news, and Hermione turned to look at Harry in surprise. She had signed up for the correspondence courses immediately of course, but Harry and Ron hadn’t told her that they did too. He just shrugged and gave her a shy grin.

“Next, I would like to announce that Draco Malfoy has consented to join the Ministry as a consultant for the auror department. He has agreed to train our aurors in legilimency and occlumency methods, which he himself has mastered. Many of you may not be aware of this, but the Wizengamot has authorized me to inform you that Mr. Malfoy is the only living person who occluded from Voldemort, Dumbledore, Bellatrix Lestrange, and Severus Snape on a regular basis during the course of the war. He also trained the others on stage with him in his methods, which were used successfully against Voldemort in the final battle. As a former auror myself, I am thrilled that our aurors will be learning this skill from the very best.”

Hermione now spun around to stare at her boyfriend as the crowd erupted again. He just smirked at her, and she beamed. She caught sight of Lucius and Narcissa in the crowd, and they both looked stunned by this news, but incredibly pleased.

“Finally, as I mentioned, Hogwarts will be reopening on the first of September, and I am pleased to confirm that Headmaster Flitwick’s efforts to recruit new teaching staff have been successful. Joining Hogwarts as the Defense Against the Dark Arts professor will be Remus Lupin, whom you saw on stage earlier tonight.”

Another cheer, as Hermione saw Remus wink at Harry.

“I was surprised but very amused to learn that Charms, which was previously taught by Professor Flitwick of course, will be taught by none other than Fred Weasley.”

There was a stunned silence at this, and then Fred yelled, “Extra credit for any new spells my brother can use in the shop!”

There was laughter at this and some catcalling, as Fred took a bow. Hermione was laughing too. The Weasley twins were famously talented in charms work, but she could only imagine the chaos Fred would bring to that class. Then again, after all the darkness from the war, some laughter wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. Hermione knew that Flitwick had always had a soft spot for the twins.

“Additionally, I’m exceptionally pleased to announce that once she has completed her seventh year coursework, Miss Hermione Granger will be taking over the post of Transfiguration Professor. Hermione, I can say without a doubt that Minerva would be thrilled to know you’re following in her footsteps.”

Hermione just blushed and looked at her hands as the cheers threatened to raise the roof. She felt Malfoy squeeze her hand wearing the bracelet, and she looked up as he brought it to his lips to kiss it, the diamonds nearly blinding under the stage lights as the flash of cameras caught the sweet gesture. She felt pride radiating from him.

“And finally, Professor Slughorn has very recently informed Professor Flitwick that he will be returning to his retirement now that the war is over. I am thrilled to tell you that Draco Malfoy is also taking over the role of Potions professor at Hogwarts, and he will be splitting his time between Hogwarts and the Ministry. Additionally, the Wizengamot has authorized me to inform you that Mr. Malfoy recently earned his potions mastery with distinction in a record six months for brewing and improving the *felix felicis* used by the fighters in the final battle. His apprenticeship was formally registered with the potions guild and supervised by Severus Snape, one of our posthumous award recipients.”

There was a stunned silence at this. Lucius and Narcissa looked gobsmacked, and even Hermione was staring at her boyfriend in amazement. He hadn’t told her he had apprenticed with Snape, but now his insistence that he do the *felix* all by himself made sense. It was his mastery potion. And he had even earned a distinction by making it even better. She beamed at him.

Kingsley allowed himself to smirk at the amazed looks from the crowd. “Yes, for those of you who took *felix felicis* in the final battle like I did... well, Ron here told us that Hermione brewed it because he didn’t think we’d actually drink it if we knew the truth at the time.”

There was laughter at this as Ron’s ears turned red, and Hermione saw that even Malfoy was chuckling.

“But it’s time you learned the truth,” continued Shacklebolt, now smiling. “So please help me welcome Mr. Malfoy and all our new teachers who will be joining Hogwarts on the first of September!”

Again Hermione looked at Malfoy as the noise from the crowd washed over her, and he just grinned. “I can’t have you spending the entire week at Hogwarts without me,” he said under his breath.

“You know Flitwick said I could live at the Manor and floo in each day,” she muttered, but she was smiling broadly.

“So?” said Malfoy, “I never got to shag you at Hogwarts. That’s a major oversight I intend to correct.”

Hermione felt a giggle erupt as Kingsley finished with, “And now for the presentation of the awards!”

Hermione moved as if in a dream to accept her Order of Merlin, First Class before a band took over the stage and dancing began.

“We’re so proud of you both,” said Mary, as she came up to Hermione and Malfoy and hugged them. “And Hermione.... You’re stunning.”

Hermione gave her mum a smile, and they moved to talk to Molly Weasley for a bit while Malfoy chatted with her father.

Two more glasses of champagne and several dances later, Malfoy leaned down and whispered, “Let’s get out of here, beautiful. I want some time for our personal celebration.”

Hermione smiled at this, and she and Malfoy slipped away and back to the Manor, where he pulled her in for a kiss.

“There’s something I want to do before we celebrate,” he said. “Come with me.”

She looked at him questioningly, but he grabbed her hand and led her through the ballroom, out onto the terrace and through the garden until they reached a low slung marble building.

“Come on,” said Malfoy quietly as he lit the vinewood wand to shine light on what Hermione now recognized was a mausoleum. “This way.”

He led her down a row of markers until he reached one that read *Rose Atwater*.

"It's time for us to return this," he said as he reached into his pocket and pulled out the pendant he had once given her. "Tippy can always apparate you into my room if we want to sleep there."

Hermione said nothing but just watched as he used his signet ring to open a cavity in the ledge below Rose's tomb. He gently placed the necklace back in and then closed it again, as he brushed a hand over her name.

"That day of the final battle," he said softly, "I thought I watched you die. And I understood Septimus. I understood his pain."

Hermione looked at him. They had never really talked about this, but perhaps it was time.

"I think..." she said slowly, as he looked at her, "I think I bound myself to Harry only — that part of him that was separate from Voldemort. When he took that killing curse it fulfilled the exchange, even though it was Voldemort's soul that was hit and not Harry's."

"You mean..." he said with a suddenly hopeful look.

"I mean the bond broke. Or part of it anyway. I felt it happen. It made me pass out for a bit, but it didn't kill me. I think it would have if Harry hadn't been a horcrux. In an odd way, that saved my life."

At this he broke into a brilliant smile as he pulled him to her.

"Thank Salazar. I've been so worried that you might still be tied to Potter."

Hermione pulled back and looked at him. "Well we are still tied together, in a way...."

He looked alarmed, and she hurried to add, "But not like that! I don't think our lives are tied together anymore."

"How then?" he asked curiously.

Hermione gave him a small smile. "Well you know I used the sibling version of that spell. It really shouldn't have worked, but I think.... Well, I blame the vinewood wand, really. I've always had a tendency to overdo it a bit when I'm in a crisis, and after the things I learned about wands... I'm pretty sure it got a little overexcited too and channeled my power more strongly than I intended. It forged a sibling bond with Harry at the same time I performed the spell to save his life. So Harry is my brother literally, not just metaphorically."

He gave her an interested look. "So what does that mean exactly?"

Hermione couldn't help but smirk. "Let's just say that when Harry finally went to Gringotts for the first time in more than two years, the goblin who helped him gave him an extra key to the Potter vault for his sister Hermione Granger."

Malfoy looked stunned for a minute and then burst out laughing, as he started to lead her out of the mausoleum.

“Are you telling me you’ve been part of an old pureblood House all this time, love?”

Hermione smiled and shrugged. “You tell me. What does it mean to be a pureblood really? Besides, I thought the House of Potter was considered half-blood in Harry’s generation. Lily was muggleborn.”

He grinned, pulling her slowly through the gardens. “Have you exercised your rights then? Taken anything out of the Potter vault?”

Hermione smiled as she let him lead her toward a familiar spot. “Well now that you mention it, I did go there with Harry a couple days ago to look at everything. I won’t be taking any of Harry’s gold, obviously. But James had quite a few rare books on Transfiguration that I took. He was an illegal animagus you know. He figured it out when he was fifteen. I think he must have bought every book he could find on the subject. I think I might try it too. For a mastery, I mean. I can’t be the only professor at Hogwarts without a mastery.”

He smiled softly at this. “You won’t be the only one there without a mastery. Fred Weasley isn’t the master of anything except chaos.”

“Actually, Flitwick let Fred take his NEWTs since he practically finished seventh year before quitting school. He’s going to have a Charms mastery by the time term starts next year. He’s registering the portable swamp spell that he invented. Flitwick agreed to apprentice him, just to make it official.”

Malfoy chuckled. “Fair enough. Then you can train to be an animagus. I’m sure we can find somebody with a Transfiguration mastery to submit the paperwork for you. It’s not like you’re going to need any help from them to do it. I’m sure you’ll be able to figure it out from the books you found in Potter’s vault.”

By now he had led her to his bench, and as they stepped into that part of the garden, Hermione gasped. Dozens of candles lit the night, and she saw a blanket on the ground with a champagne bucket and a platter of snacks and champagne flutes for them. It was as though it appeared from thin air.

“Draco!” she said, looking around in delight. “It’s lovely!”

“Well we have a lot to celebrate,” he said. “Two Orders of Merlin First Class and new jobs at Hogwarts next year.” Then his eyes turned serious. “And hopefully something else too.”

Hermione’s heart started to thud as he traced the bracelet he had given her earlier that night. “You know, I said this bracelet completed the set, but I was wrong. There’s one more piece you don’t have.”

She inhaled as he lowered himself to one knee.

“I love you more than this world Hermione. And I know we’re young, but I’m certain of this. Please. Will you marry me darling?”

Hermione couldn't speak, she just nodded as she sank down onto her knees too. He beamed as he pulled out a ring with a large diamond in the center, the band covered in tiny diamonds too. As Hermione studied it, she realized that each diamond on the band was really the center of a minuscule Tudor rose etched into the metal. They were almost invisible unless you knew to look for them.

"It's... it's..." she was speechless. She just let him put it on her finger, and the ring magically sized itself to her.

"This ring is why we finished the *felix*, you know," he said quietly, as he raised her hand to kiss it. "It helped win the war for us."

"What do you mean?" she asked breathlessly.

"The goblin gold dust. Snape and I couldn't find it in any of the shops, and none of the dealers could find it for us either. We were getting desperate, because it was the last magical ingredient we needed, and we both thought we weren't going to find it in time, and the potion would be ruined at the very last step. Potter suggested I go back to the goblins who made your earrings and necklace, to see if they would break their own law and sell it to me. So I did, and I told them the truth. I told them the jewelry I had been commissioning was for you, and if they would sell me gold dust I would do my damnedest to help Potter win the war so I could marry you. I commissioned the ring that day."

"You didn't," she breathed.

"I did," he said. "I was going to do it right after the war ended, but there's only one potion that takes goblin gold dust and that's..."

"*Felix felicis*," she said softly.

Malfoy nodded. "They thought I was brewing it for the Dark Lord, and they weren't going to sell it to me until I proved to them that it was really for you."

"And how did you do that?" she asked softly.

He shrugged. "The vinewood wand. And your rose necklace. I brought both in so they could inspect them. You know goblin metal imbibes that which strengthens it. You've done a little magic while wearing the necklace, and it absorbed your magical signature. They traced your signature on the necklace and matched it with the signature in the wand. Your wand used to be registered in your name before I reregistered it in mine. So they knew I was telling them the truth. The jewelry was yours, and I wanted to marry you. They agreed to sell me the gold dust and throw the war for us if I commissioned another piece from them that day. I thought about doing the bracelet so I could give it to you before the final battle, but I decided to do the ring instead. I just... I wanted to have faith that we would win, and you would wear it someday."

Hermione smiled broadly at this, and then she launched herself onto him, kissing him frantically.

He laughed as he pulled her to him, and they rolled back onto the blanket together.

“Darling we’re going to ruin your dress,” he said, chuckling.

“I don’t care. I love you too much to care.”

He smiled into her lips as she kissed him hard, her fingers scrambling to loosen his tie and unbutton his shirt.

“Will anybody see...” she gasped between frantic kisses.

“No,” he said, sounding just as eager. “I put up notice-me-nots.”

Satisfied that as usual Malfoy had thought of everything, Hermione pushed his shirt open, and he sat up to yank it off his shoulders. Then he leaned back as she stood up to unzip her dress.

He just watched, his eyes heating with that familiar fire as she slowly pulled the zipper down and then let go to let the fabric slide off of her breasts, down her hips, and to the ground. She hadn’t needed a bra so she was left with just the scrap of lace that comprised her underwear and her heels, along with the fortune of jewelry she was wearing.

Malfoy was still sitting on the blanket, and he opened his pants and started stroking himself as he just watched her raise the hand with the bracelet and ring to her neck and trace a path down her own body, squeezing each breast for him before moving her hand across her stomach that was no longer scarred, thanks to the curse breaker Malfoy insisted she visit as soon as the battle was over.

His breathing was shallow as he still said nothing, but just watched her as though he was mesmerized. She remembered what he once told her: that seeing her wear nothing but the things he had gotten for her was a fantasy for him. She wanted him to see that it fulfilled a fantasy for her too.

“Tell me what you want,” she said.

“Turn for me. Slowly,” he said, and so she did, the candlelight making her skin glow. When she turned her back to him she heard him inhale at the tiny lace that was nothing but a string.

She heard a rustle and suddenly realized he had stood up and was behind her, pressing himself into her back and pulling her to him as his hands skated along her body and up toward her breasts.

“I want you wet for me,” he whispered in her ear. “So fucking wet.”

As usual, his words made her melt against him, as he took control. She felt him slowly pull the lacy knickers down and then settle in behind her as he started to suckle her neck.

“Show me darling,” he said between kisses “Are you a good girl?” and he grabbed her hand and guided her fingers to herself for a swipe before he released her neck and pulled her hand up so he could see.

"Perfect," he said, as he slipped her fingers into his mouth and licked her off. Hermione felt herself shudder.

"Mmmm, you like that," he said, as he moved her hand down to do it again. "I *could* eat you out like this – your fingers and my mouth."

Hermione felt her breathing getting heavy at this suggestion.

"But I think I want a real taste," he said as this time he guided her hands to her breasts.

"Play with those pretty tits, darling, I'll be right back."

Hermione looked around in confusion for just a moment as she felt his warmth leave her, but a moment later he had returned, and this time he was kneeling in front of her again.

"Legs apart for me good girl, I want you to fuck my face."

Hermione gasped as he went all in on her, and before she knew it she was holding herself up using his shoulders as support.

"I... I can't..." she said.

Malfoy broke away for just a moment. "You need to stay standing for me, beautiful or I'm going to stop."

"No, don't stop," she gasped, but he just chuckled as he went back to work on her. Hermione felt her knees giving out as she got closer and closer, and then finally she broke and started to sink down to the ground.

Malfoy moved more quickly than she could have believed possible, as he maneuvered himself underneath her and caught her in his lap. She sank down directly onto his cock, and she had only the briefest time to think that he had really incredible aim before he was thrusting up into her, and she was clinging onto him as she felt herself shake.

He grabbed her arms to unwrap her from him.

"Lay back," he whispered. "Let me see all of you."

So she did. She would always do as he said, but only during sex. He was openly besotted with her, and she had all the power to direct him in everything else if she wanted to, but in *this...* He was in charge, and she loved it more than anything.

She laid back on the blanket for him and presented herself, making Malfoy groan. He lifted her hips to raise them just a bit as he sat back on his knees so he could get a clear view. When he buried himself into her, her eyes rolled back in her head. Something about this angle was utter perfection for both of them. He gave her that deep penetration she craved, and she gave him the sight of her shattering before him.

"Fuck, you're so beautiful," he whispered as he started to pick up the pace. "And your tits... fuck me, those tits..."

Sure enough, Hermione felt them bouncing to his rhythm as he pounded her, and instinctively she reached up to grab them.

“Yes, just like that,” he gasped as he watched her.

Hermione gripped and tugged and rolled her fingers to give him the show she knew he wanted.

“Come. Now. I have to see you come,” he said, and then shifted the angle ever so slightly, and he hit that magic spot ever so deep inside of her.

Hermione moaned and threw her hands out to catch herself as he did it again and again.

“I’m gonna... I’m gonna...” she gasped.

“Go darling, take what you need from me,” he said, and something about his words made Hermione lose control. She felt her hips snap and rub into him, desperate to hold pressure on that magical spot, and she ground into him hard until finally....

Bliss. Sheer bliss as she snapped in two, and Malfoy did the same.

He gently lowered her hips back onto the blanket, and she waved her hand in the air to make the mess disappear, before it dropped back to her side with a soft flump.

He chuckled and laid down next to her, propping his head up on his elbow and grabbing her left hand to study it.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” she said a little dreamily, as she looked at the ring.

“Not as beautiful as you are,” he said simply.

She smiled at this as she nestled in and then grabbed her wand to conjure another blanket and pillows.

“We’re going to do this, Draco,” she said softly. “We’re going to get married and make babies and be that ridiculously happy couple at Hogwarts that makes everybody around them jealous.”

“We are, darling. And I can’t think of anything I want more than that for the rest of my life,” he said. “Not a single thing.”

It was only as she laid with Malfoy and started to fall asleep that Hermione realized what this meant to her. *This* was the best moment since the battle was won. This one beat them all.

Chapter End Notes

For those of you who want to read about Draco and Hermione working together at Hogwarts as the Potions master and Transfiguration professor, check out my fic “Interhouse Unity.”

It is much fluffier than this one (it will rot your teeth it’s so sweet), and it isn’t really a sequel — but I loved the idea of them working together at Hogwarts so much that I couldn’t help myself. It’s another 150k+ word story of pure self-indulgence, and it is complete.

Thank you again for giving The Vinewood Wand a try! It took me twenty years to put it down on paper, but this has been my head canon since Book 7 came out.

Works inspired by this one

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