

Closer

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Closer

by [itsjustsilver](#)

Summary

There is something wrong with Hermione.

Dramione non-con

a/b/o

AU- no Voldemort.

Draco Malfoy is much older than Hermione in this fic.

Alpha Draco, Omega Hermione.

Dark story. No underage sex. Will update tags as I go along.

Please heed the tags!

*** Do not plagiarise. ***

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

9 jul 2024

The library's become somewhat of a zoo. The Bulgarian Quidditch player, the one everyone's obsessing about, is in there all the time, and he seems to have inspired a good part of the Hogwarts population to hitting the books with him; hordes of students, most of whom I don't think ever stepped one foot in the library before his arrival, have decided that it's now the place to be seen.

I really don't want to go, but I'm missing some information on the properties of dragon liver which I need in order to finish my Potions essay. It's due in a week, and I don't like to leave things to the last minute.

The Quidditch player- I forget his name, stands and heads out of the Great Hall. He's immediately followed by a swarm of people.

I down my drink and hurriedly prepare to leave also. It looks like he and his fans are heading outside, and if I'm fast, I can be in and out of the library in an hour and evade all of them.

"Where are you *going*?" someone asks, yanking on my arm.

I look down at Parvati. "To the library," I reply. "I need to research something for the Potions essay."

"Which essay? The one we were given just this afternoon?" She groans. "Hermione, no one's in the mood to study right now."

That's not true. I'm in the mood.

"Speaking of moods, she's ruining the one here," Ron says unkindly. "Just let her leave."

Lavender chuckles. But she chuckles at everything Ron says, so I don't take offence.

Harry, playing with a snitch he likely stole, looks wistfully in the direction the famous player has disappeared. "If I could just go to the library, read a book, and become amazing at Quidditch, I'd be there all the time," he mutters. "Wait a minute! Is *that* why Krum's always in the library?"

"No!" I say hastily, alarmed by the significant glances he's now exchanging with Ron and Neville. That's the absolute last thing I need- more noisy Quidditch fans in the library. "No

way,” I firmly tell them. “He’s just looking up spells to help him in the tasks. I saw him reading a book on orbital theories yesterday.”

I didn’t, but I figure it’ll turn them off to the idea of coming to the library with me.

And it works: They’re grimacing with disgust. Smiling to myself, I leave.

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The library is finally quiet.

Some OWLs and NEWTs students are occupying the study tables in the heart of the Potions section, and I stay a respectful distance from them, scouring the shelves as unobtrusively as I can. I’m looking for recently published books, ones that take into account Professor Dumbledore’s discourse on the twelve uses of dragon blood.

Finding a promising title, I pull it out:

[Regulating Hormone Imbalance in Mid-Weight Dragons]

“Liver,” I whisper into the spine, and the number ‘56’ appears engraved into it for an instant before disappearing. 56 mentions of liver in this book. Promising indeed. I flip to the first glowing page.

“May I haff a vord with you?”

I jump, accidentally dropping the book.

It’s the famous Quidditch player who’s snuck up behind me. Alone, too, and looking as though he’s just shed a disillusionment charm. He’s still semi-transparent around the edges.

“I am sorry if I haff scared you,” he apologises. He has a very thick accent. I’m not sure if I’m hearing everything he’s saying correctly.

I glare at him suspiciously, looking over his shoulder for signs of his followers of which there are none. He must have finally got sick of them and taken to walking around invisible. I don’t blame him.

“How can I help you?” I whisper.

“I am Viktor.” He offers me his hand to shake.

I take it, still peering around him. “I’m Hermione. You’re not supposed to be invisible in Hogwarts, you know.”

I know he's not technically a student here, and while I do sympathise with his situation, it's forbidden for a reason, and no one should be exempt from the rules.

"I'm sorry if I haff scared you," he says again. "I hope I am not offending you by being so direct, but I vont to know how you are managing to be hiding."

"Hiding?" I ask, frowning up at him. He's frowning also, but then he always looks like he's frowning. "I'm not hiding. I'm just being quiet. This is a library."

His face gets even frownier. "No," he insists. "You are hiding vot you *are*."

I jerk back. "If you mean hiding the fact that I'm a muggle-born," I snap quietly, "you should know that we don't generally have a sign on our forehead declaring us as such. Now if you'll excuse me." I bend to pick up the fallen book, hoping I've made it clear that I want to be left alone.

But when I unbend, he's still standing in front of me, and looking dumbstruck.

Maybe it's the first time someone's stood up to him, but if he thinks he can do wonky faints and get away with being a prick, it's time he learns otherwise.

"This is a library," I repeat pointedly.

His eyes widen. "You *don't* know..." he mutters.

I resent being told that I don't know something even if I don't know what the something I apparently don't know is, so I glare at him while debating whether to demand an apology or just walk away, until a smile breaks out across his face, erasing his inbuilt frown.

"Vot I mean," he clarifies, "is that you are a beautiful girl. A very beautiful girl. That is vot I mean. How are you hiding your... true beauty from others, that is vot I was asking you."

"Er, okay," I mutter blushing straightaway. My eyes flit around. Is this a prank? Or is he really trying it on me?

"Hermione," he says, voice deepening, "I think you are the most beautiful girl here in Hogwarts."

Oh.

His voice makes something uncurl in my belly. He takes a step forward. I feel rooted to the spot.

"You vill go with me to the Yule Ball next week," he says in an even deeper, lower voice. His eyes lock to mine. "Yes? Say yes."

I nod dumbly. "Y-yes."

"Good." His voice returns to normal. He grins and winks at me. "See you soon, Hermione."

I stay standing in the same spot for a while after he leaves before remembering what I'm supposed to be doing. I look at my book.

"Liver."

The pages glow.

-

The Yule Ball is tomorrow.

I know, because I've been counting down the days in nervous anticipation. Along with everyone else. Ron finally asked Lavender to go with him, but seeing as he only asked her last night after rumours that he had been publicly rejected by the Beauxbatons Champion, I'm not sure she should be as happy as she is.

Nobody has asked me if I have a date, and I haven't told anyone. Sometimes it feels like a dream, or a big joke, but every time I think about it, Viktor's voice resounds in my head – *You'll go with me to the Yule Ball next week, yes?* – and that voice silences all doubts.

So, I bought a dress; a very expensive dress, because I had to have it custom-made at the last minute. It's a dark pink, my favourite colour.

There's a tapping on the window. An owl looks balefully in at us, feathers white against the sky.

One of the boys- Neville, goes to open it and let in the owl. He takes the letter.

"It's for Hermione," he says, walking over to hand it to me.

All the girls turns to stare. "Who's sent you a letter at *night*?" asks Lavender interestedly.

I shrug and put down my quill. "Thanks, Neville," I say, ripping the envelope open.

Parvati reads aloud over my shoulder: "Wear your hair up tomorrow," she squeaks breathlessly. "Who's V?"

"No one," I say, but that just makes it worse. Lavender leans over and snatches the slip of paper from my hands. She shrieks excitedly. "Who's V, Hermione?"

-

I'm so proud and happy, I think. I'm walking into the Great Hall on the arm of the most famous Quidditch player in the world. I'm busy trying not to trip, and I'm smiling nervously at no one and nothing in particular.

Viktor's prouder, smugger, and looking like he's the one showing me off. Like he's seen something in me no one else has. And I want to believe that- that finally, after all my struggle to belong to this world, someone has noticed me for me and not for the fact that I'm a muggleborn; but he has this mischievous grin on his face that kind of makes me nervous.

We descend the stairs.

"I like your hair," he says to me. It's piled up on the top of my head in smooth curls that took hours to achieve.

"Thanks," I say. I look at him. We kind of match; his hair is a little curly at the top, like a masculine version of my hairstyle. He's in burgundy and has a fur cape draped around one shoulder. I wouldn't have thought him my type, but he asked me, and here we are. He's good-looking, I guess, in a rugged kind of way.

We walk past a rank of silent students. Some of them look terribly displeased- his fan club, especially, and Venusa Lockhart's face is thunderous. I heard that Viktor had first asked her to be his partner before changing his mind and not even telling her until yesterday. That doesn't sound very nice of him, so I hope it's not true.

I'm about to ask Viktor about it when he says, "You should wear your hair up all the time and show off your lovely neck."

He brushes my neck with a finger.

Several girls around us burst into giggles. I hear an intake of breath and a whisper from someone nearby that sounds like: 'No way'.

Is it that unbelievable that a famous Quidditch keeper has me for a date? I guess so. I can hardly believe it myself.

Viktor steers me towards the other champions all already waiting in the middle of the Great Hall, right in front of the row of professors and ministry officials.

None of them look very happy. Professor Karkaroff seems to be placating the Minister of Magic. "I can assure you that there is no intent..." I hear him say, before the music begins and we are swept into the first waltz.

"What's happening there, you think?" I ask Viktor as we go through the motions.

Viktor laughs a full-throated laugh and spins me. "They're not very happy with me," he says happily.

"What did you do?" I ask. He'd probably been caught prowling around invisible. I did warn him. Although, I don't think that kind of infraction would involve the Minister of Magic. Whatever he did had to have been really out of line.

He appears to think for a moment, and then says, “They think I stole something valuable.”

I spot Lavender and Ron amongst the blur of staring faces. Lavender is whispering in his ear.

Viktor spins me again, and when we come back to each other, I rest my hand on his arm. “Don’t joke about such things,” I scold lightheartedly. “You didn’t actually steal anything, did you?”

“Finders keepers,” he says cryptically, wearing a wide smile. He looks a lot less moody when he smiles.

“Ha ha,” I say. “Very funny. I know you play keeper and all, but I highly doubt that sort of childish excuse will hold up in court.”

He shoots me an astonished look. “I’m a seeker, Hermione.”

I wave a hand. “Seeker, finder, stealer, however you want to call it...”

“No. What? No! I play Seeker. In Quidditch.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I apologise. I may not care for the game, but I’m sure it’s important to him, and it’s embarrassing to have got it wrong.

The tempo of the waltz is slowing. “Well, what do they think you stole?” I humour him by asking.

While he’s thinking about it- inventing a lie, probably, the song comes to an end. We have to separate and bow to each other.

As the first smatterings of applause begins, he puts his thumb in his mouth, sucks on it, and then reaching out, his arm bridging the space between us, he rubs his wet thumb along my collarbone.

“You,” he grins.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

9jul2024

Gasps intersperse with the clapping.

“What are you doing?” I hiss. I’m trying not to look or sound too obviously alarmed; there are people watching; but I’m confused and not a little angry. I really want to wipe at my collarbone, but I don’t want to touch his spit.

Viktor is smirking down at me, looking much more like a naughty schoolboy than an internationally renowned sportsman.

Professor McGonagall comes to my rescue. She’s followed by Professor Karkaroff.

“Mr. Krum, Ms. Granger,” Professor McGonagall interrupts, “If I may have a word.”

Viktor doesn’t look surprised by the intrusion. “Off course,” he says, giving me his arm.

We leave the dance floor.

Professor Karkaroff is jabbering at Viktor in their own language. He sounds angry. Viktor replies to him in short grunts.

I can feel where he’s wiped his thumb on me, I can *feel* it.

When we turn into a long and empty corridor, I begin to scratch my collarbone, attempting to use the sleeve of my dress to wipe at it.

Professor McGonagall pushes open the door to one of the classrooms along the corridor. There are already a number of people waiting in there. The Minister of Magic’s one of them. So is Madam Pomfrey, who is chatting with an old wizard wearing the insignia of a Healer.

“My dear,” cries Minister Fudge as soon as he sees us. “What are you playing at? It’s illegal not to register, you know.”

I look at Viktor. Does this have to do with him being invisible in school?

“Just a minute, Minister,” says Professor McGonagall. “As upset as I am that Miss Granger has chosen to out herself in such a public fashion, the law clearly intends for the parents of the child to do the registering, not the child herself.”

"Well? Where are the girl's parents then?" demands a tall official in bright yellow robes.
"Who are they?"

"I'm a muggle-born," I say. "But what do you mean? Register for what?"

No one hears me. They're talking amongst themselves as though I'm not there. Viktor's still arguing with his headmaster.

"I believe the girl is a muggle born," injects Percy Weasley eagerly. He's a recent graduate and aide to the Minister. "She's one of my brother Ron's close friends."

"A muggle-born? That can't be. Are you sure?" someone asks.

"I... Well, I couldn't swear to it, but..."

"I'm a muggle-born," I confirm, to looks of confusion.

Viktor returns to butt into the circle of confused ministry officials that's formed around me. Ignoring their glares and exclamations, he sweeps me against his chest. His cape covers my shoulders.

Somebody clucks their tongue disapprovingly, but no one makes a move to separate us, not even Professor McGonagall whom I know can't stand seeing students behaving inappropriately.

Embarrassed and angry and dying inside, I blush and wriggle away, but Viktor raps on the hollow of my collarbone. "Stop it," he growls.

Surprised, I stop moving.

"She's not for you," someone calls out. "You can't just—"

Minister Fudge raises a mollifying hand, silencing the indignant voice, then crosses his arms and scowls at us. "We don't want an international incident, Mr. Krum. When you signed the Triwizard Contract you were made aware that you have to abide by the laws of this country."

I've had it. "I don't think there's any law prohibiting people from dancing with whomever they please," I say. "Even muggleborns."

Viktor pushes a finger in the hollow of my collarbone again. "Quiet."

I quiet. I can feel my pulse against his finger. It's strangely calming. He adjusts his cape and I turn my face into its warm fur lining to breathe in the smell.

More sounds of indignation break out.

"She doesn't know vot this is about," growls Viktor. "Stop scaring her."

"Viktor was just having his fun," Professor Karkaroff joins in. "He's already committed to another back home."

"That was fun at our expense," another ministry official grumbles. "He's marked her. Healer Hewett, perhaps you'll want to examine her to make sure there will be no long-lasting effects..."

Viktor adjusts his cape around me. I want to burrow into the soft fleecy warmth and never emerge.

"I don't want you to scare her."

I'm not scared. I'm confused. "What do you mean marked?" I mumble questioningly into the fur.

"Nothing to worry," says Viktor. He pets my hair to more sounds of outrage. "They're just being dramatic, your officials. I didn't mark you. It's just like a little lick. It's nothing permanent."

"All right, Mr. Krum," says the Minister, "we'll need assurances from you, obviously. Let's continue discussions while we have her inspected by the Healers."

"Hermione," says Viktor, drawing me out. "Go with your ministry Healers. I'll come get you later and then we can go back to the party." He pauses. He looks guilty. "I'm sorry," he says. "I didn't think about how it would be for you. I'll see you later and we'll go and have fun and forget about this."

I nod and follow the healers out.

There's something wrong with me. *There's something wrong.*

"What do you smell?" asks a Healer in blue. She holds up a little cup with white potion in it.

I smell nothing and tell her so.

It's not the right answer and her wand confirms it; the light it's emitting remains a neutral blue. It's been blue for the past five minutes.

"What is 'nothing'? Describe for me please."

The absence of smell- nothing. I smell nothing at all.

"What do you smell?" Another cup. Another potion, odourless.

The healer is piqued. "Please don't lie to us, Ms. Granger," she says. "It makes our job much more difficult."

“Granger wouldn’t lie,” says Madam Pomfrey, looking at me kindly. She takes another cup of potion. She reads the label. “Here. Try this. Does it smell good? Bad?”

I want to cry. “What am I supposed to be smelling?” I ask bravely. I’m afraid to ask the question I really want to ask: *What’s wrong with me?*

There must be something wrong with me, right?

“Hmm, it’s hard to say,” says the older wizard, the one named Hewett. “Are you on any potions, Ms. Granger?”

“No, nothing...”

They confer amongst themselves while I sit miserably in a pink cloud of tulle on the observation platform hovering above the ground.

“Perhaps we can bring Mr. Krum in, and see if...”

“If it’s possible. My feeling is they won’t allow them in the same room anymore. They won’t take their chances...”

Madam Pomfrey looks back at me. Her wand swishes upwards and silence, heavy and instant, descends like a veil between us. I can no longer hear what they’re saying.

“I need Viktor,” I say loudly. I don’t, not really, but irrational fear is spiking in me and right now I feel that he’s my only ally in the whole world.

They don’t hear me.

I slide off the platform. “I need Viktor. I’m going to go find him.”

The muting spell is lifted.

“Please remain seated,” says the wizened Healer Hewett. “We’re not done carrying out tests.”

“I didn’t agree to these tests. Where’s Professor McGonagall? Where’s the Headmaster? Where’s *Viktor*?”

“Sit down, Granger,” orders Madam Pomfrey. “Healer Moore will fetch your Head of House.”

The Healer in blue slips out.

“I’ll check your throat,” says Healer Hewett, approaching me and gesturing to his own throat. “Chin up please.”

I lift my chin. He pokes and prods at my throat, my collarbone, and the space between neck and shoulder. “Does this hurt? Any tenderness? And here? What about here?”

No, no, no.

But there's a strange sensation in the place where Viktor had rubbed his spit into, and it's not one I can accurately describe. I want to wash it out with soap and water.

Healer Moore returns with Professor McGonagall and a large burgundy shearling-lined cape hanging over one arm. "Krum can't be here right now, but he says he'll try and visit you later," he reports. The cape is deposited into my lap. "He gave you this."

I thank him and draw it over myself like a blanket. It's long and heavy and comforting.

The other healer watches me snuggle into the cape. "Let's try this," he suggests. "Forget the potions. Why don't you tell us what Krum's cape smells like. Does it smell nice?"

"Oh, yes, I guess. I don't know. I mean yes, it smells... it smells nice."

The wand-light is flickering green.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

10 jul 2024

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

One boring week at St Mungo's later, I come back to the news that Viktor Krum had withdrawn from the Triwizard Tournament and returned to Bulgaria. It leaves me with a weird feeling I can't even begin to unravel. Did I get him in trouble? Did *he* get me in trouble? Are we friends? Were we dating? Should I feel betrayed?

"A Triwizard tournament with only two champions isn't as exciting, is it?" Lavender says, distracting me from my jumbled thoughts. We're seated in the stands above the lake, looking at the sky reflected against its calm surface and listening glumly as Bagman reports what the remaining champions are doing underwater.

"Certainly not now that the most exciting champion's taken off," says Rohesia. She's a Prewett, and a Ravenclaw, but she spends a lot of time with her Weasley cousins.

Ron agrees. "This is all your fault, Hermione," he complains, turning around to give me an unhappy look.

I roll my eyes at him. "How is it my fault, Ronniekins?" He hates when anyone calls him that, so it gives me great pleasure to see him wince.

Rohesia kicks him. "She's right. Be nicer to her, Ronniekins. What if you're chosen to marry her?"

Bagman chooses that exact moment to announce Cedric's success at retrieving his hostage.

"*What?!*" Ron and Lavender and I exclaim all at once.

The outburst attracts attention. Neighbouring Hufflepuffs shoot us angry glares, and we all hastily rise with the crowd to clap and cheer.

"What's going on here, children?" The Weasley twins have joined us. They're wearing black and yellow scarves.

"Ron thinks he'll get to marry Hermione," Rohesia offers, struggling to get her voice heard over the crowd's hollering and hooting.

Ron's spluttering silently. His ears are turning redder by the second.

The twins chortle. “Ickle Ronnikins hopes he’ll present?”

“Why would he *get* me?” I cry.

Fred laughs. “No need to be rude, Hermione. We all know you’re pining for Krum, of course, but-”

“Aren’t we all?” says his twin mournfully.

“-there’s already a long list. Ron could very well-”

“Weasley’ll have to off quite a lot of people,” a new voice cuts smoothly in. We look at the newcomer, Avery Gaunt, a dark haired Slytherin sixth year boy, who had clearly been passing through and overheard our conversation.

Fred and George wear identical expressions of distaste. “And you know that how? Been looking at the list yourself?” Fred asks.

“Probably already figured out how many people *he* has to off. *If* he even presents,” said George.

Avery sneers. “I’d pass. Maybe the Weasleys don’t mind but Gaunts only marry pure-bloods.”

Everyone laughs jeeringly at that, even Lavender. Even the listening Hufflepuffs. I’m way too confused to be offended.

“Hard not to only marry pure-bloods if you only have pure-bloods to pick from,” says Harry. He’s carrying a large glass of butterbeer from wherever he managed to sneak it from and is picking his way towards us, trying not to spill any of the liquid. He’s followed by Neville and Cetus.

“What,” I elucidate, trying to be as patient as possible, “are you all ON about?”

“Yeah,” says Cetus. “My father swore he would upset the order of things by marrying a half-blood or a muggleborn, but then he presented and all that talk went out the window.”

“Your father?”

“The illustrious Lord Black,” Neville drawls sarcastically.

“Don’t let him hear you call him that,” says Harry. “Anyway, if it ever comes to it that you only have muggle-borns to pick from, I’m sure I’ll see you marrying a muggle-born.” He grins at Gaunt. “Maybe even a mugg-”

“Don’t you dare finish that sentence,” Gaunt hisses.

I ignore him. “I know who Cetus’s father is.” Even the muggle-borns know who Sirius Black is. When Cetus was sorted into Slytherin, he came storming in the next day demanding a re-sort. It was very dramatic.

Now, normally I hate admitting I don't know something; I'm afraid of being looked down on, but curiosity is burning a hole in me. "I don't understand," I complain. "What's all this got to do with your father? What's presenting?"

"What's presenting?" repeats Cetus slowly. "I- Are you- I still don't understand Gryffindor humour," he finally says, looking to Harry and Neville for help.

"Hermione..." Harry pierces me with a deeply concerned look. "Hermione you do know what you are, right?"

I shake my head. "I'm a witch?" I say weakly. I know that's not what he means, but...

"Oh, she really doesn't know," says Rohesia quietly. Lavender rolls her eyes and makes a cynical sound, but the boys are looking at me wide-eyed.

"And this," declares Avery Gaunt theatrically, "is why I will be passing on muggle-borns even if I present." He walks off.

"Don't listen to him," says Fred.

"He's a prat," adds George.

"You know what an Omega is?" asks Rohesia.

"Yes," I reply quickly, relieved to be back in familiar territory. I *do* know this. "One of the symbols in Runes, frequently meaning the End, or the Ultimate, or even Destiny. Its origin is-"

"No, no... It's a type of witch. Pure-blood... usually..."

It turns out that where the adults were reticent, my fellow schoolmates are more than willing to educate me.

"And very rare," Cetus adds. "Their counterpart is the Alpha."

"Always a wizard," Neville contributes. "Also extremely rare."

"But not as rare as the Omegas. Who are getting *rarer*."

"If the wizard is an Alpha he presents at seventeen-ish," Ron says. "I think. Both Charlie and Bill presented at seventeen. I dunno about the Omegas though..."

"Omegas present at puberty," says Rohesia.

"Ah." I am beginning to understand. "It's genetic then..."

Cetus nods. "It's mostly confined within the pureblood families. I suppose that's why everyone was surprised when you presented."

I stare. I'd known where this conversation was leading to, I suppose, but it's still a shock to hear. At least I now have a name for what I have. Or what I am, apparently.

Omega.

I can work with that, I think.

"And what makes them different?" I ask.

Everybody appears stumped and uncomfortable. Lavender giggles. Harry shrugs. Ron has a little crease in his forehead like he gets when he's asked to answer anything in class.

"They're just... different," says Cetus hesitantly. He's slowly turning red. "I don't want to say how. But they are."

Cedric Diggory's head breaks through the surface of the lake. We all stand automatically and applaud. He makes his way slowly to shore, dragging Cho Chang with him; her long hair floating like seaweed in the water.

"There's a doomed romance there," Lavender sniggers.

"You should probably talk to her," Rohesia leans down to speak in my ear as we watch Diggory wrapping the shivering girl in a thick towel. "She's the only Omega outside of Slytherin. Besides you, of course."

The stands quickly begin emptying. After over an hour of sitting and staring at the lake, very few people are interested in waiting for the judges' scoring, all confident that Diggory would receive the highest marks. Fleur Delacour hadn't even managed to rescue her sister.

"What sort of Champion gets trapped by *Grindylows*?" says Cetus scornfully. "I actually feel embarrassed for her."

Chapter End Notes

No Voldemort, no wizarding wars. A lot of wizarding families that are extinct in canon are still flourishing here.

Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

9jul2024

The train compartment is overly crowded. There are ten of us in here, not counting six owls all screeching and hooting intermittently. I'm squished, open book in lap, between one of the Patil twins and the window looking out into the busy corridor.

We're almost at Hogwarts, so everyone is occupied with changing into school robes or visiting compartments to catch up with friends and show off the things they got over the summer. Through the smudged glass, I see Harry striding in our direction. The compartment door slides open and he barges in.

"Oi, where's my snitch?" he bellows. "I know one of you girls stole it. Dean told me."

He's met with a sea of innocent-looking faces.

"We didn't know you had a snitch, Harry," someone says. "It's not something you ever talk about." It's followed by a series of barely-suppressed giggles.

"Right," says Harry hotly. He starts hauling random luggage off the racks, ignoring all our loud protests. I move my knees out of the way. One of the bags falls onto an owl cage. Its metal door springs open, and the bird flies out, screeching madly. Someone throws themselves sideways, jostling me. My head hits the glass window.

"Argh!" I grunt, fed-up. "Stop this! It's with Ginny, all right? Ginny's got your blasted snitch!"

"Hermione!" Ginny cries. "Why'd you go and snitch on me for?"

There's more loud giggling. I ignore them; I've just seen Cho Chang walking down the corridor alone, and I've been wanting to catch her. I jump up, exit the compartment, and squeeze past several second years and an annoyed trolley witch with her trolley to tap Chang on the shoulder.

She looks over her shoulder and smiles politely. "Yes?"

I introduce myself. "Can I talk to you in private?"

Something gold buzzes past our ears and we flatten ourselves against the wall as a few boys hurtle past us. It would appear Harry's recovered his snitch.

Chang shoots them a disdainful look. “Mates of yours?”

I sigh. “Yeah. Erm, obviously there’s nowhere private here, but when we get to school, I mean, and if you have time...”

She raises an inquisitive brow. “I don’t know if I’ll have time later. We can go to the Prefects’ carriage. It should still be empty..” She pinks slightly. “I just came from there.”

I remember that she’s dating Cedric Diggory.

We make our way to the end compartment and slide the door shut behind us. I’ve never been in here before. It’s a lot cleaner; the leather seats are less worn and there are no empty sweet wrappers in the corners. Strings of pennants displaying each House’s crest hang from the ceiling.

A pang of envy crosses my heart; I had been hoping to be made Prefect this year.

We seat ourselves facing each other. “I was hoping for some clarity,” I begin uncertainly. “On... on our situation.”

The only thing I am sure about, with regard to Omegas, is that it appears to be a somewhat delicate subject.

Her face lights up with immediate understanding. “Who is it?” she asks.

Who is what?

“Never mind, you don’t have to tell me. Whoever it is, are they already on the list? Obviously, Cedric’s not on it yet. But he’ll present, I know it.” I can hear the desperate hope in her voice.

“What is-” I rub my temples. “I’m sorry. Can you please explain from the beginning? I don’t know anything about a list or presenting or who is or isn’t on the list.”

She stares. “Didn’t your family tell you? Haven’t you been matched yet?”

They had, in fact.

“You’re an Omega, Hermione!”

That had been the gist of it.

“My family are muggles,” I say. “They don’t know anything. Can we start with what an Omega is?”

“All right,” she says slowly, wearing the uncomfortable look I’ve come to associate with this topic. “Omegas are a type of witch.”

I could scream.

“Go on,” I prompt, forcing myself to remain calm. “What’s wrong with them? Why does no one want to talk about them?”

She frowns. “You mean *us*. Well, it’s like talking about sex. But weirder.” She sits up straighter. “Right, you know how you can tell if someone is an Omega or an Alpha by their smell?”

I shake my head no, but things are beginning to make sense. All those tests at the hospital, and everyone assuming I already knew I was different. “Smells... We *smell*?” My nose scrunches in distaste. “That sounds... disgusting. Do I smell right now?”

She frowns again. “It’s not disgusting. And you do smell. I mean you smell nice.” She sighs frustratedly. “It’s hard to explain, and it’s strange that you can’t tell. Maybe you just don’t know what it is you’re smelling.” She purses her lips quickly to one side. “What do I smell like to you?”

“Erm. I don’t know,” I say. “I can’t really smell anything from here. Is it probable that everyone’s made a mistake?”

“You smell like Omega to me.” She pats the space beside her. “Sit here. Try smelling my hair.”

I cross the short distance between us and bend my head close to her. This is weird. “Maybe shampoo?” I guess, squinting in concentration. “Roses?”

“Yeah, that’s what my shampoo smells like.” She laughs. “I think you’re the first person to actually notice I use rose-scented shampoo. Everyone else just smells *Omega*. It’s weird that you can’t recognise it. You really should be able to, especially since we’re alone. Hmm. Oh, I know! This really isn’t proper, but... try smelling my neck.” She loosens her blue-and-bronze tie and pulls her hair into a ponytail.

“Okay.” This is *very* weird. I lean in. “What exactly are Omegas supposed to-”

The door slides open with a startling bang and I scoot backwards.

“Kinky,” someone comments. Avery Gaunt stands in the doorway, arms folded. A green and gold badge glints on his chest. “I know people like you don’t get made Prefects, so why are you in my carriage?”

My jaw drops. “*You’re* the new Head Boy?” Of all the unfair things in the world. “And why wouldn’t we get to become Prefects?” I add in indignation. “We’re better fitted for the role than you!”

He begins laughing, almost howling with uncontained mirth. “Who would listen to you?” he manages in between gasps of laughter.

“Oh sod off, Gaunt,” Cho Chang snaps.

It only makes him laugh harder. Finally, he straightens. “This is *my* carriage,” he says. He points accusingly at me. “You. I’ve heard enough about you from my family this summer to

last a lifetime.” His finger moves to Cho Chang. “And you. Don’t think I don’t know what you and Diggory get up to in here. Both of you out. Now.”

A witch and wizard gripping hands smile falsely at me from the front of their shiny pamphlet. ‘MALFOY GLOBAL ASSET MANAGEMENT’ reads the bold green heading.

“I’ve read this three times over and I still don’t know what it is they do,” sighs Lavender. Her face is hidden behind the pamphlet, but I imagine she looks annoyed.

“Our dad works there,” Parvati says. “And even I don’t know what he does.”

“Manage assets, probably,” says Ron sagely, mouth bulging with potatoes. Almost all the Gryffindors had their Careers Advice appointment with Professor McGonagall today. The remainder are due to see her on Monday. I haven’t received the note with my appointment time yet, but really, I’m too busy revising to mind. I’m sure she’ll get to me in time.

Lavender folds the pamphlet with an even bigger sigh and drops it onto a messy pile. She picks up another one. “Black and Malfoy Apothecaries,” she reads out loud. “A global potions company based in London. At Black and Malfoy Apothecaries we strive to set the standard for quality, safety, innovation… urgh.” She puts down that pamphlet too. “This is really stressful. I wish somebody would just decide for me.”

“Your OWL results will probably decide for you,” I say, shutting ‘Core Principles of Animal Physiology for the NEWT Transfiguration Student’ with a snap.

Ron snatches it from my hands. “Why are you reading a NEWT textbook?” he demands. “You don’t even need to take the NEWTs.”

“Nobody *needs* to take the NEWTs, Ron,” I say nastily, taking back the book and stuffing it into my bag. “*You* certainly won’t be taking them at the rate you’re going. They’re not going to let you copy from me in the exams, you know.”

I swing my leg over the bench and depart hastily before Ron can think of a comeback. Lavender’s already reading from another brochure. “Oo this one’s a fashion brand!” she squeals excitedly. “Maison Malfoy, a family-run multi-national… Wow, do the Malfoys own everything?”

The steady scratching of quills on parchment fills the small circular room. I pause my own writing to appreciate it; I think it might be my favourite sound in the world. Around me my classmates whisper to each other under their breath. We're technically supposed to be solving a problem alone, but it's clearly confusing people.

Professor Vector is reading a magazine upside down. On the blackboard beside her, she's written out the problem in chalk. I read it for the fifth time.

'Jack is planning the optimum time to meet Rose for a date in London. He knows that Rose is twenty-five years old and an only child. If Jack has calculated that their date must take place at seven thirty-five PM on a Friday during the waning gibbous lunar phase when the moon is 72% illuminated and at latitude: 0° 59' North, Longitude: 132° 10' East, when was Jack born?'

I bite my cheek, attempting to add numbers in my mind, and bend my head to scribble the necessary equations, whispering also. "Kappa, epsilon, omicron, beta..."

My partner, Daphne Greengrass, yawns audibly and puts her blonde head in her arms. Normally I sit beside Padma Patil, but she's been excused for Careers Advice with Professor Flitwick. Arithmancy is a very small class and they've combined all the houses for it.

I sneak a glance at her calculations and immediately spot the glaring error. "The moon position's a red herring," I whisper, unable to keep myself from correcting her.

She lifts her head. "A what?"

"The moon position's not relevant to his birthyear." No wonder people are having trouble with the problem. They're probably making the same mistake.

"Oh!" She perks up. "Thanks."

"Yeah no problem," I smile wryly, watching her cross out the wrong equations. "Didn't make sense that he would be thirty-nine, did it?"

"Sure," Daphne snorts, casting me an odd look. We resume writing, and after some time, she pauses to give me another look. "I'm really impressed you can still find it in yourself to care. But I suppose he's letting you continue after your OWLs?"

I lower my quill and give her a quizzical glance. "Who?"

She returns the expression. "Your fiancé? Who is he by the way? I haven't seen an official announcement."

I stare at her for a few seconds, then, unsure if she's joking, laugh nervously. "Daphne, I don't have a fiancé."

"Oh!" She looks taken aback. "Don't worry," she soothes. "You'll get one. It's probably just taking them awhile to negotiate."

"What?"

"Yeah. I had to wait a long time too. I was rejected by two people on account of my possibly having a blood malediction."

"What?? -Oh!" I swear and jerk my quill back. It's made a huge ink blot on the parchment. Professor Vector looks up from her magazine to glare at me, and I whisper a hasty apology.

"Yeah," says Daphne. "There's really only a one in five chance that I could have inherited it, but I guess even that's too risky for *some* people." She rolls her eyes.

"I'm sorry to hear about the blood malediction," I tell her sincerely. I've never met anyone with a hereditary curse- it's that rare. We haven't even covered it in any of our subjects, and I'm very interested to learn more about hers.

But this isn't the time.

I pull out my wand and try and carefully siphon off the ink. "Why are you engaged, though?" I ask. "You're still in school!"

She frowns like that's never crossed her mind. "It's just the way it is," she says uncertainly. "And anyway, I don't mind getting married, I'm looking forward to it. But I do wish I could *choose* my husband. It's really unfair that the guys get to choose, and we don't, right?"

I sit up, abandoning my task completely.

"Obviously Rowle's okay." She continues. "Our families go way back. And we really get on, so it works out. But that's after I got passed over by Malfoy and Lestrange. It was a real cock up, honestly, and I was depressed for months. My parents hired a famous cursebreaker from Indonesia, but he told them it would..."

She's still talking but I'm no longer listening. There's a ringing in my ears.

I stand up. Professor Vector calls my name, but I'm afraid if I open my mouth to respond, I'll be sick. I stumble out of the classroom.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

9 jul 2024

Professor McGonagall transfigures a sheaf of parchment into a napkin for me to blow my nose into. I ignore it, letting the snot run down my face.

“Is this why you never called me in for Careers Advice?” I wail, shaking with rage and betrayal. “Is this why you never call on me to answer questions in class anymore?”

Professor McGonagall at least has the decency to look contrite. “I don’t call on you in class because I want to give the other students a chance. You have already proven yourself to be very knowledgeable.”

I preen a little at the praise, and then break down again, crying morosely. “What’s the point of being knowledgeable if I don’t get to *use* that knowledge?”

She sighs. “Greengrass’s case is unique. Her family’s curse sometimes results in an extremely short lifespan for their women. Almost everyone else will go on to take the NEWTs.”

“So that’s why she’s marrying early,” I spit out. “So that she can start popping out children like a broodmare before she dies? That is *disgusting*. Professor, don’t you see how vile of a practice this is?”

“It is certainly not a just one,” she agrees. “But this has been the practice between pure-blood families for centuries. It’s written into the law.”

“But I’m not one of them!”

I am genuinely glad, for the first time, to be a muggle-born. I can use this.

“I highly doubt an exception will be made for you. The best thing for you to do is to wait until a fiancé has been selected for you and then negotiate an agreement with him.”

“Thanks for the advice, Professor,” I say, standing. I have absolutely no intention of following any of it; I have a much better plan. I take the napkin and wipe my face, hoisting my bag further up my shoulder.

“Before you go...” Professor McGonagall picks up a quill and looks at me over her glasses. “There is a Career Fair planned for the twentieth. I’ll leave it to you to decide if you want to attend.”

“Thanks. I will attend,” I say coldly.

I shake a can in the direction of a trio of fifth-year boys. “Join SLOW today. A small donation will go a long way towards legal fees.”

Cetus stops. “What’s SLOW?”

I smile broadly at him. “I’m glad you ask, Cetus. SLOW stands for the Society for the Liberation of Omega Witches, an oppressed and downtrodden group...”

I’m drowned out by the heckling from several Gryffindors exiting the career fair tent and have to pause to throw them a dirty look.

“What are you liberating Omegas from?” asks the boy next to Cetus. Terence Higgs, I think he’s called. I can’t decide if he’s being curious or sarcastic. He does look genuinely curious.

“From the highly discriminative and patriarchal practices-”

“Oh, do let’s go,” Cetus implores. “I’m late to meet my mother, and you know how she is...”

I shake my can at them and move to block them from entering the marquee. “Stop interrupting me!”

“Just give her the donation, quick,” advises the third boy, another Slytherin, Theodore.

Cetus pokes his tongue in his own cheek and huffs an exasperated sigh. He digs around in his inner robe. I hear the heavy clanking of coins. “Harry warned me to avoid you,” he complained. “I thought it was another one of his weird pranks...”

“You, too.” I thrust the can out menacingly at the other two boys. “We need as many supporters as we can get.”

They groan and grumble and begin pulling out sickles and galleons.

“Go SLOW!” the can squeaks merrily as it eats each coin.

I thrust various paraphernalia into their arms. There are badges, hats, and scarves. “Brilliant. We’ll meet every Thursday evening in-”

“Oh, no...” Cetus moans, looking beyond me. “It’s my aunt. Oh, I hate seeing her. She always compares me to my cousin and it’s awful. Hide me- Oh, *hello*, Aunt Narcissa!” His voice takes on a chipper tone. He’s got a smile plastered to his face.

A tall, thin blonde woman in grey floor-sweeping robes is approaching us. “My dear Cetus,” she drawls. She has a strangely deep voice for someone with such a frail looking physique. She angles her face towards me for a second, frowning a little, and then turns her attention back to the three boys. “I was just stepping out for a breather. It’s a bit of a zoo in there. Ah. Hello Theodore, Terence.”

The other boys greet her, and I learn that she is Lady Malfoy.

She enquires after the boys’ exams. “Your mother has confided in me her anxieties for what your OWL results might be,” she says, turning to Cetus. “I presume Quidditch has been taking up all your time? I advised her not to worry. After all, Draco played Seeker and still managed to score seven Outstanding. Although, of course not everyone can be as gifted...”

Cetus is clearly struggling and failing to keep his annoyance in check. “Yes, well,” he replies pithily, “I think that was also the year Slytherin came in last for the Quidditch cup for the first time in fifteen years.”

His friends look highly entertained, but his aunt only shrugs her shoulders nonchalantly. “One must prioritise. Quidditch or academic results? I think Draco made the right choices... Graduates of high calibre have been increasingly difficult to find, and I fear the current and next batches just don’t look so promising...”

I clear my throat. “Last year’s cohort was the best-performing in over fifty years,” I say, crossing my arms. “They scored an average of three Outstanding each. And this year’s cohort is expected to do better.”

I’m in this year’s cohort, so we really ought to. Unless of course Ron fell asleep in the exams like he did in the mock tests.

Narcissa Malfoy raises an eyebrow. “I don’t think we’ve been introduced,” she says pleasantly.

I brush off my schoolmates’ attempts at a formal introduction. “I’m Hermione Granger,” I say.

In fact, now that I’ve got their attention...

“Everyone from last year’s cohort moved up to sixth year,” I continue, voice growing in pitch. “From this year’s cohort however, at least one female student will be forced to drop out, due to a barbaric and outdated-”

Narcissa Malfoy claps her hands delightedly. “Ah, I should have realised! You’re the new girl everyone’s been talking about. I wondered of course why you were a stranger to me. The families are all so very close... I thought you were perhaps an exchange student. But of course, this makes much more sense...”

“Err,” I say, not expecting this reaction at all.

The boys take advantage of her distraction to make quick farewells and depart.

Narcissa Malfoy slots her arm in mine and begins pulling me into the immense marquee. “Come. Have you visited our booths?” She laughs and I am again startled by the deepness of her voice. “Where is he...? Really, we have too many booths this year...”

I bite my lip worriedly. I don’t want to go look at her booths. I want to recruit more members to join SLOW. Although... Narcissa Malfoy is a wealthy pureblood woman. I heard they’re something like socialites, when they’re not being unfortunate broodmares. If I can get her to join my cause, it will really gather traction.

We press onwards through the throng of students and visiting adults. Narcissa Malfoy is still talking, but her voice is lost in the general noise. Suddenly, she stops walking; there’s a couple blocking our way.

The woman of the pair is tall with long, dark and wavy hair, and a haughty expression on her face. She’s accompanied by a man almost her carbon copy; he has shoulder-length hair and heavy-lidded eyes that recall squid-ink and petroleum. He frowns and sniffs the air, so subtly that I wouldn’t have noticed it if I hadn’t been studying his face and caught the slight flaring of his nostrils.

His eyes lock on to me. He smiles.

I smile politely back.

The woman is looking at Lady Malfoy. “Cissa,” she says- at least I think that’s what she says. It’s very hard to hear in this crowd; on top of the chattering students, many companies have presenters that have given their voices a loud and magical boost in their attempt to draw the crowds.

“Bella,” replies Lady Malfoy.

“Is... girl then? My, are the Malfoys ... desperate to be mudbloods...” The other witch lifts her chin as she talks. What little I can hear of her speech drips with disdain.

I try and pull my arm out of my captor’s grip. I have no interest in listening to these two women having a row. But Narcissa Malfoy refuses to let me go. The crowd thins a little around us and I manage to hear her response.

“You’re a hypocrite, Bella. What I’d like to know is what you’re doing creeping around Hogwarts and dragging Sebastien with you. You never come to the Career Fairs. That reeks of desperation if nothing else.”

The man- Sebastien, I assume, who until that point had been just been staring almost unblinkingly at me finally speaks:

“I would like to be introduced,” he says softly. He leans in. His nostrils flare again. Somehow it doesn’t sound like a request.

I take a hasty and somewhat imbalanced step backwards and someone I don’t see puts their hand on my back to steady me.

A new voice, deep and velvety smooth, speaks up right behind me: “Then that makes two of us, and I rather think I get first rights. Hello Mother, Aunt Bella... Seb...”

I feel Narcissa Malfoy heave a silent sigh of relief. Sebastien looks chagrined. “Draco,” he says curtly.

Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

9 jul 2024

I turn to face the newcomer, a man dressed in dark grey robes cut similarly to a muggle suit. He has fine slicked-back blonde hair and very light grey, almost colourless eyes. “Are you all right?” he asks me, his hand still on my back.

I nod. “Yes, thanks.”

“Good.” He smiles and moves away to peck his mother on the cheeks.

“What about that introduction then?” Sebastien asks dourly.

Lady Malfoy smiles thinly. “Miss Granger is apparently more than capable of introducing herself.” There’s a strange message hidden in the tone she uses- polite but guarded. She’s probably trying to warn them all about SLOW.

I couldn’t care less; it’s too late for them.

“Yes, thank you Lady Malfoy. I’m Hermione Granger,” I say, waving a small ‘hello’. “And I’m very pleased to have the opportunity to talk to all of you about the newest non-profit organisation born right here in Hogwarts, the Society for the Liberation of Omega Witches. Or SLOW, if you will.”

Ignoring the looks of confusion on their faces, I plough bravely on: “It recently came to my attention that these women have been unfairly marginalised by the wizarding world. Our group aims to shed light on the oppressive and obscure laws pertaining to Omega rights. Our long-term aims are to influence local and international laws as well as to help write policies on reproductive and marital rights.”

Now my audience looks nothing short of astounded. They’ve remained courteously silent throughout my entire speech, but the dark-haired woman’s mouth is slowly falling open. I’m pleased to have made such an impact.

Her son Sebastien sneers. “Is this a joke?”

I chuckle. “Believe me, that was the very question on my mind, when I first found out about this.”

His mother blinks several times before snapping her mouth shut.

Lady Malfoy is attempting to catch her son's eye. He, like the others, has evidently been rendered pleasantly speechless by my earnest delivery, and has a slow smile tugging at his mouth. "Well, this is certainly different," he finally says.

His Aunt Bella has drawn herself to her full height, shoulders thrown back. "I presume you'll both be declining," she says. "Again."

Draco Malfoy steps forward and offers me his hand, lips quirked up. "I'm Draco Malfoy," he says, bending his neck slightly towards my upturned face. "Why don't we take a closer look?"

"Great!"

"Draco." His mother's voice is tight; I can hear the slight strain in it.

"Mother," he replies. There's a note of warning in his. He hasn't let go of my hand. "Let's go to one of our booths," he tells me. "We can discuss your project there."

"I'll come too," growls Sebastien. His own mother grabs his arm, but he brushes her off. "I'm also interested."

Perfect.

We wend through the aisles as a group before coming to a standard white booth with an arch over the entrance displaying the logos of various Malfoy companies. When we pass under the arch, the space transforms into a wide floor that's already full of students and employees.

One of them, a young witch carrying a clipboard, detaches herself from the crowd to hurry over. "Mr. Malfoy, I've compiled a list of the interested families as you've directed, and these—"

Draco Malfoy raises a hand. "Not now," he says, and she nods and scurries away.

"Look! It's the Malfoys!" I hear a distinctly feminine voice squeal. "And the Lestrange!"

I would know that irritating voice anywhere. I swivel to locate its source and spot three shockingly ginger heads by an enquiry desk. Lavender, Rohesia, and Ron are here, and it looks like his sister Ginny's tagged along.

I return their wave and gesture them over.

It turns out that the Weasleys and their cousin are already on somewhat familiar terms with the adults, but Lavender needs and gets a proper introduction. Unfortunately for her, she doesn't even get to finish saying her name before we are besieged by other students all clamouring not so subtly for jobs.

"Isn't it Hogmeade's weekend for you?" I ask Ginny, after I've been pushed to the periphery by my highly pro-active schoolmates.

She shrugs. "Yeah, but I've nothing to do there."

"If you want something worthwhile to do, why don't you volunteer with my non-profit?"

She shrugs again. "Nah. I've heard about it and I think it's a waste of time, honestly."

"A waste of- You can't really think that!" I splutter indignantly. It's exactly that sort of attitude that needs changing.

I'm still attempting to recover from her blatant rudeness, when Ron very loudly announces, "My brother Bill crushed your team five hundred and fifty to seventy when he was in third year."

Oh, dear God. Somebody needs to medicate the Weasleys.

Ginny's turning away from me, her bored look shifting to an excited one.

"*Honestly*, Ron." Their cousin Rohesia is turning as red as her hair. "Don't mind him he's just erm- erm..." She obviously can't come up with a credible excuse, and I don't blame her.

"Do you mean William Weasley?" drawls an unperturbed Draco Malfoy. "I'm trying to remember him, but there are *so very* many of you, it's hard to distinguish one from another."

We all stiffen, even Lavender. Some Slytherins around us laugh nastily.

"And where is William now?" asks Sebastien. "I haven't seen him around. Has he left the UK?"

"Bill's in Egypt," Ginny says proudly. "He's Gringotts' best curse breaker."

"Not for long," says Sebastien, and his mother smiles.

I don't like where this is headed so I turn to slip away. But I don't get two steps farther before someone clamps their hand around my upper arm.

It's Draco Malfoy. "Where are you running off to, Ms. Granger?" he asks pleasantly.

"Er- the Career Fair."

"But what about your project? I really would like to hear more about it."

"Yes, er, hold on." I rummage in my satchel for a copy of our manifesto while he looks on amusedly. "Here. This contains all-"

He shakes his head. "It's too noisy in here," he says, bringing his mouth close to my ear to exaggerate his point. His breath tickles my ear. "I have a better idea. Why don't you come by my office in London? We won't be disturbed there."

The witch with the clipboard returns. He slips a business card into my hand before moving away with her. "Do contact me, Ms. Granger. I'm always on the hunt for people with..." He cocks his head, searching for the right word. "...potential."

It's a hot, sunny day; cloudless. We lie on the grass by the lake and watch some sixth year Ravenclaws practising their mermish with the green-haired folk. Tails slip through and smack the water as they surface to yowl and screech. It's awful.

"He can't really get your brother fired, can he?" I ask Ron worriedly. "Lestrange..."

"Probably not," he says. He reaches for another slice of pineapple upside-down cake. "The goblins don't care for wizard politics."

"You're a prat, you know," I say. "Why'd you go and provoke him for?"

"Eh, Seb's all mouth," says Harry. "He likes to make creepy threats, but at the end of the day he can never be arsed to actually follow through on them."

"Yeah. I'd be more worried if it had been Draco who'd said that," Cetus adds. He rolls on to his back and yawns. "Can you move the cloud, Hermione?"

He's trying to dry out from his swim in the lake, and the large, fluffy cumulus I've conjured to shade those of us not wishing to get sunburned is in his way.

"Only if you get me ice cream," I barter. We go home the day after tomorrow, and it'll be two months of boring sugarless treats for me. "Why would you be more worried if it had been Draco?"

"Let's just say he always gets what he wants. If *he'd* made that threat, you can say bye-bye to your brother's career, Ronniekins. Oi Kreacher!"

There's a loud sound like a rubber band snapping, and an old, stooping elf appears. "How may I be of service to young master Black?" he squeaks, bowing himself almost in half.

Cetus gestures in my direction. "Ice cream for the lady."

Ginny raises her head. "I want some, too."

Cetus acquiesces. "Yeah, okay. You know what, get us every flavour that Florean's offering now," he tells his elf, who bows again and disappears.

"Oh, you're awake," I say to Ginny, as I use my wand to reshape my cumulus so that it covers everyone but Cetus. I'm still a little cross with her, but I think I can get her to come around. "Did you read my manifesto? I put it next to your bed."

"She's put it next to everyone's bed," Ron breaks from a Quidditch-related conversation with Harry, Seamus, and Gregory to complain. "Girls shouldn't be allowed in our dormitories. It's unfair."

I scowl at him. “You want to talk about unfair? What’s *unfair* is-”

“I think you’re overcompensating, Hermione.” Ginny shrugs out of her outer-robe and winks at Harry when she catches him looking. “You want to fix a problem that’s personal and you’re trying to get everyone else involved in it. Honestly, if you don’t like who the Ministry picks for you, just get your parents to reject them.”

“This isn’t just *my* problem, Ginny,” I snap. Then- “Wait, what? I can do that?”

“Yeah and your family are muggles, aren’t they? I reckon it’ll be easy to trick them into rejecting suitors until you get to marry the one you want.”

The ice cream arrives, and everyone crowds round the house-elf.

“Don’t encourage her to do that, Gin,” scolds Gregory. “It’s really bad practice.”

“It is really bad practice and it was a big problem for Bill,” Ron agrees. “He was supposed to be fiancé to Isolda Selwyn, and then to Elizabeth Burke, but their families rejected him because they didn’t think we were good enough.” His face turns red and angry. “But joke’s on them all. Fleur’s much prettier than either of them.”

“Fleur?” I inquire, savouring my ice cream with not a little bit of guilt. “Fleur as in Grindylow-Champion Fleur? *That* Fleur?”

“Fleur as in half-veela Fleur,” says Ron smirking so widely you’d think it was him who’d married her.

Cetus shakes his head. “Yeah, but she’s still only-”

“Oh, look,” Parvati warns. “Head-boy coming our way.”

He immediately shoos off Kreacher, who disappears with another loud snap, leaving behind tubs of labelled ice cream. Sensing that the end of our ice cream party is imminent, we all start to shamelessly shovel spoonfuls of the stuff in our mouths.

“I could see your house-elf from the entrance, you fools,” Avery Gaunt says without pre-emption, when he reaches us. “That’ll be fifteen points from Gryffindor.”

Several jaws drop. “That was Cetus’s house-elf,” Harry protests. “You can’t take points from us!”

The Slytherins in our group are laughing. Gregory is clutching his stomach and rolling on the grass.

Gaunt sneers. “Oops, I already did.” He looks up. “And who cast that Nebula Formatio?”

Nobody answers.

He shoots me an ungracious leer. “I’ll presume it’s the doing of our resident know-it-all then,” he says. “That’ll be fifteen points from Gryffindor. No magic outside of class.”

Ginny rolls her eyes. “What do you want, Gaunt? I already told you I’m not going out with you.”

Now everyone’s laughing.

“Another fifteen points from Gryffindor,” he hisses. He sounds like his Head of House. “Granger’s been summoned by the Headmaster. You’re to come with me.”

“Ooo,” my friends exclaim. “What did you do, Hermione?”

I pick myself up and dust grass from my robes. “Don’t know. See you in the common room.” I truly don’t know what I’m supposed to have done wrong. Visions of having failed all my OWLs float in my head and make me anxious.

“Did Professor Dumbledore say what he wants me for?” I ask Gaunt as I hurry after him. The last time I spoke to our Headmaster was when he told me I was a very special kind of witch. I still harbour feelings of bitterness.

“Quiet and follow me,” he snaps, picking up his pace. We zip through the entrance hall and into the quad. But instead of taking a right to the marble staircase tower where Professor Dumbledore’s office is situated, he takes us over the stone bridge. I guess whatever I’ve done or not done can’t be so bad if it hasn’t warranted a formal meeting.

When we’ve crossed into the viaduct, we descend a set of narrow spiral stairs. I follow silently, my mind elsewhere. I’m wondering if Cho has convinced her family to reject potential fiancés until Diggory presents. What will happen to her if he doesn’t?

Our footsteps echo across the stone walls.

“This way,” says Avery, and I look up to realise we’re deep in the dungeons and all alone.

“Where are you taking me?” I ask in growing alarm. “Dumbledore isn’t here, is he?”

He slows and laughs malevolently. “Took you long enough to figure out.”

I stop. “This isn’t funny. I’m going back.”

He turns around to face me. Shadows from the lit wall sconces flicker across his face. “You can go back when we’re finished.”

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

10 25

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

I take a step back from him, my heart pounding. “You’ll be expelled for this!” I cry. Even to my own ears, my voice sounds screechy.

“Expelled? For what, exactly?” he says dryly. “Besides, I’ve technically graduated, Granger. NEWTs are being scored right now and I’ll be surprised if I get less than ten.” He shakes his head scornfully. “And they said you were intelligent.”

I swallow my fear. “Whatever. I’m going.”

Avery moves towards me, rolling his eyes. I’m just about to turn and run when a door somewhere behind him opens very noisily. Making a split-second decision, I dash towards the sound instead. He jerks back in surprise as I barrel in his direction.

I run as fast as I can. After a slight bend in the tunnel, I see that the door to one of the unused classrooms is wide open. A woman is leaning against it. She has black hair strewn with white, and the type of bone structure that might have rendered her somewhat pretty in her youth if her nose had not been extremely off-centre and her eyes not too close together.

Her arms unfold at the sight of me running to her at breakneck speed. “In here,” she directs in a soft voice, and I run straight in, pushing my hand against the wooden door for balance as I make the abrupt turn.

Inside the room sit several wizards. It looks like they’re having a meeting.

I come to a halt. “Oh, I’m so sorry,” I stammer.

They look up. “Don’t dally, Avery,” snaps an old man with a grisly beard, as he looks past me. “Merope, shut the door. The wind is killing my knees.”

I swivel around, gaping. Gaunt brushes by to sit next to the old man. The woman shuts the door.

“So, this is the problematic Omega,” someone comments. “Doesn’t look like much. Why were you running, girl?”

“Attractive enough,” says a blonde wizard. He looks vaguely familiar.

“It’s not about the looks, Thaddeus,” sneers the old man. He makes eye contact with me. “I hear you’re magical enough for a mudblood. Show us.”

My initial fright has worn off and I’m insulted by the slur. “Who are you?” I demand sharply.

Another wizard leans forward. “I see what they mean.” His eyes glitter. “She behaves nothing like a typical Omega. Her dirty blood must be altering the characteristics.”

His frank bigotry is astounding.

I take another tack and attempt to look simpering and stupid. “Fine. How do you want me to show you my abilities?”

The old man grins crookedly. His lips stretch and crack. “That’s more like it.” He gestures. “Show us a spell. You’re in your OWL year, correct? For a mudblood, I’ll be impressed with any spell you can do that a second-year can.”

That’s exactly what I wanted to hear. Not that part about the mudbloods, but the permission I have just been given to pull my wand from my robes.

I do so.

“Okay. Ready?” I ask. I think my smile has become a little deformed because Gaunt narrows his eyes. His Head-boy badge glints as he shifts in his chair. “I must warn you all-” he begins, but unfortunately for them all, he doesn’t get a chance to finish his sentence.

I’m already waving my wand smoothly. “Intruders in room D-fifteen,” I quickly dictate, and the translucent body of an otter emerges headfirst from my wand. After gambolling nonchalantly around my audience’s stunned heads, it runs right through the ceiling.

Gaunt swears. He leaps up.

I move to let him pass. “Messenger Patronus, silently cast,” I explain, smirking widely as the door slams shut behind me. “I don’t think you’ll find that’s even tested in the NEWTs. Oh, and in case you’re wondering, that message went out to Professor Dumbledore.”

Another half a second of stunned silence precedes low, gravelly laughing. The laughing wizard stands and claps. He’s bald with a rust-coloured goatee. “I can recognise something rare and unique when I see one,” he says. “I’ll be putting in my bid.”

“Er, I’m not marrying you, if that’s what you mean,” I cut him down quickly. I’m quite revolted. “I’m not marrying any of you.”

The door bangs open, startling the witch Merope who was standing just beside it. Our Headmaster enters with drawn wand. He’s followed by Professors McGonagall and Flitwick.

“You say that, but it’s been ages since I’ve found anything rare and unique in your shop,” one of the blond wizards, unbothered by the sudden appearance of the Headmaster, complains to the bald one.

The entering professors blink with surprise and lower their wands. Dumbledore casts a penetrating eye over the scene. “To what pleasure do we owe the visit of the Lords Burke, Nott, Gaunt, and Rowle to Hogwarts?” he asks.

The blonde wizard stands. No wonder he looked familiar. He must be Theodore’s father. “This lovely young lady was just showing us around,” he lies blatantly with a thin-lipped smile.

“That’s not what her patronus indicated,” Dumbledore replies. He looks angry. “Gentlemen, I am disappointed in you. You are well aware that it is not correct practice to be holding an audience with Ms. Granger without someone from her family present.”

Some of the wizards shift awkwardly. Professor McGonagall puts an arm across my shoulders. “Come on, Granger,” she says, and after shooting the men a disgusted glare, steers me out.

“Shame on you all,” I hear our Headmaster admonishing, before the door closes.

Draco Malfoy

The name, printed in slightly slanted gold lettering, shines dully in the light as I flip the thick calling card over and over in my fingers.

I’m thinking about what Ginny said- about SLOW being personal.

It’s not true at all; she’s wrong. I do want to help all Omegas. This isn’t just about me. But no one else appears to genuinely care. No one else thinks it’s a worthy cause, not even the other Omegas. The only person who has seemed remotely interested is-

Draco Malfoy

I flip the card again. There’s a London address on the other side. It’s in the Square Mile; I can walk there in an hour.

Feeling energised, I jump up to dress and go.

The walk is a lovely one, but by the time I reach St. Swithin’s Lane where the Malfoys’ offices are located, I’m beginning to feel uncomfortable in my ballet flats. What’s worse, the

building doesn't seem to exist. I walk around in frustrated circles before finally pulling out the business card to make sure I've got the correct address.

The moment my fingers touch the card, a silvery-grey building appears, squeezing itself between two others right in front of my astonished eyes. I look nervously around before darting through the ornate gold revolving doors.

The lobby is busy with witches and wizards walking to and from the lifts or sitting at tables having meetings.

I make my way to one of the reception counters.

"How may I help you?" the reception-witch, who has her hair pulled into a tight bun, asks.

I tip-toe slightly to rest my arms on the high counter. "I'd like to schedule a meeting with Mr. Draco Malfoy, please."

"Ah," she says. "Do you have his calling card?"

I produce the card and she passes her wand over it.

"Wonderful. I can't help you with scheduling a meeting, I'm afraid, but I'll put you in touch with one of his personal assistants who will be able to help you do that. Could you give me your name, please."

"Yes, it's Hermione..." I write my name down for her on a strip of parchment. "He asked me to contact him when we met at the career fair..."

"That's wonderful. Please write your address down as well so the owl will know where to find you... Wonderful, wonderful..."

She taps the parchment with her wand, and it catches fire before disappearing completely. "One of his PAs should reach out to you soon with some dates," she says. "They'll probably be able to fit you into his calendar sometime in October or November, so if you're- Oh, just a second." A tongue of flame has appeared in a little tray in front of her. It burns out quickly, and she picks up the parchment left behind.

Her brow raises high as she reads the note. "It would appear that Mr. Malfoy can meet you right away," she says. "You must have made quite an impression. This almost never happens. I'm to take you straight up." She stands, smiling. "If you'll follow me..."

"Oh, right now?" I say in panic. I didn't prepare any materials! "I just wanted to set up a meeting, actually. I didn't expect-"

She nods briskly. "Say no more. Of course you don't want to meet non-relations unaccompanied. It's improper. I should have thought of that. I quite understand." She unrolls fresh parchment. "What did you say your family name was again? I'll let his team know to reach out directly to your Lord Father for-"

I fold my arms over my chest and purse my lips in irritation. “You know what, I will take the meeting.” Her comment’s made my blood boil. I am perfectly capable of handling myself. I am top in my year and I bested a room full of creepy old Lords! I can most definitely take a meeting alone.

“Wonderful,” says the well-trained reception-witch amiably. “This way, please.”

She leads me into a private elevator which we ride to the thirtieth floor. It’s a double-volume floor; when the doors open, I’m met with an outstanding and unobstructed view of the river and the skyline.

Another witch emerges from a door on the right and the reception-witch disappears back into the elevator.

The new witch- one of Draco Malfoy’s PAs, brings me through a set of enormous mahogany wood doors to Draco Malfoy’s office.

My first impression is that it looks like a cross between a portrait gallery and a personal library.

Along the right side of the room, the structural glass windows offer a view of the flat London skyline. On the left, the wall is hung with stately portraits of wizards, every single one of whom is blonde with silvery-grey eyes.

A metal spiral staircase goes up to what must be a loft and what I can see of it from below is mostly built-in shelves that are filled to the ceiling with books. At the end of the long room, at a large table, sits the dark-suited figure of Draco Malfoy.

The witch enters ahead of me. “Ms. Granger to see you, Sir. Would you like me to stay and take notes?”

He looks up. “No. There’s no need. Come, Ms. Granger.”

The doors shut behind me. I walk forward. It’s a long walk, and the portraits all stare eerily at me as I pass each one.

“Thanks for taking the time to meet me,” I say to him. My voice echoes slightly. “I would have sent an owl, but I live very close by and I don’t have an owl...”

He remains seated, sharp eyes scrutinising and a droll expression adding a slight smirk to the mouth. “You don’t have an owl?” he asks. I feel his gaze rake me from head to toe as I reach him.

“No,” I apologise, feeling extremely self-conscious now. “My family are muggles... I’m sorry if-”

“Don’t apologise. I was only asking.” He gestures with an open hand. “Please, have a seat. Let’s discuss your project.”

I twist my hands together, taking the offered seat. “I- er, have to apologise again. I didn’t expect I’d be meeting you today, you see, so I didn’t bring any materials.”

I do know my pitch by heart, and I can just owl him the materials tomorrow, but starting off on the wrong foot has thrown me off balance. Figuratively, of course.

“Let’s start with why you’ve started this project,” he suggests. In the bright afternoon sunlight, his fine blonde hair glows like a platinum hallow, contrasting greatly with his sombre surroundings. It feels like I’m talking to an arch-angel.

“Certainly,” I say. “I would say it started when I was told that I was an Omega witch. I tried to do some research, but there was nothing on the topic I could find anywhere, and I have since discovered that there just aren’t many resources available for women like me. No resources, in fact, if you discount-”

He lifts a finger. “You were *told*? ”

“Yes, and to add to my point, it was very hard to get any information out of- really, out of *anyone*-”

“What do you mean you were told?” he interrupts. “Didn’t you just... discover what you were by yourself?”

I frown, biting my lip. “Well I- Could you clarify what you mean by discover? I should think Viktor did the discovering, but I definitely wouldn’t say-”

“Viktor?” he asks coolly. And now he moves, leaning forward in his chair in a creak of leather and metal. “And who is Viktor, Ms. Granger?”

Chapter End Notes

Fyi

The reason nobody seems to care about Hermione's problem is because just like with SPEW, they don't think it's an actual problem.

There is no Tom Riddle in this world, but Avery Gaunt is biologically closest to him. He's basically Tom Riddle Lite.

Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

10 25

Chapter Notes

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

“Er, Viktor Krum, the Triwizard Champion...”

A brow raises. “You mean the Bulgarian seeker?”

“Yes, he was my date to the Yule Ball, and they told me later that he was an Alpha and that was how he discovered me-”

Draco Malfoy interrupts me again. “What did Mr. Krum do? Nothing... untoward, I hope?”

“Nothing *really* bad. He just-” I pause to grimace in memory. “He sort of rub his spit on me, but that was all, really, and it washed right off.”

For a moment, it doesn’t look like he’s breathing at all.

I shift awkwardly. “But what was worse,” I continue, in a bid to redirect the conversation, “was coming to the realisation that people in positions of authority, like the healers and the professors, were not going to give me any information or advice beyond ‘wait til you have a fiancé and talk to him’, so most of the information I have has come from other students.”

“Naturally,” he says, leaning back. “The families of the Omegas take care of everything. You’re the first muggle-born Omega in recorded history. I imagine your family is just as in the dark about our ways and customs as you are.”

“Sadly, you are correct.” I smile wryly. “With regards to access to information, I am at a disadvantage. But the cultural differences more than make up for it. I’m not sure if you are aware, but muggles don’t generally marry so early, and arranged marriages have long ago fallen out of favour.”

He shakes his head slowly and in apparent incomprehension but otherwise doesn’t speak.

“My family would never dream of telling me when to marry,” I elaborate, “or whom to marry. And I certainly don’t intend to marry in the foreseeable future, or worse, be coerced into having children before I’m ready. So, I’m not so worried about my future. But other Omegas are not so lucky. And this is where SLOW comes in. One of our goals is to put an

immediate stop to the tradition of arranged marriages. Omegas shouldn't be forced to marry Alphas. *No one* should be forced into a marriage they don't absolutely want."

"If you stop Alphas and Omegas from marrying, how will our magical lines continue then?" Draco Malfoy questions, brow raising.

I purse my lips. "Obviously I understand there exists a... desire on the part of many wizarding families to keep their bloodline pure, but that shouldn't stand in the way of freedom of choice. Most pureblood witches are not Omega, and I see no reason why men cannot choose among that pool instead of insisting on an Omega bride-"

His arms cross over his chest. "But given that Omegas and Alphas can only procreate together, that will create quite a problem. How do you intend to solve for that?"

My eyes widen. My mouth closes slowly.

An understanding smile shoots across his face. "Ah," he says. "You didn't know."

"No," I stutter, mind working fast. "No, quite frankly, I didn't. But there are ways to circumvent-"

He stops me, palm out. "Miss Granger, there lies the flaw in your project. It's not a thoroughly researched one. You cannot hope to influence the system without even knowing why it is the way it is."

"I admit this was overlooked," I say, twisting my fingers anxiously and regretting taking this meeting unprepared. I knew it wasn't the best idea, but I had been over-eager and over-confident and now I'm paying for it. Maybe I can still salvage this. "Let me go away and put together-"

Again, he motions for me to stop, smiling kindly. "I can't publicly support a cause so misinformed, and frankly, so detrimental to the survival of wizarding society. You don't even know the basic facts."

My shoulders drop. Somehow, having my project pronounced a failure feels worse than knowing I am letting down future generations of Omegas.

His smile deepens. "Don't look so put-out. I may still be able to help you."

I blink uncertainly at him and his eyes crinkle with amusement.

"Yes. I am a busy man, but... You are quite an exception, Miss Granger, so for you I'll make an exception of my time. And I think I can help you in more ways than one. I can instruct you in all things Alpha and Omega so you never have to have a deer-in-the-lamplights moment like that again."

I thank him profusely and with great embarrassment. "I really appreciate your time and support, Mr. Malfoy. And I want to assure you-"

"Please, call me Draco."

I hesitate. It feels too familiar.

“I insist,” he says, voice deepening.

I frown but give in; if he’s going to be my mentor-of-sorts, it does make sense to be on a first-name basis. “Okay,” I say.

“*Okay, Draco,*” he instructs gently. “Say it.”

“*Okay, Draco.*” A strange thrill runs through me. I bite my lip, resisting the urge to shudder, and try and focus on something else instead.

My eyes catch on one of the documents on his desk.

Peeking out from under a proposal for the merger of two Nott and Malfoy companies is an official-looking request for funding with the Hogwarts crest on the letterhead.

A selfish thought enters my head. “Er, I don’t want to take up even more of your time, but I was also wondering whether if I were to have some questions about the NEWTS syllabus, if I could come to you with them... I heard that you scored very well...”

“I would be pleased to instruct you in *all things*,” he responds pleasantly. He really does look and sound like some kind of angel or higher being. Benevolent and powerful.

“Yes, please, that sounds nice,” I reply. “Thank you.”

Draco stands. “You go back to Hogwarts in three weeks, correct? Why don’t we set up another meeting a week and a half from now on... the nineteenth? You can floo directly to my office. Ah, no, I forgot that you’re a muggle-born. You wouldn’t be connected...”

He eyes me thoughtfully as I stand and adjust my skirt. “I will send you a car with an escort.”

My eyes bug out slightly at the idea of being escorted anywhere. “Oh, there’s really no need for that,” I say. “I can make my own way here. It’s perfectly safe.”

“I insist,” he says, moving forward to walk me out.”

I shake my head. “No, thank you,” I say firmly. “I don’t want to sound ungrateful, but really, it’s very safe.”

“Mm.” Silver eyes narrow for a second, then he’s smiling politely and ushering me out. “As you wish.”

“Just...” I stick my tongue in between my teeth as I balance my shopping on one arm in order to cross out another item on my checklist. “...three outstanding. All to be found at the apothecary....”

My mother grimaces. “You can do that alone can’t you, petal?”

She hates the smells of the apothecary, which is weird because she’s an oral and maxillofacial surgeon and has probably been exposed to some rather interesting smells in her career.

I nod. “Of course. Look, Dad’s coming out of Gringotts. Why don’t you both go to that healing store we passed-”

Her eyes light up. “Yes, the one with that fascinating moving diagram of the craniofacial development-”

“Right, and we’ll meet at The Leaky Cauldron in an hour?”

“Yes. Perfect. Good idea as always, petal.” She takes some of my shopping off my hands and we separate.

I only head off when I see that she’s caught Dad’s attention. Maybe it’s because I’m an only child, but I’ve always been as protective of my parents as they are of me.

The apothecary I usually frequent isn’t very far, and I enter to find it crowded with Hogwarts students. It’s apparent that I’m doing my shopping a little too last-minute this year: Everything’s jumbled from students placing items back in the wrong shelves, and some items are completely sold out; I can’t find a no. 18 scalpel at all.

“Hermione,” someone calls. It’s Ron.

I greet him quickly, moving out of the way as a girl reaches for something on a high shelf next to me.

“Where are the others?” I ask. I don’t think I’ve ever seen Ron travelling alone before. Maybe he’s lost his family.

“Around.” He gestures vaguely. “Fred and George went to look for the live Kappa that the new Menagerie’s got, and they’ve stuck me with the shopping.”

“Oh. Well, they’re out of the scalpel I need here.” I swivel around to look for a shop assistant, but they all appear to be occupied. “I think I’ll go to B&M.”

“I’ll walk with you,” he offers, which really cements my impression that Ron Weasley cannot spend a minute alone by himself. He’s never offered to walk me anywhere before. “I’m got everything I need from here, and I really want to look at the Kappa.”

“Sure.” We go to the counter to pay. “You got everything?”

“Mostly. They ran out of Billywig stings too.”

“I reckon they’ll have them at B&M,” I say.

He turns inexplicably red. “We don’t really shop at B&M. Mum says we’d just be paying for the fancy packaging there and we don’t like to waste our money on nonsense...”

We hear the Contemporary Menagerie long before we see it, excited hollering and yelling already audible from one street over. The sounds grow louder as we draw nearer, and soon we can make out distinct voices. I recognise the mischievous tones of one of the Weasley twins.

“Stick your bum in the tank, Lee, I’ll give you a galleon, go on!”

I roll my eyes. “I hope they know that the shirikodama thing is just a myth, and the only thing they’ll accomplish is possibly get their friend drowned.”

But Ron isn’t listening. Without a word to me, he zips into the throng, his freckled face alight with glee.

I roll my eyes again and continue to the next store.

B&M is a high-end chain of apothecaries. Their store in Diagon Alley is located- somewhat morbidly, right beside the menagerie. I wonder idly if they just order their stock directly from their neighbour. It would certainly explain the superior, fresher quality of their ingredients.

The store is cool and dark and silent inside and reminds me of Hogwart’s dungeons. There are no disgusting smells here, except for when a customer unscrews a lid or opens one of the acrylic bins at the end which all hold the cheaper items like poppy seeds and dried berries and beetle eyes.

I’m quite confident I’ll find my scalpel here, albeit for a much higher price.

A shop assistant wearing a clean, starchy apron over midnight-blue robes approaches. “Welcome to Black and Malfoy Apothecaries. Let me know if there’s something I can assist you with.”

“Do you do no. 18 scalpels?” I ask and am thankfully led to a shelf stocked with various scalpels in their protective casing.

“Shall I keep this at the counter for you while you keep browsing?” she enquires, after I’ve picked out a long-handled one that advertises itself to be self-cleaning. “You might also want to take a look at our new arrivals over there...”

I thank her and shuffle lazily over to the area she’s pointed out. Most of the items on the shelves here are ready-made potions and poisons, although there are also stoppered vials full of single ingredients.

I pick up one that holds what appears to be thick flakes of salt.

“Merpeople tears,” I read out loud. “Species Aegean Blue, quantity twenty-five. Hmm...”

I’ve yet to come across a recipe calling for merpeople tears, but I imagine its use involves counteracting the volatility of potions that require both ashwinder eggs and dragons’ blood.

I return the vial delicately to its rack and then tilt my head all the way to the side almost to my shoulder to quickly read through the names of the potions they have for sale.

“Ultra Gnome Repellent, One-Day Acne Away, Omega Phero-clone Spray, Doxy Detox, wait...”

My eyes slide back to the newly familiar word. I pick up the tiny oval bottle. A single rose petal is suspended in a liquid lightly tinted pink.

“Omega Phero-clone Spray...” I murmur, squinting at the tiny writing. It’s hard to read in the ambient light. “Mimics the natural scent of an Omega. Intimate spray for intimate forays... What in the world is this-?”

“You don’t need that,” someone says softly behind me.

I jerk my arm back and blush, embarrassed to be caught holding something that has the word ‘intimate’ written on it. Then I turn to face the man who’s sneaked up on me.

“I came for that,” says Sebastien Lestrange, “and look what I found instead. The real deal.”

“I was just browsing,” I say defensively.

He reaches out to pluck the bottle from my hands, then unscrews the lid and brings it up to his nose as I watch.

“I make my girlfriend wear this all the time,” he confesses, slowly re-tightening the lid. “And not just in bed, although *especially* in bed.” He pouts, bloated lower lip sticking out. “It does smell good. But it’s still nothing compared to...” He leans over me and makes a show of smelling my hair. “...the real thing.”

“Cool,” I say, trying to sidestep him. “Er. I have to go pay. Excuse me.”

He doesn’t move. “Are you sure you’re a mudblood?” he asks. “Families like mine don’t approve of mudbloods, not even when they come packaged in pretty, fragrant Omega bodies.”

My feet move backwards. The hard edge of the shelves digs into my back. “Quite sure,” I respond, somewhat shakily. “Definitely a mudblood. Very muddy.” My eyes flick to the side, looking for a shop assistant.

He takes a curl of my hair between two fingers. “What a waste,” he comments, voice growing softer yet deeper. “I do think you’d look perfect with black hair. Just like mine. Don’t you think?”

I focus involuntarily on his hair, a soft matte black that hangs to his shoulders. Unlike everyone else, I can't tell who's an Alpha by scent- maybe there's something really wrong with me; but he's clearly one, and I can almost taste the danger.

"Right," I say. My brain chooses this moment to shut down. "Sure. Now if you'll excuse me—"

"When do you turn seventeen?" he now asks, still holding on to the lock of hair. He leans his other hand on the shelf, caging me in.

The implication behind that question coupled with everything else he's said is despicable enough to make my blood curdle. "It's none of your business," I snap, pulling strength out of somewhere and taking back possession of my hair with a quick tug.

He drops his hand, eyes widening in astonishment. "Little Omega has teeth," he remarks, surprise colouring his voice. His mouth widens. "I have teeth too," he purrs. "Want to see them?"

"There you are!" A loud, flat voice rudely interrupts, and relief floods my system.

Ron is striding up. "What are you doing with her?" he demands. Ginger eyebrows knit together. "Is this person bothering you, Hermione?"

I've never been so grateful to witness Weasley tactlessness in action.

Sebastien Lestrange's brow goes up. "We were just flirting," he says, pulling reluctantly away.

"No, we weren't!" I take advantage of the opening to escape, moving quickly to Ron's side and slightly behind him. "You touched my hair," I accuse.

"As I said, flirting." He smiles tightly, all lips and no teeth. "Just a bit of fun."

"That's not what she says," Ron contests loudly.

Another shop assistant, a wizard wearing glasses and a wary smile, materialises. "Can I be of help, gentlemen?"

Lestrange glances at him. "No," he replies, before frowning slowly down at Ron. "I know you. You're a *Weasley*. This isn't the first time you've interrupted my fun. I'll remember that..." His dark eyes move to mine. "Bye for now, Omega."

We both watch with unfriendly faces as he walks away.

"Won't be the last time either," Ron yells at his retreating back, and then in a quieter voice: "Slimy prat."

I nod fervently. Slimy doesn't even begin to cover it. "He really gives me the ick."

"Sorry I left you alone," Ron says sheepishly.

It earns him a glare of suspicion from me. “Why are you apologising? Are you also treating me differently because of the whole Omega thing?”

“Yeah, of course.” He blinks uncertainly at my aggressive expression. “I mean *no!* I mean it’s because you’re also a Gryffindor. I wouldn’t care what happened to you if you were a slimy Slytherin.”

I have to laugh at that. We head to the counter, me still laughing, and him looking disturbed and concerned.

“One of these, please,” I tell the shop assistant, pointing at a jar of Billywig stings, and after she’s packaged it up and I’ve paid, present it to Ron. “Here. For you. Thanks for saving me.”

He blushes, ears going red. “Oh, yeah, ‘course. Cheers...”

I wave him off, equally embarrassed. “I figure I owe you- you’ve probably just kicked off a life-long feud with the Lestranges thanks to me.”

He shrugs. “It doesn’t matter. We’re not in their circle anyway. Got everything? Let’s go.”

My good mood tentatively restored; I lead Ron out of the shop with a forced spring in my step. “So, did the Kappa drown Lee?”

“No.” He looks dejected. “Although they got thrown out of the shop. You were right about the shrieky-thing.”

“Shrikidoma.”

“Yeah, that. How come you know so much?”

I roll my eyes good-naturedly at him. “How come you don’t know anything?”

The sound of something sharp clacking against a glass surface wakes me, and I shift, blearily imagining myself to be in my dorm at Hogwarts where someone’s owl is surely demanding entry into our tower. Probably Lavender’s.

There’s more insistent clacking, and I jolt up in sleepy irritation.

I’m only half wrong; I’m still at home, but there really is an owl perched outside my window. It beats its wings against the glass.

“*Okay,*” I grumble. I throw the covers off myself. “I’m coming.”

The moment I push open the window, the owl swoops by my head and deposits an official looking roll of parchment tied up in white ribbon onto my table, along with a lime-green envelope bearing the St. Mungo's emblem. Then, it picks one of the picture frames on the desk to settle on.

I don't have an owl, but I've observed enough of my schoolmates' ones to know the owl stays only when it wants something. I pick up the parchment first.

The ribbon unties itself and the parchment unrolls smoothly.

'Letter of Intent to Graft' reads the heading below a coat of arms featuring a green sphinx holding a harp.

'Dear Ms. Hermione,' reads its body.

'After giving the matter some serious consideration, Lord Thaddeus Nott would like to express interest in and intent to graft you into the House of Nott as a rightful, honourable, and pureblooded daughter.'

I continue to read, eyes squinting in disbelief, as the lethargy is swept instantly from my brain.

'An appointment has been pre-scheduled with the Registry of Magical Families for the morning of the 21st August, at Nine-Thirty, with the aim of formalising the process.'

'Should you wish to have representation with you, they may contact us directly to begin negotiations.'

'We look forward to receiving confirmation of your acceptance and attendance.'

The letter ends with a flourishing signature taking up almost a third of the page.

I have to re-read it three more times before I'm convinced of its sincerity. I exhale the disbelieving breath I've kept in and look at the unimpressed owl. "Do you belong to the Notts?"

It hoots.

"I presume that's a yes..."

I cock my head, thinking. *Lord Thaddeus Nott...* He was one of those unpleasant wizards I met in the empty classroom at Hogwarts. Was it him who said he was going to put in a bid for me? No, it was the bald one with the goatee. He'd said- what had he said?

I think I can recognise something rare and I'll be putting in my bid.

Something to that effect.

I'd assumed it had to do with marriage. Obviously, I was wrong.

I drop the parchment, thinking hard.

Were those wizards discussing a bid to adopt me? If so, why? Did they think I was an orphan? Maybe they thought I was a helpless, defenceless Omega that needed a home?

The accompanying letter from St. Mungo's might hold a clue. I break open its seal and unfold the insert.

It's an official notice informing me that tests confirm I have Nott ancestry.

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Chapter End Notes

In Canon witches and wizards don't practise surgery, but they prepare potions ingredients by hand (chopping and dicing and mashing etc) which I find incongruous. I have Hermione buy a scalpel because I presume (by presume I mean that I've made this up lol) that NEWTs potions would include dissection at the very least.

Also, google 'Kappa and shirikodama'- you won't regret it.

Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

10 25

“Hermione, are you alright? You’re a little off-colour, dear...”

“Oh, yes, I’m just- er, worrying about the Animagus elective,” I lie. “I don’t know if I’ll be accepted with only an E in Defence...”

Mum checks her watch. “That’s the course with elements of zoology and genomics? What does defence have to do with it?”

“Let me know if you need us to write a letter,” Dad says, adding his support. “We can write a very angry letter...”

“Don’t worry about it anymore.” Mum gives me a peck on the cheek.

I stand to follow them to the door.

“We’ll bring back dinner.” Dad shrugs his jacket on. “Do you want that prawn masala from Kutir? With the palak paneer- I know you like that.”

His solution to a bad day is always Indian takeaway. I manage another appreciative nod. When they’ve left, I rush through the house and up the stairs two steps at a time to my bedroom. The owl is still there.

“I told you to go!” I admonish, and then sigh when it doesn’t move. “Are you really going to stay here until you’ve got a reply from me??”

It hoots.

“Fine. *Fine*.”

I grab a roll of parchment, dip my quill into ink, and begin to write.

‘Thanks for the offer. I am extremely flattered, and you have certainly given me a lot to think about. I will reflect on the implications of the results of the genetic test over the weekend and send a definitive response by the 19th.’

I don’t believe them at all- I don’t think I’ve got one drop of Nott ancestry, but I do need to think about how to turn them down. I have a meeting on that Monday with Draco Malfoy,

and I might want to ask him about this. He's one of them- a pureblood; he'll know how to handle it with tact.

"Here you go." I tie my letter to the leg of the owl, and it flies off in a silent sweep of wings into the bright morning sky.

Not five minutes later, another owl swoops in through the open window. This one is a common owl with light brown wings, and the letter it deposits on my desk is neither tied up in ribbon nor written in heavy parchment.

Fearing another life-changing piece of news, I unfold the letter with some apprehension.

It's just an invite from Ginny, of all people, to come to their estate, The Burrow, for a dinner party this Saturday. She's also included an invite to my parents from hers.

This provides me with much needed distraction. I've never been to the Weasleys' and I'm very keen to see what a real magical household looks like. I've only ever visited Parvati and Padma, but they live in London and because they have to follow the ministry's secrecy laws, their house is not much more magical than mine.

More exciting than the prospect of exploring a magical house is the fact that Ginny sending me a social invite can only mean one thing: She's finally read my manifesto and decided to join SLOW.

The Weasleys' house is even more wonderful than I'd imagined.

We arrive by invisible flying car chauffeured by a very enthusiastic Mr. Weasley and are immediately greeted by the sight of a giant patchwork marquee being erected in an overgrown field in front of a house that looks like it was built by someone who had no concept of gravity or symmetry.

A group of people wielding wands make the large tent unfold, rise into the air, and then hold itself in place without need for poles or pegs.

Mr. Weasley, having finished scaring Dad with a monologue on how pointless petrol is when a good hovering charm on the whole car is all it takes to make it stay air born, honks once at the marquee crowd before circling and landing.

"But I poured petrol in the boot anyway because I know that's how muggles do it," he tells Dad reassuringly.

Mum, descending the car with shaky legs, grabs me somewhat painfully by the elbow. "That was- that was quite an experience!"

"It's my least favourite part of being a witch," I whisper. "I don't know why they like flying so much. We could have taken a portkey, it would have been faster, too."

A group of lanky redheads converge upon us. My parents have met most of the Weasleys at some point or other during sundry trips to Diagon Alley, but there are so many of them that re-introductions are necessary.

I am pulled away by Rokesia. "You're very early," she says. "I think Uncle Art overestimated how long it would take to travel by flying car."

"We are?" I ask, looking around. It already looks like there are a lot of people present, but then of course, the Weasleys *are* numerous. "Who else is coming?"

"Bill and Fleur are still on their way. Harry's coming with his parents, and Lavender with hers, and some of the twins' Quidditch friends are coming too. Lee, I think was invited, and Angelina, Katie..."

"That'll be quite a gathering, *ow-!*" Something tiny and brown sinks its teeth into my ankle and then runs away at top speed. "What *was* that?"

"Oh, it's just a garden gnome. Oi Fred, George! Another one of your little friends is on the loose!" Rokesia leads me towards the crooked house. "C'mon I'll show you around."

"You don't even live here, Ro." Her cousin Ron breaks away from the group to follow us. "Shouldn't I be giving the tour?"

"Sure, you should," says Rokesia. "But didn't Aunt Molly ask you to first come and help her peel the potatoes?"

Ron blanches. "Actually, you go ahead... I think I'll help catch that gnome first..."

"Well that's got rid of him," says Rokesia, after Ron runs off. "Come, let's say hi to Aunt Molly and then we can go to Ginny's room. She told me to bring you up."

"Er, okay." I eye the house, wondering how it manages to house all the Weasleys. I've heard of expansion charms being added to the interiors of wizarding residences. It's an inexpensive way of adding space, but it's not very safe unless done by competent wizards, and it needs almost daily upkeep.

But when we enter, it's obvious that no expansion or extension charms have been added. The inside of the house is just as charming as the outside; a hodgepodge of things piled one on top of another with no regard to personal space.

In one corner there is an old transfiguration textbook on top of a cookbook on top of a boxy television. There is a clock without numbers, and a wall covered from floor to ceiling with medals and certificates loudly and squeakily proclaiming their owners' achievements. The numerous sofa cushions appear to be playing musical chairs using the mismatched armchairs and sofas.

I follow Rokesia through the living room, my head swivelling this way and that as I try to take in as much as I can. In the kitchen, Mrs Weasley is conducting dinner preparations like a music director while yelling at her kitchen tools. She waves her wand and her oven pops open to accept a grumbling tray of pies.

“Where is Ronald?” she fumes, casting an eye at her niece. Then she notices me. Her tone instantly changes. “Oh! Hermione! Lovely to see you again, dear. Perhaps you can get Ginny out of her mood and- Oh dear-” She waves her wand as a pot behind her starts to boil over. “-and remind her that her mother would appreciate some help in the kitchen.”

“I can help,” I offer, but am immediately rejected.

“Of course not, dear, you girls go and play...”

We leave the harried Mrs. Weasley to it.

“She’ll only accept help from her own kids,” Rokesia says, as we begin to ascend the winding stairs. “I’ve tried multiple times, but she won’t let me help her either. She just shoves me out the kitchen and tells me to go and play.”

I am quite overwhelmed by all the sights, sounds, and smells, and am glad to be climbing away from them. “What’s wrong with Ginny? Why isn’t she downstairs?”

“I dunno. Won’t leave her room, apparently. Keeps alluding to a woman’s time of the month.” She rolls her eyes. “Bit dramatic, what. But she shouted at me through her door just now to bring you up when you arrived.” We reach a door painted pink, and Rokesia raps on it. “Hermione’s here!”

I hear the heavy thud of someone jumping off their bed, and then the pounding of feet on wooden flooring. The door cracks open to reveal Ginny’s face. She doesn’t look very well. Although she’s dressed for dinner- and clearly sprayed on a lot of perfume, her face is pale and her eyes overly bright.

She grabs my arm and yanks me in, closing the door on an annoyed Rokesia. “Tell my mum we’ll be out for dinner!” she yells through the door.

“I’m not your house-elf!” Rokesia yells back, before we hear her go grumbling back down the stairs.

“What the hell, Ginny,” I exclaim, looking around. There are open bottles of potions ingredients lying around. Her room stinks of preservatives and perfume.

She stares at me wide-eyed, then grabs me by the collar and takes violent sniffs. “Oh no, *oh no, it’s true!*”

“What the hell, Ginny!” I pull away. “What are you doing? What’s wrong with you?”

“Can’t you *tell*?” she cries, wringing her hands. “You have to help me!”

I look around. “Are you trying to brew something? You don’t even have a cauldron!”

“Of course not,” she snaps, sounding suddenly like the usual Ginny. “I’m trying to hide the smell, you nonce.”

I fold my arms. “There’s no need to be rude. Just explain clearly what you need help with or I’m leaving. Your room stinks.”

“I-” She wrings her hands again, then looks up and around as though expecting God to show up and deliver her. “I-” Her voice drops. “I think I’m an Omega, Hermione!”

“What? What do you mean you think?”

“What do you mean I think? *I mean I think!* I am starting to smell like one. I am starting to smell like you!”

“Er.” I run a hand down my face. “Don’t they- Weren’t you supposed to find this out at puberty or something?”

“Weren’t *you*?” says Ginny snappily, before sinking morosely down into her bed. “Sorry, I’m very stressed.”

“Okay.”

“I haven’t got my first period yet,” she confesses, forcing the words out through stiff lips.

I sit down next to her, frowning with concern. “This sounds like delayed puberty. It’s not good. You’re what, fourteen?”

I raise my brows quizzically when she shoots me a glare. “Ginny, I don’t think I’m the best person to talk to about this. Wouldn’t your mum be better able to help you?”

“No,” she hisses. “She’ll report me and then I’m done for!”

“Okay.” I press my lips together inwardly. I want to say I don’t think her mum will report her, but I am not sure about anything anymore.

“How did you do it?” she asks, looking hopeful and fearful all at once. “How did you hide it for so long?”

I shrug helplessly. “I don’t know. I wasn’t doing anything.” I perk up. “Maybe that’s the trick! Just pretend everything’s fine and no one will notice. It’s probably all psychological...”

“What? That’s not going to work. They’ll realise it the moment I leave the room. It’s been getting more obvious for days!”

Well, this explains why she’s made her room stink, at least.

“No one smelled me,” I point out. Maybe it *is* all psychological...

That quiets her. She appears to think, one hand fiddling with the tiny pink flowers sewn onto her bedspread. “You’re right,” she concedes. “I think we could tell there was an Omega

around but didn't think that it was you, because no one thought that it *could* be you. And of course, at Hogwarts there are so many students that it's hard to distinguish who's what..."

She looks up at me with fierce hope. "I think I can try and hide myself the same way. You just have to go with me everywhere! Then people will think they're smelling you, and they won't suspect me!"

I frown. "Ginny, that's crazy. We can't go around together all the time. Wait a minute, is that why you invited me here?"

She looks ashamed for a moment, then gathers herself together again. "You said you wanted to help Omegas! And you're the only one I know who doesn't want to be one..."

"And I do recall you telling me that being an Omega was no big deal," I say, raising my brow.

"That was before--"

"Before you found out you were one?" I complete her sentence and watch with satisfaction as her face redds with shame again.

"I'm sorry," she whispers.

"Okay I'll help you," I concede. I put my hands up in a cautionary gesture. "At least for tonight, and maybe *only* for tonight. We don't even know if it'll work anyway. They might realise what you are the moment we go down."

"It'll work," she says confidently. "Harry's mum's coming and she's an Omega too, so she'll help camouflage me. And of course, everyone will be distracted by Fleur."

I remember Fleur is her brother Bill's wife. "Ah, I didn't realise she was also an Omega..."

"No." She grimaces. "You'll see..."

"We're not trying to emulate conjoined twins," I hiss. "Don't rub against me like that."

"What's a conjoined twin?" asks Ginny as she continues to nervously press the left side of her body into the right side of mine in an unconscious effort to imitate one.

"We're so glad that you're feeling well enough to come out for dinner, Gin," Lady Potter, a pretty witch with dark hair and eyes addresses her. "Harry's been so worried."

Rohesia sniggers while Lavender *oohs*, and Harry tries to hide his awkwardness by putting his elbow in his bread plate.

Ginny giggles half-heartedly.

I feel truly bad for her.

“Aa, young love,” croons the beautiful Fleur. She drapes herself across her husband and bats long lashes at him. “Love is all we need, n’est-ce pas?”

“Why did Gringotts send you back, Bill?” asks Mrs. Weasley peevishly. I get the feeling that she doesn’t like her daughter in law very much.

Bill Weasley, his arm around his wife’s shoulders, chuckles. “You all know that old Marvolo’s just kicked it? Well, the new Lord Gaunt’s finally let the goblins into their vault to appraise their precious heirlooms and some of them are very, very dark artefacts. They recalled a few of us to help break their curses. Can’t value them if we can’t even approach them. Vegetables, please.”

I help pass the platter of roasted roots along. “Avery’s grandfather is dead?” I exclaim my surprise, remembering the unpleasant old man with the bad knees. He might have been grisly and unkempt, but he didn’t exactly seem in bad shape.

“Yes. Oh, is his grandson still in school?”

“Just graduated,” one of my schoolmates clarifies.

“There are cursed items?” Mum enquires in poorly hidden alarm. “What exactly do these curses do?”

“Oh, there are all sorts,” Harry’s father begins to explain to her. “But don’t worry, we make sure most of them don’t fall into mugg- unsuspecting hands.”

“What do the Gaunts got hidden in their vault, Bill?” demands one of the twins, exiting a conversation with Lee and Angelina about a match between the Quidditch teams, Puddlemere United and Wigtown Wanderers.

Bill shrugs. “Probably the usual poisoned weapons and binding jewellery but we don’t know for sure. Haven’t started work yet. We have to get the papers in order first and that takes time...”

“You know what?” says his father, as he drizzles gravy liberally over his plate, “I think Morfin got sick of having to live in squalor while watching his peers rolling in gold. An ancient name doesn’t buy food, does it? This is what happens when you force yourself to live a life you can’t keep up.”

“I don’t know if I could ever sell my family heirlooms,” sighs Lady Potter, rejoining our conversation. “Although Sev’s more pragmatic. He’s said he’d sell his last cauldron if it’d keep us off the streets. And Merlin knows, he’s probably had to too...”

Mrs. Weasley shakes her head. “I’m with your brother on this. I’d sell whatever I had to to provide for my family.”

Ginny has a literal knee-jerk reaction to that and accidentally kicks me under the table. I try and suppress an annoyed grunt, but we've attracted attention, and faces turn to us.

"I heard that Avery's adopted," I blurt out in an attempt to distract, the very wild, very untrue statement making its way through my brain where it was born just seconds ago, and out of my mouth.

To my great surprise, everyone sniggers, including Percy. "I don't like to make conjectures," he says, "but if even Hermione's heard it..."

"I heard," says Lavender slyly, "that his uncle's his father."

"Oh, that's a common one, and I'm sure they'd like everybody to think that," says Harry's father, causing Lavender's superior little grin to fall off her face at the realisation that her news isn't as shocking as she thought it would be.

"Why would they want us to think that?" I gasp in disgust, my brain still reeling at the apparently true piece of gossip I've accidentally brought to the table.

"Because the alternative is that his mother... er..." Bill racks his brain for the right word. "... dallied with a muggle."

Fleur giggles. "*Dallied?* Tu veux dire faire l'amour?" she whispers very loudly into his ear. Ginny makes a gagging sound next to me.

"This isn't dinner-appropriate conversation," complains Mrs. Weasley, and she with the women at her end of the table break off to talk about a rice pudding recipe.

"Merope's *definitely* his mum, though?" asks Angelina, which elicits another round of gossiping from the rest.

"How is dallying with a muggle worse than incest?" Even my dad's question sounds so naïve to me now, and I am for the first time sad that I immediately know the answer to something.

"In some circles, it's the worst crime," somebody else explains apologetically.

"Are adoptions common practice in the wizarding world?" I ask, trying to make it look like I'm steering the subject in a marginally more appropriate direction while really trying to dig up information I need.

"Yes and no," answers Lord Potter, pushing up his glasses, and when I press for him to elaborate, he obliges: "It's most commonly employed by pureblood families to keep their line going by legitimising a bastard or adopting in a male descendent of one of the female lines so the name can carry on. Avery probably has his uncle or grandfather listed as his father. He carries the Gaunt last name, doesn't he?"

"Yeah. But you think that they also did it to be able to continue to claim they are pureblood? Because his real father might be a muggleborn?"

"I don't think that exactly, but some people do, yes."

The table is cleared and we all slowly walk back into the house, weighed down by full and satisfied stomachs. The adults head to the kitchen to pick their digestifs. I follow them, Ginny trailing me.

Harry joins us. “Uncle Sirius’s great grandfather married a fake Macmillan, didn’t he?” he says before turning to Ginny. “Can I talk to you in private?”

Ginny looks at me. “Er.”

“Fake Macmillan?” I say.

“She wasn’t a fake Macmillan, she was grafted quite late into the Macmillan bloodline, just before she became of age, when it would have been too late,” Harry’s father clarifies, as he pours himself a glass of something. “Sometimes, if an heir is adamant on marrying a half-blood or muggle-born, they bribe another family into adopting the witch so that she technically becomes a pureblood. Problem solved.”

“None of these so called Sacred Twenty-Eight families are one hundred percent pureblood,” adds Bill. “Although they’ll do all sorts of things in order to keep their status. They’ll perform dangerous blood magic if it gets the job done. Usually bungle it too. And then we get called in to fix it.”

“Ginny?” says Harry, trying to get her attention, and she tugs on my sleeve in turn.

I exit the kitchen with the couple. “Er. I’m sorry, Harry, but I’m conducting an experiment on magical cores and Ginny’s volunteered. We’re not allowed to separate.”

“Why? What sort of experiment? Until when?” asks a perplexed Harry.

“There’s no such thing as magical cores,” says Rohesia suspiciously, looking up from a chess game with Ron. Sometimes I forget that she’s nothing like her cousin. She’s a Ravenclaw and very well read. “What are you two really up to?”

“I think I can prove that magical cores exist,” I say stubbornly, unwilling to abandon the plot. “Ginny and I are trying to temporarily merge our cores.”

That earns a collective snort from the group of young Weasleys and their friends that are piled on the couches.

I roll my eyes, quickly inventing another piece of gossip. “Speaking of blood magic, isn’t that how er...” I try and remember the name of one of the Quidditch teams being discussed at the dinner table earlier. “...Puddlemere United supposedly won the league last year?”

Just as I intended, it sparks a full-blown Quidditch argument and when Bill comes out of the kitchen to add his piece, I manage to sneak Ginny back up to her room.

“Here.” I unwind my scarf, and then pull off my jumper. “Just wear these when you go out, and make sure everyone knows they’re mine. That way they’ll think they’re smelling my clothes and not get suspicious. I’ll keep sending you more. We can pretend it’s part of the experiment.” I pause. “Just to set the record straight, I think this is all really wrong.”

"I know you do. Thanks for helping me," she says. "I- I'm sorry I involved you in this. It was such a shock and I just don't know what to do about it yet."

"I know. I understand."

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

10 25

I arrive at my next meeting with Draco Malfoy fully prepared. The secretary that meets me, a young pimply witch, raises a polite eyebrow as I lug a tote packed with SLOW emblazoned decks printed and bound the muggle way, out of the lift.

Without a word of comment, she knocks discretely on the mahogany wood doors which open to reveal the long hall-like loft-office of Draco Malfoy, one side of it an uninterrupted line of glass looking out onto the river and skyline. Threatening black clouds hover above the grey-clad city. Beads of moisture sit on the surface of the windows.

I turn my attention back to the desk and the man behind it, ignoring the cold stares that follow me from the wall of silver-eyed portraits. “Good afternoon, Mr. Malfoy,” I greet, walking with quick and confident steps to his desk.

His heavy gaze sweeps from the top of my head down through my ecru skirt suit and to my ballet flats-fitted feet. “I thought we agreed,” he says with a smile, “that you were going to call me Draco.”

I’d honestly forgotten and say so.

“Understandable. Why don’t you try again?”

I peer doubtfully at him. *Is he serious?*

“Try again?” I ask, and when he makes no reply, I break a self-conscious smile and repeat my greeting with the correct name, my uncertainty adding a questioning inflection to the end of it:

“Good afternoon... *Draco*?”

“Please,” he replies, waving a welcoming hand. “Make yourself comfortable.” The chair in front of me pulls itself out.

I sit and begin awkwardly extricating documents from my bag, determined to set the meeting back on track.

“I see you’ve been busy,” he observes drily. “Let’s not go straight into that just yet. Why don’t you tell me what you’ve done since we last met?”

“There’s not much to tell.” I laugh forcedly. “The only events of note are somewhat personal.”

“Tell me anyway,” he says, and settles into his chair as if prepared for a long story. I know from my parents retelling of their work stories that important men can be somewhat eccentric; one just has to humour them. And Draco Malfoy is a very important man.

“Sure,” I say slowly. “One of it involves your cousin Lestrange.” I hesitate. “I know he’s your cousin, so I don’t mean to offend you by criticising him, but he was definitely behaving very inappropriately.”

“Mm, how so?” asks Draco Malfoy, as though he’s heard about his cousin’s behaviour many times before and is not surprised by the accusation.

“He said some highly suggestive things when we met in Diagon Alley.” The words come out in a rush because even though it wasn’t me that had behaved inappropriately, I am embarrassed by proxy, and thinking back on that encounter is upsetting me.

He clicks his tongue in disapproval. “What did your escorts do? I hope they hexed him?”

A bubble of laughter escapes me as I imagine Ron attempting to hex a grown wizard. “No, I was alone. But one of my classmates intervened...”

“Alone!” exclaims Draco Malfoy, the word holding worlds of shock and concern. “How dangerous. You poor girl.”

“Oh, er- It wasn’t *dangerous*, really...”

“Mm. And then what?”

I blink. “That was it. Oh, I did also receive an offer to join a wizarding family.”

His eyes narrow slightly. “An offer to *join*...?” he repeats questioningly.

“Yes, a grafting offer. It’s a type of adoption-”

“Ah. Yes, I am familiar with it.” His pleasantly shaped mouth curves up in a generous smile. “Did you bring their offer?” His head tilts a little to scan through the pile of documents in front of me. “I can have one of my lawyers here in minutes. These things must be negotiated well.”

“Thanks,” I say. “But it won’t be necessary. I’ve rejected them.”

His chin jerks up. “Rejected them?” he says in sharp shock, and for a second, I imagine I hear anger in his voice. “When?”

I frown. “Why? Does the when matter?” Actually, I’d sent out the rejection letter from Diagon Alley just half an hour ago.

“Of course not,” he assures. “But are you sure about this? A wizarding family could be very useful to you, and in the-”

“I’m sure,” I interrupt decisively.

His jaw clenches. He taps his fingers restlessly on the table. “Hermione, I do wish you’d discussed this with me before making such a rash decision. These are old and powerful families and you don’t want to break bridges if you want to see your project succeed. I offered you my help. My door is open at any time.”

“It’s not a rash decision,” I maintain, irritation pricking my chest. Then, unable to keep in my anger any longer, it all bursts vehemently out of me. “I know what they’re trying to do! They just want to sell me. They’ve already found a buyer.”

He stills, watching me cautiously with eyes as grey as the sky outside.

“And it’s your cousin, I know it!” I proclaim loathingly. “I know I have no proof and maybe you think I’m crazy, but I know it’s him! He *told* me in Diagon Alley that his family only marries purebloods. He *asked* me when I would turn seventeen.”

My chest heaves with indignation and fury. Just recalling my conversation with Sebastien Lestrange is enough to get my blood boiling again.

That oily fucker!

Draco Malfoy is still staring at me like he can’t believe what he’s hearing.

I continue, too angry to stop. “He must have found out when my birthday is, and he knew I would only remain eligible to be adopted for the next few weeks. Well, he can keep buying those perfumes. I’ll never marry an Alpha!”

“So, your plan now is...” he begins, when he’s found his voice.

“Easy.” I force myself to calm down, breathing heavily. “Avoid Lestrange for the next few weeks until I turn seventeen and untouchable, and then continue to work on SLOW and with your support, eventually change the laws.” I pat the top of my pile of decks. “I’m very sorry I lost my temper. It’s been a stressful few weeks...”

He blinks, breathes in deeply and regards me calculatingly, silver eyes glinting like new coins. “I *would* like to keep extending you my support, and I believe I have a solution that will ensure my cousin ceases to harass you, but...”

I lean in. “But-?”

“But you might have to be deceptive, and I’m not sure you have it in you...”

“I do,” I say eagerly. I’ll fight dirty.

He looks hesitant. “Well, this would be a lot on my part, you understand, but you and I can pretend that we have an understanding...”

I withdraw, disappointed. “What? You mean like a fake engagement? That’s it?” I’d expected something more than a game of charades.

He shrugs grey-suited shoulders. “It’s the simplest way to chase away other Alphas.”

Somehow it had never really crossed my mind that he’s an Alpha. I blink at him. “Oh. *You’re* an Alpha?”

Suddenly it feels like a very, very bad idea to be alone here with him. I frown at the ominous sensations now swirling in my gut, trying at the same time to ignore them. I never like to rely on feelings; they can be very misleading.

And I blame the wizarding culture for beginning to infect me with its views on propriety. I must destroy the toxic Alpha-Omega traditions before I too begin to think it all normal.

But the feelings persist, and I feel compelled to reassure myself. “You’re not also...?” I begin, before changing my question. It would be too presumptuous and egoistic to ask if he too wants to try and marry me. “I’m, er, safe with you, right?”

He looks surprised. His expression softens. “Of course.”

“I just don’t want to...” I twist my hands, unable to articulate just what I don’t want. “I don’t want it.” I’m blushing now. “Marriage and babies and- and- all that.”

His face hardens again in a strange mixture of possessive protectiveness, something like what I imagine an older brother might look like if I had one.

“Poor girl,” he says, voice deep and slow and sympathetic. “Look at you, you’re so frightened. Come here.”

I stand to walk around the desk and go to him. He is very attractive; all sculpted lines and cool grey tones, and I know that’s not exactly an observation one would make of an older brother.

He touches my hair. “What unruly curls. As unruly and untameable as its owner.”

I like my curls. Viktor had asked me to wear it up for the Yule Ball, and I’d had to use lots of charms and potions to get it to behave.

“I like it,” says Draco Malfoy softly, and I smile.

He smiles too, eyes crinkling, and for a second there is a hint of gold in their grey, like sunlight hiding behind fog. “You don’t want to be tamed, do you?”

“I’m not a pet,” I say, half-jokingly.

He laughs cleanly. “Pet. I like that. Can I call you pet? It could be our way of making light of this whole situation. Very ironic, no? And of course, it’s also a short form of petulant, which you perpetually are.”

I tilt my head, unconvinced, slightly disturbed, but afraid of offending him. “I don’t know... It’s...” *Inappropriate*. “...Unconventional. But I suppose if we’re making it a short form, it is also a short form of petal, and that’s what my parents call me.”

He smiles indulgently. “See, it’s perfect. Shall we make sure no other Alpha ever gets his hands on you, pet?”

I shiver, picturing Sebastien Lestrange with his oily eyes and mannerisms. “How would it work? Obviously, I don’t want to actually be engaged to you. Er, no offence...”

“I think you might be the first person to say that,” he says. His eyes meet mine, and they’re as flat and as serious as his tone. “You have no idea how that makes me feel.”

I start to chuckle at his straight-faced joke but startle when he suddenly snaps his fingers. “Dobby!”

There is the tell-tale crack of an appearing house-elf, followed by the house-elf itself. It bows low.

“Bring me the Dragon’s Fantasy from my personal vault,” commands Draco Malfoy. He smiles at my confusion. “It’s just the name of the ring. Trite, I know, but I inherited many such things, and they’ve been named by their past owners out of sentimentality.”

“I still don’t see how an engagement can be much of a deterrent to someone whose moral compass is already in need of tuning,” I point out, frowning in doubt; I’m not sold on this idea.

But the blonde wizard in front of me is practically oozing confidence. “This ring is special,” he assures, taking the lacquered box from his house-elf when it reappears bearing it in its skinny hands. He flips the box open with his thumb. Nestled in the middle of the dark velvet lining lies a miniature dragon with diamonds for scales, tiny pear-shaped emerald eyes, and a large green stone held in its open jaw. It blinks.

“Wow,” I breathe. It’s beautiful and so very magical. “But why do you refer to it as a ring? How does it work?”

“It will modify your scent by muddling it with mine,” he explains, looking on amusedly as wonder and admiration play openly on my face. “All we have to do is feed a couple of drops of our blood into it. Simple.” He picks up the piece of jewellery. The shining metal beast sways its proud head and swishes its tail lazily. “And as to your other question, it will wrap itself around your finger when I direct it to.”

“What you’re describing sounds like dark magic.” It sounds borderline illegal, in fact.

He laughs. “Blood magic isn’t necessarily dark magic, sweet girl. Here, hold out your hand.”

“What, now?” I say in alarm.

Draco Malfoy smirks. “When then? After my cousin has caught you? I think that would be too late.”

I bring my hands protectively to my chest. “I- I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

He swivels his chair to face me fully. “Hermione, don’t be difficult. This will solve a lot of problems.”

“I know and I’m very grateful for your help.” My eyes flit around, panic building in me inexplicably. “But this doesn’t feel right. It feels like I’m going backwards...”

He lowers the dragon back into its box. “Shh, calm down,” he soothes lowly. “This was *your* idea, and it’s a good one, but we don’t have to do it if you’ve lost the nerve.”

“Okay.” I *have* lost my nerve. “I’m sorry.” I frown down at my hands. “I just-”

“The ring will offer you protection,” he says placidly. “Don’t you want my protection?”

My heart rate is sky rocketing, and I’m finding it hard to think. *Protection. Do I want his protection?* What do I need his protection from? “Maybe I should do some research on the subject first.”

He snaps the box shut and stands. “I really don’t like wasting my time, Ms. Granger. *You came to me.*”

I lick my lips, unsure and upset. I’ve offended him and- “I didn’t mean to,” I begin. I hesitate, tremble, look at his impassive face, and almost give in. But I look at that shiny box again, and I just can’t. I just can’t take part in a blood-magic ritual without at least knowing what’s written into it.

“I’m sorry. I’m so sorry for wasting your time on this matter,” I apologise. “But if we can go back to discussing SLOW, I have new-”

He smiles icily, lifting a hand to silence me. “I don’t think we can do that today. We’re out of time. I’ll summon my secretary to walk you out.”

The abrupt end to what should have been a successful and productive meeting is like a slap to the face. I jerk back. “Wh-what?”

“You don’t appear to value my suggestions or need my help. Like I said, I don’t like wasting my time.” He snaps his fingers again. “Ms. Bulstrode.”

The pimply secretary returns and Draco Malfoy coldly gives her orders to escort me out, before he disappears wordlessly up the spiral staircase. Confused, I quietly gather up my things and leave, and as the doors to his office close behind me, the portraits along the wall begin to converse in low, derisive tones.

Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

10 25

The clink of cutlery on plates can barely be heard over the chattering that echo across the Great Hall. Breakfast is almost over, and prefects and student club leaders are scurrying around delivering messages or calling for attention.

The Gryffindor tables are no exception. “Quidditch trials are in a month,” announces Harry loudly, going up and down the long tables. “Kindly register by the fourth by adding your name to this list. I’m going to pin it up in the Common Room...”

“I’ll be trying out for Chaser,” Ginny declares, stabbing her fork aggressively into the air. “All our subs are incompetent arsewipes.”

“Don’t get your hopes up,” warns Seamus. “I know Harry’s sweet on you and all, but I guarantee the starter position will go to Farah.”

I yawn and put my head in my arms. I was up all last night researching Central American logographic systems, and when I close my eyes, columns of fat squiggly glyphs parade past the inside of my eyelids.

“Just because her uncle’s a famous international referee doesn’t automatically make her a good chaser,” says one of Ginny’s mates. Corner, I think. “I’ve seen Ginny play. She’s decent. Loads better than Farah. And anyway, isn’t Shafiq being investigated right now?”

“Oh yeah,” says Ron further down the table. “I think he’s made some bad calls lately. Krum would definitely’ve caught the snitch if not for...”

I start at the mention of Viktor, but when it’s clear it’s still just Quidditch related, let my forehead drop back down. I think I’m getting a headache.

Somebody prods me in the back. It’s Parvati. “Alchemy now,” she says. “Get up. Let’s go.”

“Mm,” I respond, and drag my body up, massaging my temples. Everyone else is getting ready to leave. The chatter increases in intensity. Benches scrape against the flat stone floors. We wend our way through the usual exodus of breakfasted students and head for the dungeons.

“So, here’s the plan for tomorrow,” says Parvati. “Neville and Seamus have volunteered to get butterbeer and firewhiskey from Hogsmeade—”

“Oh no,” I groan. “I don’t need any of that. It’s just a birthday.”

“It’s not just a birthday,” she snaps. “You’ll be seventeen. It’s got to be celebrated.”

“It’s not- Hmm...” I pause to reflect. “You know what? You’re right. I do want to celebrate.”

My seventeenth birthday will be important in more ways than one. Tomorrow, I’ll truly be free. And without the help of blood magic. Now *that*’s something to celebrate.

Parvati squeals. “I told you you’d change your mind. We already ordered a Seer’s cake. That’s traditional, so it’s got to be done, and it’s really fun. And we got some dragon’s firecrackers...” She prattles excitedly on until we meet with her twin near one of the stairs to the lower levels.

“Looking rough, Hermione,” she says. “Cramming for the NEWTs already?” She chuckles.

Who says Ravenclaws can’t be funny?

“Ha ha,” I deadpan. My eyelids feel heavy.

We descend the stairs together, and I pull my mass of curls into a bun on the top of my head as Padma pushes the door to our classroom open.

The new Alchemy classroom is a converted storeroom; last time I was in here it contained a fascinating collection of study skins and other magizoological specimens. But now there’s a blackboard, a shelf stacked with spare parchment and gloves, and twelve empty cauldrons sit next to twelve L-shaped workstations in the middle of the room. One of our classmates has already arrived and is busy setting up shop at one of the stations in the middle row.

“Theo!” greets Padma, when we enter. “I *knew* you’d be in this class. Why weren’t you at breakfast?”

I study the blonde Slytherin. Despite attending almost the exact same classes together, I’ve never actually made any personal connection with him.

“Morning.” He looks up and greets Padma, smiling slightly. “I had a floo-call with my father, and I had to take it in Professor Snape’s office...” His eyes slide to me and suddenly I feel self-conscious.

Does he know about the grafting offer?

“Oh,” says Padma. “Sorry that merger fell through, by the way.” She raises her eyebrow when he shoots her a funny look. “What? I read about it in Investment Today. It’s not exactly small news, is it?”

I place my bag on the station next to the one Parvati has chosen. Financial gossip isn’t much more interesting to me than Quidditch gossip, and I need to do something about my tired state of mind before one of our most perceptive and nit-picky professors comes in. “Be right back,” I tell the twins. “Since Professor Snape’s not yet here, I’m going to go splash water on my face.”

Padma gives me a quizzical look. “What for?”

“I need to wake myself up. I won’t be a minute.”

The twins chortle amusedly while Theodore scoffs. “Merlin, Granger, are you a witch or not?”

Parvati pulls out her wand. “Here.” A blast of icy cold air hits my face, shocking me sufficiently to fully wake me. The cold is not enough to stop me from flushing with mortification, and soon I can actually feel the heat in my face. “Sorry,” I mutter an excuse. “Brain’s practically dead from exhaustion.”

She giggles some more. “Sure,” she says, patting my back in friendly condescension. “Don’t worry, even Hermione Granger’s allowed some dumb moments.”

The door bangs violently open and Harry, Cetus, and Neville walk in, chattering excitedly. Neville dumps his bag on the table in front of mine and turns around. “Professor McGonagall was looking for you. Says to inform you-” He adopts an exaggeratedly formal tone. “-that your application to take a portkey home tonight has been approved, and to make sure you are present at her office no later than five this evening.”

“Huh?” I say. Maybe I actually am brain-dead. “Me? I didn’t apply to go home.”

Neville shrugs and turns around as the door opens again, this time to admit Professor Snape. He is followed by a flock of Ravenclaws and a few lagging Slytherins.

“Settle down,” he barks, before the last student has even entered the classroom. “Who can tell me what Jabir considered to be the four basic qualities of the elements?”

Hands are hitting the air. Professor Snape’s eyes rove around before landing on me. His lip curls. “Are we pretending modesty for once, Ms. Granger, or have we finally found a subject that you can’t get your bushy head around?”

I lower my gaze and roll my eyes safely at my textbook, looking up only after he’s called on a Slytherin student, Barty, to answer.

I mouth the answer silently along with my classmate. “Hotness, coldness, dryness, and moistness...”

“Correct,” says Professor Snape curtly. “Take five points. And what are the eight known elements of Alchemy?” His eyes survey the room again. “Harry?”

“Er,” says Harry, straightening up. “The eight known elements... They’ll be aether, air, earth, fire, sulphur, salt, water, and, er... lead?” He frowns at his uncle’s irritated headshake. “No? Er, krypton then? No, er... Gold?”

Cetus is sniggering.

“Oh!” says Harry finally. “I got it- Mercury!”

“Very good,” Professor Snape praises. “Take five points for Gryffindor.”

I roll my eyes again. Could he possibly be any more obvious about his favouritism?

I knock on the door to Professor McGonagall’s office at five minutes to five. The lion-shaped knocker opens its mouth and her stern voice issues from it: “Enter.”

The door opens and I step in. “Professor,” I immediately start, not wanting to waste any time; I want to go to the library and finish my essay on logographic systems for Ancient Runes. “I’m sorry for the confusion but I didn’t submit a request to go home—”

“I know, Miss Granger. Your parents did.” At my surprised look, she smiles good-humouredly. “I understand you will turn seventeen at exactly seven minutes and thirty-three seconds past eight o’clock tonight. They’ve sent a letter expressing their desire to celebrate your coming of age the traditional way and requested that you be allowed to go home for the night.”

“Wow! I- Really?” I didn’t even know there was a traditional way of celebrating a seventeenth birthday. Except that one must have a Seer’s cake, apparently. I suppose my parents learned about this from the Weasleys.

“Yes, really,” Professor McGonagall responds drily. She hands me a square paperweight stamped with the Hogwarts Crest and a symbol of a key with wings beneath it. “You will take this portkey home in a few minutes and you will take the same portkey back here tomorrow morning. It will activate at precisely ten o’clock.”

“Amazing, thanks!” I say excitedly. I’ve only been back to school for a couple of weeks, but I already miss my parents, and can’t wait to see them. “See you tomorrow, Professor.” I grasp the heavy paperweight. It’s not a moment too soon; there’s a jerk behind my navel, and then I’m falling forward into nothing.

I land with an ungraceful stumble in our entrance hallway, still clutching the paperweight. The lovely, slightly musky smell of home is the first thing to greet me, and I take a deep, appreciative breath, before yelling for my parents.

There’s no response. The house is silent; almost too silent, and I fear they might be trying to surprise me. It’s dark in the hallway even though it’s still light outside, because there are no windows. I flick the wall-switch, but it doesn’t work.

I sigh in annoyance. I've only been gone two weeks and already things are falling apart. My parents are really bad about calling the electrician. Last year I came home to discover that the TV hadn't been working for months.

I place the portkey on the console table. Even in the darkness I can see that both their keys are here. They're definitely home. Maybe they're upstairs getting ready. "Mum?" I call again. "Dad?" They know I hate surprises, but maybe that's also a wizarding birthday tradition?

I look up the long flight of stairs and decide to head for the living room first. I know from watching movies that that's where one usually gets surprised, and if that's what they've planned to do, it's best to get it over with.

There is a very strange, almost magical peace to the house. Perhaps the Weasleys are here and helped them plan whatever it is they are planning?

I sigh and pause just outside the living room, fearing I'm about to be jumped on by fifteen redheads.

Bracing myself, I turn and enter.

In the darkened living room, where the curtains have all inexplicably been drawn shut, I find my parents seated side by side on the couch, looking straight ahead of them.

So, no surprise then. "Hey!" I gesture and take a few steps forward. "What's going on? Didn't you hear me calling?"

Their stares remain blank and fixed and they don't appear to have noticed me despite my standing almost directly in front of them. I frown, my heart rate spiking as I suddenly realise that I can hear neither the sounds of the streets outside nor the usual hum of all the electrical appliances in the house. All that is indicative of magical warding.

"*What the hell!*" I mutter to myself, panic overtaking me. "*What's happened? What do I do?*"

"Whatever I ask you to do," somebody behind me responds, the smooth, slightly acerbic voice familiar to my ears.

I whip around, my pulse now a staccato in my ears.

Avery Gaunt stands in the doorway behind me. An older man I've never met is with him. He's dark-haired, dark-eyed, clean-shaven and looks to be in his early fifties. I guess him to be the new Lord Gaunt because while Avery's significantly more blessed in the looks department, they do share the same nose and jaw line.

Avery steps into the room. "You know, this is my first time in a muggle residence, and I already have so many questions. Why, for example, do they keep frozen food sealed in a container in the kitchen? I'm almost starting to regret not having taken Muggle Studies..."

I whip out my wand and move to put myself in between them and my parents, panic miraculously turning into aggression. "What the hell are you doing here?"

“Isn’t it obvious? We’re here to celebrate.” He laughs malevolently. “Didn’t McGonagall give you our message?”

“This isn’t funny, Gaunt. Get out. Reverse whatever you did to my parents and get out!”

The older wizard laughs too. He aims his wand over my shoulder. “Filthy Mudblood thinks she can give us orders. Don’t you know who I am? Know what I can do to your filthy muggle parents?”

“Don’t be crude, Uncle,” says Avery, his dark eyes flashing with humour. “We must be civilised. After all, it’s not like we’re muggles.”

His uncle cackles appreciatively and moves forward.

I take a step back. “Try anything and you’ll be on your back faster than you can say *Merlin marries muggles*.”

“You won’t,” Lord Gaunt says confidently. “You wouldn’t dare. You’re still underage. You’ve got the Trace on you, and they’ll break your wand if you break the law.” He pauses to scowl. “And Merlin never married no muggle.”

“The Trace picks up on any magical activity performed in my vicinity,” I say. “You won’t perform magic either. You won’t risk the Ministry sending someone here to check on me.”

Lord Gaunt squints like he’s trying to work out the problem. Beside him, Avery sighs exasperatedly. “I forgot how much of a know-it-all you are,” he laments. He stashes his wand in his robe. “You really irritate me, you know.”

“Good,” I snarl. “Now get out.”

He raises his empty hands, palms out. “Alright we’ll go. But first we just want to talk.”

“What-” His uncle begins to protest, but Avery turns and pins him with a look, spitting out something that sounds distinctly snake-like. The older wizard lowers his wand, looking surly.

“What was that?” I demand. My wand-hand shakes. “What did you say? What kind of language was that??”

Avery approaches slowly, eyes on mine. “Just calm down, alright? No one’s doing magic here. No one’s threatening anyone. You see?” He waves with both hands, exaggerating how wand-less he is. “Your parents are fine. You’re fine.” He’s coming closer, cajoling, more tractable than I’ve ever seen him. “It’s alright. We just want to-” In a flash he’s grabbed my wand, pulling it right out of my sweating hand.

I let out an angered yell and lunge frantically for it, but he dances out of the way. “Ah ah,” he singsongs, holding my wand out of reach while his uncle cackles madly and moves towards my parents, his own wand raised again.

I vacillate, unsure whether to go for my wand or block the elder Gaunt from approaching the sofa.

I stay where I am, my hands curling into fists at my side. “Fine,” I say. My voice wavers from the adrenaline. “Cast a spell. Alert the Ministry. I hope they send an Auror to investigate.”

“First of all,” says Avery, twirling my wand triumphantly, “The Trace is not in effect during the school year. You’d have known that if you weren’t such a goody-two-shoes. Never tried to do magic outside of school, have you?” He laughs at the twisting expressions of horror and self-reproach on my face.

His uncle snorts and looks around as if afraid the walls might give him Hepatitis. “Enough gloating, Avery,” he snaps. “Let’s get this done so we can get out of this filthy place.”

“You won’t do anything,” I say, like I can make it true just by saying it. “You won’t do anything!”

Avery flicks my wand. “*Vulnus*.” There is a flash of bright light, a streak of white heat travels past my cheek, and I whip around with another cry.

A long diagonal red line has appeared on mum’s face, passing from her right temple through her right eye, nose, and mouth, down to her chin. A heartbeat later, bright red blood starts pouring from the long cut. But she sits unmoving, staring with her empty stare as the blood collects in her eye.

This time I scream a real scream. I leap forward and use my body to block my parents, arms outstretched. “Stop, stop!”

“I’ll be the only one giving instructions,” says Avery. He catches the glare his uncle throws him and shrugs. “My plan, my rules. Now, listen very carefully. We won’t harm the muggles so long as you choose to do as told.”

“Okay! Okay, I will. Don’t- don’t hurt them anymore.”

The Gaunts grin in tandem, a disconcerting sight.

“Perfect,” Avery exclaims happily. He indicates the open doorway. “Shall we begin? We don’t have time to waste, we’re already *cutting* it close.” He laughs again and waves his wand. “Get it? Cutting-”

“I- What about my mum? You have to heal-” My panicked words become a ringing scream as Avery sends another cutting hex whizzing under my arm to open a line in my father’s abdomen.

“Shut up and move, girl,” growls Lord Gaunt, gesturing with his wand.

I stumble after him into the hallway and then into the kitchen, which they’ve turned into a potions lab. It’s stiflingly hot and illuminated by balls of floating lights. A black portable cauldron sits on a bed of magma-red coals. A long silver stirrer clinks against its inner rim as it moves the thick liquid in languid circles.

I take in the vials of biological material sitting in a rack on the kitchen counter; dark blood and dark hair and clear nail clippings, the open tome beside it with ear-marked pages, the

sheathed silver dagger, the wooden goblet, and the stoppered bottles of blood replenishers.

And I realise that I've been afraid all this time that one of them meant to marry me. But this setup looks like preparations for complex blood magic. More accurately to this context, it looks like preparations for blood magic meant to graft someone into a family line. It's better than marriage, but only marginally so.

Avery flips through the tome while Lord Gaunt keeps his wand trained on me. He signals for me to get down on the floor.

"Why would you do this?" I ask as I sit down cross-legged on the cold tiles. "Why would you want me in your family? You hate muggle-borns!"

"I *don't* want you in my family," the elder Gaunt spits out. "You'd be a disgrace to our family name. Do you know how many would kill to have our ancestry? Do you know how many *purebloods* would kill to be in your place? We've never had to graft an outsider into our family in all these centuries. We should never have to. The shame! The shame of—"

"Uncle, we need dittany. Could you kindly?" Avery turns and motions lazily with one long-fingered hand. Lord Gaunt sneers and disappears, and when he's gone, Avery sighs and leans against the counter, watching me with hard eyes. "Uncle gets worked up easily. Have to head him off early, or we'll be listening to him rant for the next hour."

I scan him. My eyes must look as hard and hateful to him. "No longer having to pretend to be a model student must be very freeing for you," I say.

He laughs and twirls my wand. "Oh, yes."

"So, you don't want me in your family, from what I gather," I say dryly. "I don't want to be in yours either. Why are you going through with this? Is someone forcing you to? Maybe we can work together—"

"Don't waste your breath." Avery's lip curls, and it's his turn to scan me, dark eyes running dispassionately down my seated form. "You're very desirable, apparently. The whys escape me. I've always found you to be an unoriginal, unimaginative, commonplace mudblood tryhard. But rich Alpha males appear to have proclivities different to the rest of us, and I'll take real power and real wealth over meaningless pureblood drivel any day."

He picks up the silver dagger. Its sheath dissolves to expose metal and sharp edges. He continues to monologue while I stare in apprehension and growing fear. "Convincing my uncle what was best for us was difficult. Convincing my grandfather, impossible. Sure, he was curious enough to meet you along with the other lords. But his pride made him inflexible..." He looks at his handsome reflection in the dagger and smiles.

"You killed him," I whisper. "You killed your own grandfather. Just to- what? Just to adopt and then sell me?"

"To the highest bidder." He's still smiling. His uncle reappears with a pop, holding a cluster of dittany.

"Thanks, Uncle!" Avery says brightly, taking the dittany from him and placing it on the kitchen counter. "Get her ready. It's time. Chop chop." He makes chopping motions with the dagger and they both cackle.

Lord Gaunt waves his wand, immobilising me. "*Petrificus Totalus*." Then he bends down and rearranges my arms so that my hands rest on my knees, wrists turned up. Avery hands him the naked dagger and shows him where to make the cuts, and then I'm watching helplessly as the deadly edge bites into my skin and opens my arteries. Pain makes its home in my body while warm blood spills down my wrists and into my fingers and the creases of my knees.

Lord Gaunt sticks his face in mine. "We'll try not to bleed you to death. You are our golden goose, after all."

They move off to the cauldron. Lord Gaunt hands the dagger to Avery who helps him open his wrists over the potion. He bleeds freely into the simmering liquid all the while swearing with gritted teeth. Avery watches the potion, looking for signs of change, and when he's satisfied, seals his uncle's wounds and stops the flow. Then he drops the dagger into the potion. It makes a sizzling sound, and the concoction flares with bright green light.

"Perfect," Avery declares. They sit down cross-legged on the floor near the cauldron.

Lord Gaunt points with his wand at the bed of glowing coals. "Why are you using embers?"

"Because it emits a far more consistent heat. Don't touch it. You know, there's no harm in having them appraised and catalogued, even if..."

"Don't talk to me like I'm an idiot. Why would I touch it?" Lord Gaunt switches into hissing and spitting, like he's trying to swear but his mouth won't let him.

His nephew is unfazed; he responds in kind. It sounds like I'm in a snake hole.

Lord Gaunt shakes his head. "I don't need some wet behind the ears cursebreaker dying in our vault. If you want to do it yourself, go. It's open to you, you don't need me. And while you're there..." He switches back into angry incomprehensible rasping.

They talk like that while they wait, jumping between strange hisses and normal speech as quickly as they jump topics. I transfer my attention to the stirrer clinking hypnotically in the cauldron and try to calm myself by counting each slow counter-clockwise round: *One, two, three...*

"...Well? So what if he reneges? The list is long. But he won't anyway. He's being pressured by his Lord Father..."

"...arrowroot powder and doxy saliva, I'm thinking. If you mix it into the base potion, it really kills that brussels sprouts smell, and, yeah, I know it's all aesthetic, but..."

...thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty-seven...

"... and a career there is pointless, the Malfoys practically own the Ministry, why..."

I'm beginning to feel dizzy. My heart thumps with rapidly increasing speed in its cavity. The fabric of my robes knee-down is soaked through, and the metallic smell of blood hangs around me.

...forty-two, forty-three...

Suddenly, there is a loud ding like an oven timer going off. Moving quickly, Avery gets up, lifts the rack of vials containing blood and hair and nails off the counter and tips the contents of each vial successively into the blazing potion. "This is Grandfather's hair," he says, at the fifth vial. He turns his head in my direction and winks. "Took it off his corpse myself."

"Don't talk about the deceased like that," Lord Gaunt growls. "He's your ancestor. Show some respect. Your mother never taught you proper pietas. If I had raised you, you—"

"Here, Uncle." Avery hands him one of the bottles of blood replenishers. "Drink this. You look like you need it." Then he turns to me and winks again.

All the vials have now been emptied into the cauldron and it looks like they're just waiting for the brew to finish. I continue to count the rounds the stirrer makes.

Sixty-seven, sixty-eight, sixty-nine...

"She looks pale," the elder Gaunt comments, fixing me with a concerned eye. He spits out something in that strange hissing language. Avery responds with more hissing, before switching abruptly back to English. "Besides, I did communicate to him the risks involved," he says with a shrug. "He wants her blood as pure as possible. I told him we'll have it so pure the sorting hat will think she's Slytherin's heir. Ha ha ha."

And seventy-four, and seventy-five, and who? Who wants my blood as pure as possible?

Another ding vibrates loudly through the air. Avery collects some potion in the wooden goblet while his uncle heals my wrists and lifts the body-bind curse. I sway and slump and almost collapse but am dragged upright by Lord Gaunt who has me by a fistful of robes.

Who wants my blood as pure as possible?

An image of a handsome wizard with pale blonde hair and stern grey eyes enters my mind. He holds a live metal dragon and he smiles encouragingly at me. *Just feed it our blood...*

I shake my head. *No, no, that's not it. That's-* "That's the man that was going to help me," I mumble woozily. "He's good, he's nice. It's his cousin. *He's* the bad one..."

"What?" says Lord Gaunt loudly. "What did you say?"

The blonde wizard in my memory is replaced by a dark haired, dark eyed one, face so close to mine, closer in memory. *When do you turn seventeen?* he asks. *Families like mine only marry purebloods...* Behind him, on a shelf in that apothecary, there had been a beaker full of assorted silver stirrers. I remember that. I remember shifting my attention between Lestrange's oily gaze and that collection of stirrers.

I stare at the stirrer I'm supposed to be counting now. "Thirty-five, thirty-six, thirty—"

Avery comes close. "She's probably confused. Gross blood loss will do that. I've seen it happen many times." The goblet is pushed under my nose. "Old blood out, new blood in. Bottoms up, Granger!"

I drink. It tastes like blood. Not that I'm intimately familiar with the taste of blood, but it certainly smells like blood and it tastes of rust and salt. Then, Lord Gaunt helpfully hands me a bottle of blood replenisher and I chug that down too.

He leans back on his elbows while his nephew cleans up behind him. "How long did you say it should take?" he calls, as he watches me greedily emptying a second bottle.

"Mm, five to ten minutes," Avery answers. All around I hear the whoosh of magic and the clinking of tools being tidied.

I clumsily set the empty bottle down on to the floor and put my head in my hands. The blood is rushing straight into my face and brain, but I'm still drowsy and I think I may fall asleep sitting up like this.

It seems that I do fall asleep, because I'm awoken by Lord Gaunt's angry voice. "It's been at least twenty minutes! We're almost out of time!"

The cool has leaked slightly out of Avery's voice. "It's certainly been a while. Let's have a look at her." Someone taps on my arm. "Hey. Wake up."

I look up blearily, only to find myself almost eyeball to eyeball with Lord Gaunt. I yell and scoot backwards, my feet sliding and slipping in the puddle of blood.

"It didn't work," he spits. "She hasn't changed at all! She looks like her filthy mudblood self. You said you could do it, Avery. You said this would work!"

I pat my face with bloody hands. "How would you know it hasn't worked?" I ask. "What's supposed to happen?"

Lord Gaunt's mouth twists into a sneer. He's not even looking at me anymore. He's looking off to the side as though the sight of me offends him. "Try not to open your mouth in proper wizarding society, will you? You'll make your dirty heritage obvious."

"I brewed it accurately, down to the last gram of salt," Avery hisses. He summons his tome over and flips impatiently through it until he finds the place he's looking for. His finger moves down the page. He turns to the next one and reads that too. "The recipe is fine. Even *he*'s looked through it. He agreed with my proposed amendments. He approved everything!"

"Lestrange is an idiot," I offer. Actually, I don't know that he is. But it feels good to insult him.

I'm politely ignored. Lord Gaunt paces angrily. Avery slams the tome shut. "Well at least it didn't kill her," he muses to himself. "What went wrong then?"

"It must be her dirty blood," says Lord Gaunt decisively. "We didn't bleed her enough. Never mind. We have time to attempt a second brew. We'll use the traditional recipe, it worked just fine with you. I don't know why you have to constantly re-invent the wheel, Avery. If you prepare the ingredients fast enough, we can-"

"No." Avery looks chagrined. "No, we don't. I cleared the base potion."

"You- you-" His uncle looks positively enraged. "I've always said your over-confidence will one day come to bite you in the-" He stops talking, distracted by my sudden bout of laughing. The two wizards turn to look at me.

I'm really laughing. I'm laughing full-body laughs. The relief adds a slightly crazed flavour to my belly-shaking guffaws. "Oh, that was funny," I say, wiping beads of laughter from the corners of my eyes. "The two of you quarrelling, just- Oh, it's too funny. You won't believe how scared I was until then. Well, you yourself said it: It's obviously too late to attempt another brew. I'll be seventeen in less than an hour. So, why don't we all just-"

The two recoil, identical dark eyes widening.

"You're-" stutters the older Gaunt. "Y-you're... you're..."

I stop mocking them, genuinely alarmed now. What could possibly have happened to make my assailters react like that? Nothing good, that's what!

"What? I'm what?" I'm imagining spell damage or potion damage; I'm imagining hair sprouting out of my face.

Even Avery is gaping wordlessly.

"What?" I wail, patting my face again. It doesn't feel like anything has changed, so- "*What is it?*"

Lord Gaunt shakes his head slightly. "You're- you're speaking parseltongue!"

Now I'm confused. "I'm *what*?"

"You're speaking parseltongue. Our family language."

"No, I'm not!" I look at them, at their partly affronted, partly awed expressions. They look far too shocked to be lying to me, but I can hear that I'm speaking English.

Avery walks around me. "No other change," he observes. "Just the Parseltongue then. He'll accept this, you think?"

"*Accept this?*" Lord Gaunt chokes out. "*Accept* a Parselmouth bride? *Accept* the possibility that she might pass Parseltongue down to his children? Their line has never seen a single Parselmouth, not one! He'll owe me more than-"

"I'm not marrying anyone!" I exclaim angrily. I scramble up to a stand and sway woozily again. "I'm especially not marrying anyone you tell me to!"

Lord Gaunt folds his arms. “You’re a legitimate pureblood daughter of House Gaunt now. You’ll do your duty and marry a pureblood and bring honour to us. Now go and clean yourself up and take care of your business. I have a lot of owls to send, I don’t have time to stay here and drill sense into you. You’ll return to school tomorrow and await our instructions. And don’t even think about running away. You’ll have appeared on our family wall by now. You’re trackable. And if you give us any problems-” He points in the direction of the living room. “-then the next time you come back here, it will be to an empty house!”

He disappears.

Avery shakes his head. “I suppose it wasn’t the worst, as far as rants go. He really can go for an hour. You should have heard him when-”

“I’m not a part of your family,” I say as clearly as I can. My voice shakes. “No amount of blood magic can change that.”

“I could believe that if you weren’t right now hissing at me like a viper.” He indicates the cluster of dittany still sitting on the kitchen counter. My wand is beside it. “Happy Birthday, *cousin*.”

He disappears, and I walk automatically to the counter and pick up my wand. My brain feels like cotton wool. I pick up the dittany, getting blood all over the velvety leaves, and turn around. There’s a dark puddle of blood where I was seated, reflecting the light thrown out by the floating globes. There’s really a lot of it, and I’ve tracked some around the kitchen.

I’m still very nauseous, but I wave my wand and begin cleaning up; I vanish the blood off the tiles, sterilise all the surfaces, and clean my robes. I wash the dittany in the sink and clean that again.

Then, directing the floating lights to follow me, I move through the dark hallway and into the living room. My parents are in the same seated position on the couch. They’ve stopped bleeding, but half of mum’s face is now red and there’s also blood on their clothes and on the seat and carpet.

Hands shaking, I siphon the blood from their cuts and clean them. The dittany I crush and smear over their wounds. Then I heal them and fix what I can fix. Mum’s right eye looks irritated, but I don’t dare do any more than apply dittany and heal the cut.

When that’s all done, I slump onto the carpet in front of them, resting my forehead on the low table. Even after casting multiple scent removal charms, the metallic smell of my own blood still pollutes the air around me.

I can’t cry. I want to, but I can’t. And I don’t even know what to do with my parents. I can’t leave them like this, but if I cast a counter-spell and revive them, how will I explain what’s happened?

I need help. I need to get help. I can’t return to Hogwarts until the morning, and I need help now. There’s only one person I can think of powerful enough to help me against the combined machinations of the Gaunts and the Lestranges.

I stand and make my way to the entrance hallway, pick up the portkey, cast a disillusionment spell on myself, and make for the Malfoys' offices.

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Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

10 25

By the time I reach the silvery-grey building that holds the Malfoys' offices, it's late and I'm close to collapsing from exhaustion. I enter through the gold revolving doors and find myself in an almost empty marble lobby.

One of the lifts has just closed and is ascending. Another one dings open and two wizards walk out, chattering energetically. There is only one night-time receptionist at the long counter. She's playing with her large feather quill and batting her eyes at the security guard she's chatting with. At one of the modular sofas on my right, a witch is tapping on some parchment with her wand.

Counter-wards that work to negate spells like disillusionment must have gone into effect the moment I stepped foot inside because I can suddenly see myself again, and the few people still working there catch sight of me and make sharp gasps. The receptionist's hand flies to her mouth.

Immediately, the security guard runs over. A metal badge on his robes flashes the name 'Bob Odnal' at me. "Hey! What's happened?" he asks urgently. "Are you hurt? What happened? Who did this to you?"

I'm flustered. "I- no. Not at all. But I need to see-"

"Whose blood is that? Is that yours?"

"What?" I look anxiously down at my clean school robes. I don't see any blood. I cleaned it all; I know I did a meticulous job too.

"Your face," he says sharply, giving me a strange look. "Your face is covered in blood. Didn't you know that?"

I've forgotten that I'd also touched my face with my bloodied hands. No wonder I haven't stopped smelling blood. I put my hands up to my face, stammering, feeling stupid and afraid.

Another wizard materialises out of nowhere. He has his wand discreetly out. "Thanks Bob, I'll take it from here," he says.

"Should I contact St Mungo's?" Bob asks. His voice drops. "Or Law Enforcement?"

"I- I need to see Mr. Malfoy," I say. "I know him personally, I swear. I-"

The other wizard nods while ushering me away from the main lobby. “Let’s go to one of the meeting rooms,” he suggests, continuing to herd me along.

I follow them through a door that’s meant for maintenance staff and into the lift. We descend two storeys and go into a room with a simple table, four chairs, and an overgrown fern. On the walls are colourful posters with friendly reminders on workplace codes and safety procedures.

“Now, young Miss,” Bob says kindly, after having me sit. “Do you want to tell us your name?”

I lick my lips. “Hermione. Hermione Granger.”

“Come on now,” says the other. “You’re obviously one of them Omegas. Can you give me your real family name? Fawley? Longbottom?”

“It’s Hermione Granger!” I spit. “I’m not an Omega. I’m a muggleborn.”

“Okay then, Ms. Granger,” he says doubtingly. He produces a parchment. “Can you write your name for me... Now, I see you’re a Hogwarts student. Can you tell me what’s happened? You won’t get in any trouble.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong.” I glare at them. “Don’t look at me like that, I’m not a criminal!”

“No one’s saying you’re a criminal, Hermione. You walked in here all bloody. We just want to help.” He hands the parchment to Bob. “Show this to management please and tell them she’s in the meeting room 21C and ask them to advise on next steps.”

“Can you contact Draco Malfoy please,” I beg. “He knows who I am. I’m sure everyone says that, but...”

“What about your family? If you tell me who they are, we’ll call your Lord Father in, smooth everything over...”

I put my head in my hands and shudder.

“Where’s your family, Hermione?” The wizard’s voice holds a note of concern. He probably thinks I’ve done them in. I picture my parents sitting on the sofa as still and lifeless as statues and shudder again.

“Is it Lord Fawley? You look like a Fawley...”

The door opens. It’s Bob. “Hey Frank. Management knew the name. Connected me with Midgen. Says her boss is coming back in right now. Says not to...” His voice drops to a whisper and I don’t hear the rest.

“Well...” Frank mutters. “That’ll be a first...” He raises his voice. “Can you wait here for a few minutes, Hermione? Mr. Malfoy has been informed that you’re here, and he-”

My head shoots up. “Is he coming?”

“Yes. Would you like some water while you wait?”

I nod. Yes. Water.

About five minutes later, the door swings open, and I can hear Draco Malfoy’s voice out in the corridor. He’s talking with a woman. I shoot out of my chair, almost knocking over my water.

“Just sit down,” says Bob kindly.

Malfoy enters. He’s dressed in a charcoal suit with a dark blue tie, and he’s followed by a tired looking woman with a clipboard. I recognise her from the Hogwarts career fair.

I don’t know why, but I’m suddenly feeling nervous and apprehensive. And I can’t be the only one feeling this way; the atmosphere in the room has changed. Both men with me hurry forward to greet him with deference, almost seeming to shrink in stature.

He acknowledges them then turns his head slightly, cool grey eyes immediately alighting on me. He looks distinctly unhappy. Ignoring my own hurried exclamation of “Mr. Malfoy!”, he motions to the two wizards to follow him. All four leave to go talk outside. I hear them murmuring something about cleaning up a mess before the door clicks shut and silencing wards cut off all sound.

I pace around the room, on tenterhooks. I’d forgotten how intimidating the man can be. He’s more intimidating in his silent presence alone than two dagger-wielding Gaunts combined; whenever I’m around him I feel vulnerable and unsettled.

Right on cue, the boldness begins to drain from my spirit, and I pace in increasing agitation and mortification, now unsure of myself.

Why did I come here? Who am I to summon a man like him and demand aid? No wonder he’s so upset. I’ve upset him again. And why would he help me anyway? He practically threw me out of his office the last time we met. How could I have gone and called him in this late at night, looking like I’ve just murdered-

The door opens again. Malfoy enters. His eyes flick around the room, passing the cream walls with its posters and wall-mounted lamps, the standard office furniture, and the sole plant in the corner before landing on me. A furrow appears between his brows. His voice is icy. “Ms. Granger, I must impress upon you the impropriety-”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Malfoy. I’m really sorry about this!” I cry. It feels like I spend most of our conversations apologising to him, and that thought further destabilises my already unstable self-confidence. I grip the top of the chair in front of me with my sweating hands. “But I didn’t know who else to go to. My parents- And the Gaunts- They- I need help to undo it!”

He looks at me warily from across the table, eyes travelling from my blood smeared face to my messy hair. “Undo what?”

"The- the blood magic! They forced me. They said they'd kill my parents if I didn't-" I grip the chair tighter, the hard edge of it digging into my palms. "I should have taken your advice. Now I-"

"Slow down," he says. I think I've sparked some kind of morbid curiosity in him because he's leaning forward a little, eyes narrowing, scrutinising me as if looking for evidence of spell damage. "What happened? You said blood magic. Was it executed then? You don't look any different."

"It was the Gaunts! They- they forced me to join their family, they broke into my house and hurt my parents and bled me." Phantom pain runs down my wrists, and I spasm involuntarily, recalling the terror of being frozen and helpless while my lifeblood gushes out of me and my parents sit in the living room, dead to the world. My voice trembles. "They made me drink the potion. They threatened to kill my parents if I refused to do what they wanted. They hurt my parents!"

"All right," he says. "Calm down. Start from the beginning."

I quickly recount my evening to him, starting with the note and ending with the threat on my parents lives. Malfoy stands motionless in front of the door, listening impassively with folded arms. "Did they confirm the potion's success with additional blood tests?" he asks after I've finished my story. He sounds sceptical of the whole thing.

I shake my head. "No, they were convinced I was speaking their magical language. Although..." I pause to reflect, head bowed. "Maybe they were mistaken. I was definitely speaking English. I could hear myself. It sounded nothing like their language..."

Yes, maybe they *were* mistaken. Maybe it didn't work after all! My eyes dart around the floor as I talk and think and as the hope builds in me.

"They certainly could be," Malfoy says pensively. "There is, however, one sure way of finding out..." He gives me a sidelong look before drawing out his wand and arcing it through the air. "Serpensortia!"

A long, bright green snake materialises and hits the table between us with a smack.

I stumble back with a surprised cry, stifle a swear, and pull out my wand.

"Give it a command," he commands. He's completely unafraid; his arms are folded again, wand tucked away. "Don't use magic. Speak to it!"

The snake advances, upper body lifted, tongue flicking the air. I recognise its colouring: it's a Boomslang- venomous. We use its skin in Potions. But this is a live one, and it's slithering closer. "I hate magic," it complains. "I'll bite. I don't like to, but I will." Its neck puffs up threateningly.

I gasp and blink at the creature; wide-eyed, fear forgotten. "Did you- Did you just talk?"

“Oh.” The snake looks surprised, if snakes can look surprised. It regards me with one big black eye, and its neck slowly deflates. “You’re a Speaker. That’s a relief. Do you mind sending me back? I was having a nap, actually, and I really don’t like it when you wizards—” It disappears in a puff of smoke.

I gasp again. “What happened? Did you send it back? Did you hear it talk?”

Draco Malfoy raises his brow. “All I heard was you speaking Parseltongue.” He sighs and then relaxes his posture, running his hand over his hair, looking immensely satisfied. “Forgive me, it’s such an outlandish tale, I had to make sure.”

“So, it’s true,” I say bitterly. I bow my head again and press my fingers to my eyes, picturing my parents still sitting on the couch. I have to go back to them.

Suddenly, his voice is near my ear. “All this could have been avoided if you’d done as I advised. Don’t you regret not trusting me? Don’t you regret thinking you could do everything by yourself?”

I look up. He’s standing beside me, smiling sympathetically. His eyes are pools of clear light. “Yes,” I admit. “I just didn’t think anyone could be this- this- *evil!*”

His smile turns sad. “Unfortunately, I know only too well to what lengths people who want something will go in order to obtain their desires.” He pulls out one of the metal chairs to sit on. It screeches slightly against the floor. “I tried to warn you, didn’t I? I tried to help you.”

“Yes. Yes, you did.” He’s the only one who’s tried to help me. “I’m sorry I didn’t trust you. I’m sorry. And I know I don’t deserve to ask this anymore, but I really need—”

“You need my help, that’s clear.” He spreads his hands wide. “But why should I give it? You won’t appreciate what I have to say. You won’t listen. You’ll only infuriate me. I’ve asked you a hundred times to call me Draco, and how did you greet me when I came in just now to see you, when I cut my dinner with Ukraine’s Minister of Trade short in order to attend to your problems? Was my one little request too much for you?”

“I’m sorry,” I sigh miserably. I’m so sick of apologising. I’m so sick of making mistakes. “I’m sorry, Draco. I won’t forget again. I haven’t been doing it on purpose.”

“Maybe you need practice,” he says.

“Yes, yes.” I nod. I am so tired and so antsy. “But my parents—”

He laughs softly. “Selfish, stubborn girl... Your parents can wait a little while longer. Sit down.”

He indicates the space next to him and I drag a chair there.

“Closer,” he says. “Closer.”

I drag the chair until the metal seats touch, and I sit. It’s awkward; our legs press against each other, and I have to swivel my upper body in order to face him.

He considers me carefully, hands resting on his spread knees. His face is inches from mine; I can see the rugged five-o-clock shadow accentuating the angular lines of his jaw, the little stubbles shades darker than the heavily gelled platinum hair angularly brushed back over his head. "Hermione..." he hums.

I copy the way he's posed his hands. "Draco," I say.

"What is it you think I can do for you, Hermione?"

I've thought about this. I thought about it on the way here. "I need to reverse the adoption, if possible. I want justice, and I want to protect my parents. I don't know what they've seen and heard, I don't know what's been done to them, whether they've been—" My voice fails.

"Novus Sanguis can't be reversed. It's only ever been seriously tried twice before, and both tries have resulted in death. As for justice, you'll find that the Ministry will not interfere in the affairs of families like ours."

"But that's not right!" I cry. "It's absolutely unethical! Even the muggle justice system—"

He raises a brow. "Muggle justice system? But we're not muggles. Their laws don't apply to us. We have our own justice, our own laws."

I swallow hard. "Okay. But they can be changed. The Gaunts said your family as good as controls the Ministry, I overheard them. If anyone can influence the Ministry, it's you."

A flash of fury crosses his face, so intensely my heart constricts. But then it's gone, and his expression settles into that of common irritation. "I truly dislike the rumour going around our community that we have the Ministry in our pocket. Maybe in cases of influencing economic policies, yes, but my hands are tied here. There's a reason the heads of the families have their titles, Hermione. They lord over their clan. To their families, they are the law. Even I must obey my Lord Father's wishes. And for Omegas like you—"

Fury must have crossed my face, because he stops and looks at me expectantly.

"I'm not an *Omega*," I mumble through gritted teeth. "I'm not- I don't consider—"

"I thought you were an intelligent girl. I never took you for the delusional sort." Draco shakes his head with disappointment. "Do you think everyone is wrong but yourself? Are you that narcissistic?"

"No," I grunt, shame rising to heat my cheeks.

"Then what are you?"

I look at my hands. They're sweating again. I try to wipe them subtly against the fabric of my robes. "I hate that word," I say, looking at him pleadingly. I hate it. I hate hearing it, I hate saying it, I hate what it means, what it means for me!

"Mhm. What are you, Hermione?"

“I’m an...” I lick my lips, bite hard on them. “I’m an... Omega.”

He crosses one leg over the other, his right thigh now resting almost directly on top of my leg. “You’re mumbling, pet. I can’t quite hear what you’re saying. You’re going to have to repeat it.”

My eyes snap to his. My hands are trembling and still damp, and my heart knocks angrily in my chest. But I do say the hated words without mumbling this time: “I’m an Omega.”

“An Omega like you,” he continues matter-of-factly, “belongs to her husband if she is married, her fiancé if she is formally betrothed, or the head of her family if she is unbonded. Your family are purebloods, and of the most ancient kind. They will want to do everything according to their ways.” He sighs. “If I had known that you were now a Gaunt, I would not have met with you tonight. I cannot help you anymore, Hermione. I have no right to act in your life. I am neither your family, your husband, nor your fiancé.”

“But...” I lean forward a little, voice desperate and imploring. “What if they *thought* you were my fiancé? You said before-”

He kills what meagre hope I have with a little shake of his head. “Betrothals are taken very seriously by families like ours. There are customs and ceremonies. There are expectations. And it sounds like they’ve already negotiated for you to be betrothed to someone who will be furious if you were stolen from him. Certainly, I could likely get away with it by claiming we had a verbal agreement prior to your adoption, but...”

I start, excited.

He holds up his hand. “*But*,” he continues, “you weren’t amenable to this idea last month. And now, in light of your changed circumstances, no longer am *I* amenable to it. It doesn’t benefit me to antagonise Lord Gaunt, not when I can’t profit from it in some way.” He smiles apologetically, one side of his mouth quirking up a little higher than the other. “I am first and foremost a pragmatic man. I’ll always want something in return.”

It’s disappointing news, but what did I expect? I *did* turn him down, and circumstances *have* changed. But I’m not going to sit around and mope or try and bribe a multi-billionaire with money I don’t possess. I have to keep moving; I have to keep trying all avenues.

And, he doesn’t know it, but he’s given me a brilliant idea. All I need is someone willing to enter into a pretend engagement with me before Lestrange has time to show up at my house and harass my parents too.

“Okay.” I stand. “Okay. Fair enough. Thanks for coming and hearing me out, Draco. I know you’re extremely busy, so I really appreciate your time. Thank you again. I’ll leave now- I’m in a rush too, and I-” My mind goes back to my parents. “Right. I have to go. But if I can ask for one more favour before I leave... I just need to borrow an owl from someone...”

That takes him by surprise. His brow furrows. “An owl?” he repeats suspiciously. “What for?”

“I need to contact the Weasleys...”

“The *Weasleys*?” He sounds even more surprised. “What for?”

I’d forgotten that the Malfoys and the Weasleys have some kind of feud going on.

“They’re- er, they’re very nice. I think one of Ron’s brothers is an unmarried Alpha like you. He might help me. I don’t know, but I have to try anyway. I don’t have much time.”

I chew at my lip. This is awkward. “They’re really not bad... Er, very nice people...”

Draco scoffs, regarding me with incensed grey eyes under a very attractive scowl. “You really know how to tug at my heartstrings, Hermione.” His voice is acerbic. “How could I possibly sleep at night, knowing I’d abandoned you to go knocking on every unbonded Alpha’s door in the middle of the night? *Sit.*” He says the last word with such compelling force that I’m sitting before I know it.

“If I do this for you,” he says, “I want a favour in return. Do we have a deal?” He snaps his fingers. “Dobby!”

“What kind of favour?” I ask cautiously, as his house-elf appears. “I don’t have anything...”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” he says generously. And a heartbeat of silence passes between us, before he smirks faintly, as if he knows he will never come out the loser in any deal he brokers. “I want you to owe me a favour. Any favour. Anything I ask, at any time in the future. And you’ll swear a magical oath on it.” He turns to his house-elf, issuing a command laced with urgency. “Bring me the Dragon’s Fantasy from my office.”

I feel bad for complaining after all he’s done and is prepared to do for me, but I’m too alarmed at the possibility of being one day asked to do something illegal to just accept the deal as is. And that self-assured smirk of his doesn’t make me feel any better. “That’s too vague,” I say. “What if you ask me to kill myself, or to kill someone? Not that I think you’ll ask that...” I end nervously.

“Hmm...” He rubs his chin with his thumb and looks at the floor, eyelids lowering, cutting off the silver gleam of his eyes. “Since I’m doing you a favour by helping you, the favour I’ll ask in return, should I even ever ask it, will be in the same spirit. I will also swear a magical oath that I’ll only call on you to help or to save, never to harm or to kill. Sound better?”

“Much,” I say, pleasantly taken aback by how honourable and reasonable he is. He’s genuinely a good person. “Yes, thank you.”

“Yes *who?*” he scowls crossly, as his house-elf re-appears. He motions impatiently for it to open the box. His movements are all urgent now; rushed. “Thank you *who?*”

“Yes, Draco. Thank you, Draco.”

He lifts the glittering dragon from its velvet lining and turns his stern gaze onto my wide-eyed one. “You called this a game of charades once. By accepting this, you understand that

you must play the game. If I am to play the part of fiancé, then you must play your part as my fiancée, and you must play your part thoroughly.”

“Yes. All right, yes, Draco,” I quickly agree. I’m amazed at how quickly things are now moving. *Finally, he’s feeling my urgency. Finally, I’ve got through to him!*

I hold my breath as he directs his dragon to release the large green gem it holds in its maw and to bite down on his thumb. A bead of blood wells up and disappears under its tiny metal tongue.

“Now you,” he says, motioning for me to give him my right hand. He deposits the magical creation onto it, and it sinks needle sharp teeth into the side of my thumb, just under the nail. Then, after it’s also had its fill of my blood, it takes up its gem again and crawls across my right hand. The sensation is a bizarre and creepy one, like the tiny track of insect legs on skin, only colder. It slips its body around my ring finger, the end of its tail tucked under its head, and closes its eyes.

“Is it done?” I ask curiously, after watching the dragon for other signs of magical life and seeing none. I look up to see Draco fixing me with an inscrutable stare, no longer scowling and irritable.

“Yes,” he breathes. His gaze goes down to my hand still in his. He reaches out with the other and touches the ring as if he can’t help himself. His finger leaves a smudge on the clear surface of the stone. He breathes out, and his breath fans my face, bringing with it some cool scent. “Yes...”

“I thought there might be some incantations or some ceremonial words...” I say lamely.

He clears his throat and looks at me again. “Yes, normally, this would be done in front of both our families after an exchange of many, many gifts. Along, of course, with all the ceremonial words you’ll ever want or need. When they find out what’s happened, they’ll complain that it was not done the proper way. But we were too impatient, weren’t we, pet? *We just couldn’t wait.*” He smiles and winks.

I return the smile. It’s funny because it’s true.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

11 25

Someone knocks on the door behind us, badly startling me. I'm still in a state of hypervigilance and can't even hide my flinch of fear. Draco notices, and his hand covers mine. "It's all right. Nothing to worry about," he soothes. He stands, pulling me with him, and flicks his wand at the door to open it.

A tall, heavily built wizard dressed in woven black body armour under a long black cloak enters. He is so tall he looks half-giant. Almost as tall as Hagrid, and scarier. Uglier too. Much uglier. If Hagrid is half-giant, this man might be half-troll.

My new fake fiancé squeezes my hand and fixes me with a reassuring smile. "Nothing to worry about, Hermione. This is Roman. He's in charge of my personal guard."

Roman addresses Draco, speaking in a voice to match his appearance. It's gruff and growling. "Sir. It's done." His eyes flick to me and back to Draco. "Would you like us to bring the lady back to Hogwarts?"

"No," says Draco curtly. "My plans have changed. She's coming with me."

"Where do you need us to escort you, Sir?"

"Give him the address to your parents' house, Hermione," says Draco. He frowns slightly down at me as though he's just realised something, then conjures a cloth out of thin air and begins gently cleaning the blood off my face, pushing my hand aside when I try to help myself. "Don't fuss, pet. We can't have you going to see your parents looking like this. Give him the address so we can go."

I recite my address as we walk.

Outside the room, in the corridor standing at attention, are another three wizards dressed in body armour. As we pass them, they follow, falling into step around us. It's unnerving, and I have to remind myself that they're Draco's guards. They're not a threat. They're here to help.

We go back up, exit the building, and get into a sleek black saloon.

"We'll be using these cars when we have to travel through the muggle world," Draco explains to me, once the door is shut on us and the car begins to move smoothly forward. "Magic and muggles don't mix, and we'll want to be as discrete as possible."

I think the me last year would have argued against this. Instead, I just bow my head tiredly. “I know,” I say.

“Yes, I forgot that you had a muggle upbringing. I really admire your resilience, you know. Transitioning from one world to another can’t have been easy. And now to be thrust so unceremoniously into our little pureblood world... I don’t think most grown wizards would be strong enough to handle the shock, much less an Omega just come of age...”

I know the me last year would have taken that as a challenge, but I’m too shellshocked just now. Traumatised, even. I stare at my shoes and imagine I see specks of blood in the darkness.

He runs a hand consolingly down my back. “Poor thing. You must be so tired. You’ve had quite the night, haven’t you? Lie back,” he murmurs. “Rest.”

The seat hums quietly as it begins to recline, and I lean back against the soft leather. It’s quiet. The whole interior of the car smells like leather; rich and buttery. The windows are tinted dark, and through them nothing is visible but blurred streaks of lights. We’re zooming through the streets.

Draco begins dictating to his quill as it skims across some parchment floating in front of him. His speech is peppered with financial jargon: IRRs and yields and alphas and betas... Not concepts I’m familiar with, which is good, because that means my brain will be able to tune out the content and hopefully get some rest; I can’t relax when I can follow a subject matter—it automatically gets me switched on and thinking. It’s just the way I’ve always been.

Draco continues his euphonious stream of analysis or directives or whatever it is he’s working on. His voice is as smooth as the new-leather smell around us, and something about its calm, unhurried quality makes me feel calmer in turn. I feel safer, too. I’m safe with Draco. He’s rich and powerful and he’s going to help and protect me until I can get back on my feet.

I close my eyes.

There’s going to be so, so much to do when we get to my home. Mum and Dad will have to be healed, maybe even have their memories modified. Our home will need warding- complex ones. We may even have to move. And the authorities will have to be notified of what happened, and they’ll want to take my testimony... I can’t rest until it’s all over, until I’m sure they’re safe...

-

I jolt awake.

It’s almost pitch-dark and I have to struggle to get my bearings, my brain attempting to place me at locations it knows right away I’m not in: Not in my dorm at Hogwarts. Not in my

bedroom at home. Not in-

Not in the car with Draco Malfoy.

That's my last clear memory. I'm having a hard time recalling anything beyond that, and it doesn't help that I'm so exhausted and also starting to feel feverish.

As my eyes slowly adjust to the darkness, I can make out that I'm lying on some sort of sofa or bed. Looking about, I note the outlines of a table and chairs. There are display shelves built into the opposite wall. A large model yacht sits proudly in the centre. On my right, soft light leaks in through the space under the door.

Where am I? Am I in a study? A guestroom? Whose? Draco's? Did we go to see my parents already? What's happened?

Flinging a cashmere throw off me, I get off the sofa, make for the door, and wrench it open.

Light from the hallway illuminates the room I've just left, making it look friendlier than it had felt when I'd first woken up in it alone and confused. The table is somewhat messy with rolled and unrolled parchment, photo frames, and a couple of drinking glasses. Under a framed painting of a country house sits the pillow-lined sofa. This is definitely someone's study. Draco's, maybe? Hopefully. Where is he?

Out in the hallway I am greeted by closed doors and the sound of running water coming from somewhere. Not daring to open any of the doors, I choose instead to follow the sound, creeping nervously along.

After making a turn past a varnished oriental chest with a ming vase on it, I come to an immense room with multiple sofas and an impressive water feature. A curtain of water runs down from a soaring stained-glass skylight into an indoor pool done in the austere style of a Japanese garden. One wall is draped entirely in velvet. The skylight is dark, and its coloured panels glint with refracted light from the shimmering pool. It's still night outside; I can't have been asleep for very long.

This grand room adjoins a rather more intimate space crowded with bookshelves and artwork and graced with a very big fireplace. A privacy charm is in effect here; the muted rush of water is immediately silenced the moment I step through the threshold between the two rooms.

The next corridor offers a glimpse of the curving floor to ceiling windows in the space beyond. There are people there; men. I can't see them, but I hear their deep, dulcet murmurs.

Thick runners cover the marble floors and thank God for those; they muffle the sound of my footsteps. I keep going, walking so furtively I'm literally on tiptoes. At the mouth of the corridor, I stick my head out to look.

Standing at a large oval marble table over which a crystal chandelier hangs is Draco Malfoy, still in his charcoal suit, no tie. With him are two wizards garbed in white robes. One is

browsing through what looks like polaroid frames laid out on the table. The other, clearly the senior by the looks of him, is speaking to a nodding, listening Draco.

Immediately, I feel myself relaxing. This is Draco's house. Of course.

I can't really make out what he's saying- something about strengtheners and reports and tests. It sounds serious. Behind them, at a backlit bar counter, a house-elf is making drinks. Draco's frightening, gigantesque head of security, Roman, stands by a door, muscular arms folded. He is the first to notice me, and when he does, he clears his throat, his chest moving slightly in the action.

The other three swivel their heads in my direction.

"Oh, Hermione, you're up," says Draco, smiling. "You were sleeping so peacefully I didn't want to wake you. Come, sit. Let me introduce you to our healers, Owen and Crossley."

"Yes, hello... Draco, could I talk to you... about my parents... I thought we were going to them first..."

"Yes, that's right, we were just discussing their unfortunate situation." He draws a seat for me while the wizard with the polaroids gathers them up and stows them in a black leather bag. Draco takes another chair and turns it so that it faces me. He sits.

"While you were sleeping in the car, my team went into their residence and found them petrified in the living room. Going by the signs, we suspect they were imperiused, made to position themselves, and then cursed with Lapis Effigio. Highly dangerous, and highly effective."

And highly illegal. But that's only a drop in the bucket. Almost everything the Gaunts have done tonight have been Azkaban worthy.

"So, they need mandrake restoratives," I say. "Are they awake yet? They must be at St. Mungo's? I really would like to check on them."

"And you will get the chance," Draco patiently says. "I apologise for not waking you when we arrived at their home, but since we were unable to de-petrify them yet, I saw no need to disturb you. I thought it best to let you rest."

"Why couldn't they be de-petrified? St. Mungo's?"

"St. Mungo's does not treat muggles, you know that. Healer Owen is our long-time family healer and has come at my request. They've only just returned from examining your parents, and he was giving me his recommendations when you woke up. Why don't we go over it again, Healer? For Hermione's benefit."

Healer Owen nods. "To make a long story short," he says abruptly, "mandrake restoratives have never been prescribed to muggles, and we don't know what it will do, if anything. Muggles are affected by magical maladies and remedies differently. My recommendation is to wait while we conduct some trials on non-magical creatures with similar makeup to

muggles. Of course, the downside to waiting is that the longer one spends in a petrified state, the longer it will take to come out of it.”

He pauses to cast a quick glance at Draco, who’s sipping the drink his house-elf brought him and regarding me intently.

“Mr. Malfoy has raised the question of gradual dosing- whether it would be possible in this case. It’s something we do for wizards who have been petrified for an unknown duration. It could work, but the fact is that we simply don’t know how the potion will affect muggles, even in small amounts. If you want to go ahead with that course of action, I can’t stop you, but if you’re in no hurry, the trials can be conducted in a few weeks, and if all goes well, the muggles could be de-petrified in a month or two. Mr. Malfoy agrees with my recommendation but has decided to defer to you.” He looks slightly annoyed as he says the last bit, and I can tell he’s of the opinion that I shouldn’t be deferred to for anything.

I frown. “And while they remain petrified...”

“They’re not in any danger. Nevertheless, we will keep a rotation of healers assigned to their care as per Mr. Malfoy’s request. We will alert you if any change occurs.”

“Thank you. I just want them to be safe. That’s the most important thing to me- that they’re safe. I agree that it’s better to wait.”

Draco smiles. “I knew you’d be reasonable. We’ll get the ball rolling immediately. We have the best researchers, and I’m confident they’ll be de-petrified within the month. I’ve also brought Healer Owen up to speed on the grafting ritual. He will check to make sure you’re reacting well to the new blood. In the meantime, my staff are preparing the guest room for you. You’ll sleep there, and I will take you back to Hogwarts in the morning.”

The two healers are already in action. The younger one, Healer Crossley, is taking out bottles and vials from the black leather bag while Healer Owen dispenses brusque instructions. It seems like they want to cast full diagnostics, beyond even what is probably necessary for checking for spell damage.

I shake my head, politely refusing. “Thanks so much, but I’m not sure I really need any of that. I already took blood replenishers. If you can just take me home, or to where my parents are, so I can-”

“Do continue to be reasonable, Hermione,” Draco interrupts. He places a hand on my knee and leans slightly forward in appeal, capturing my eyes in his silver, solemn gaze. “I understand your concerns, but I’m your fiancé and you’re my responsibility so you must just listen to me, trust me, and respect our healer’s advice. He knows what he’s doing, and you and your parents are in good hands. You can see them tomorrow before you go back to school, how does that sound?”

I swallow and look at the healers busy at their work. My resolve wavers. “Okay.” I really don’t want to stay here and be fussed over, but I also know I’m being unreasonable. I pass a hand over my eyes. “I’m sorry. I do trust you. I’ve just- I’ve had a bad night, and I feel like I have to do *something*.”

"I know," he says pityingly. He rubs my knee gently and gives me a searching look. "I know. Poor girl. I tell you what. I was planning on leaving you here with Roman tonight because I have to travel to New York for a couple of meetings, but if you prefer, I can stay with you for a while until you feel better..."

Before he's even done speaking, I'm already leaning forward in my seat, in high alarm. "Please don't leave me alone here." I know I sound desperate, but I don't care. I flick an anxious, surreptitious glance at the freakishly large guard and lower my voice to a whisper. "I don't want to impose on you, as you've already done so much. I think maybe it would be better if I go straight back to Hogwarts, to the Hospital Wing..."

"But the muggles...?" he reminds questioningly, his brow slightly furrowed. "You wanted to see them in the morning. If you go back to Hogwarts now, you might only be able to leave again during the holidays or at Lord Gaunt's request."

"Oh. Right..." Tiredly, I press the heels of my palms into my eyes. I really don't feel like my usual self. I'm beyond exhausted.

"Please stay absolutely still for a minute, Ms. Gaunt." Healer Owen is casting diagnostics. He frowns at the swirls of colours rising from his wand. "It's crucial that you remain still..."

"I'm not a Gaunt," I begin to protest, annoyed at being addressed as one. It's bad enough I'm apparently legally one now. But Healer Owen only shoots me a disapproving look and clucks. "I don't want to have to redo this. Please stay still."

The junior healer is preparing a line of potions in little brass cups. Draco watches him at work for a few minutes and then downs his drink. "Be good and don't argue with the healers, pet," he leans close to say. "Just do as they ask. I'm going to send a few letters. I'll be back in ten minutes." Then, after excusing himself to the healers, he surprises me by planting a kiss on my forehead before he leaves.

I look anxiously at his departing back. He's playing the part of concerned fiancé so well, and I know I'm expected to act like one, too, but how? I've never even had a boyfriend, for God's sake!

Healer Crossley hands me the first brass cup.

"What's this?" I ask, looking at the dark potion. "Why do I have to take this?"

"Blood strengthener," responds Healer Owen. "Time is of the essence with some of these potions. Some side effects of Novus Sanguis don't develop until later, and we want to make sure some never get to develop at all... The Gaunts, I understand, are prone to weak knees and ailments of the eyes, their women especially vulnerable to hyperemesis gravidarum, and these can carry over..."

The Gaunts are especially prone to bouts of megalomania and ailments of the brain, I uncharitably think, but I bite my tongue and compliantly drink each potion I'm handed.

After the fifth or sixth cup, Draco finally returns to drop another kiss on my forehead and apologise for being so busy.

“She’ll need to continue taking some of these over the next two weeks,” he’s quietly informed by his healer. “Healer Crossley can drop by every evening to administer them in the correct dosage, or if you prefer the staff to do it, I can go over which ones need pre-brewing and-”

“I’m going back to Hogwarts tomorrow,” I cut in to remind them, wiping my mouth and handing the last emptied cup back to the assistant. “I think Madam Pomfrey will probably want to get involved.”

I don’t know how Madam Pomfrey would feel about another healer dropping by to order a student around. She’s quite territorial.

“That’s correct,” confirms Draco. “The plan is for her to return to Hogwarts tomorrow. Why don’t we have a chat later while Ms. Gaunt is resting and see how we can arrange things. I may have to write to the Headmaster...” He sighs. “I’ve been doing nothing but writing letters lately. If you’ll wait for me here... Let me make sure Hermione’s settled in first.”

His hand rests on my back, guiding. “I’m sure you want to rest now. Come, I’ll show you to your room.”

I do want to rest. I am beginning to feel rather sleepy. Standing, I follow Draco back through the library and the fantastical waterfall room, and down the hallway of closed doors to a high-ceilinged bedroom with elaborately painted beams. The curtains are drawn, and the lamps throw dim light across the bed where a sleeping robe is laid out. It’s noticeably warmer in here than in the rest of the house.

Draco feels it too. He shrugs off his suit jacket and drapes it over the chair in the corner. “Something seems to be off with the internal weather charm in this room,” he notes. “I’ll investigate while you get ready for bed.”

I pick up the robe by its hanger and go into the bathroom that’s accessible from the bedroom through a connecting walk in closet. After making sure the sliding door has closed behind me, I turn on the shower and strip as quickly as I can. The only thing I can’t remove is the dragon ring, which won’t slide past my knuckle. Possibly, my fingers have enlarged from the heat.

A few somewhat painful tries later, when I can almost swear it’s actually becoming *tighter*, I give up trying to twist it off, and enter into the steaming shower.

I’m so drowsy by the time I finish that I barely have the energy to do more than swipe perfunctorily at the inside of my mouth with the toothbrush, and I end up relying on magic to dry my hair. Then, I shrug on the sleeping robe. It’s thick, and I hope the weather charm has been fixed.

Sadly, the bedroom is still a little warm.

"I can't get it any cooler," says Draco apologetically. He has his sleeves rolled up to his elbows and looks annoyed. "This is an oversight on my part, and I know it's no excuse, but since this room's been unoccupied for several months, I haven't paid it any attention. I'll get maintenance to take a look at it tomorrow."

"It's fine," I say. "Really. It's not that hot. Thank you so much for letting me stay here tonight. Thank you for- for-" I yawn. There's a knock on the door and it opens. The monstrous guard Roman appears in the doorway, his frame almost filling the space.

Draco seems to expect him. "Ah, Roman. Change of plans again. Unless- Are you sure you wouldn't rather he stays with you, pet? Roman is very dependable."

"No. You please stay with me." I move closer to Draco, frightened. It's a weird feeling, having a sluggish mind and a racing heart. It makes me want to start crying from the discomfort of it. "I'm sure Roman's very dependable and I'm very grateful, but I feel safer when *you're* here. I don't think I can be alone with anyone else." Images flash in my head: a dark house, bubbling cauldron, blood on kitchen tiles. My wrists throb. "Please, please stay until I fall asleep, Draco. Please."

Roman leaves and I make Draco lock the door. Then I shakily place my wand on the bedside table next to a glass jar of meringues. It's too hot to get under the covers so I just lie on top of the bed, practically collapsing on it from fatigue.

"Please don't turn off the lights," I manage to say. I'm struggling to keep my eyes open. I don't think I'll be able to sleep in the dark for a long while.

Draco sits on the bed beside me and bends over, his hand resting on my forehead as if checking for fever. "Tell you what, pet. I'll do some work by lumos until you fall asleep, but I'll turn off all the lamps. You won't be able to sleep if the room is too bright."

I think I do mumble a sleepy acquiescence, because he unlocks the door and summons a stack of letters from his office. It's strange being here, I ruminate, as I feel his weight shift the mattress. It's like being in a hotel. And this morning seems like it was years ago. I'd been so optimistic then. To think that I'd actually been looking forward to my birthday! Hah! Now I'm a refugee in a man's house. A man who is my fake fiancé, and my only ally. What would I have done if he had refused to help me?

I think I fall asleep in minutes, to my favourite sound of quill scratching on parchment.

Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

11 25

Someone's been calling my name.

It's Draco; I recognise his voice. He calls again, concerned: "Hermione. Pet. You should wake up now." It sounds like he's maybe standing over me.

A palm rests on my forehead, and my body tingles everywhere at the touch. But I make no visible movement; I can't respond.

I don't even want to respond. I'm too tired, my throat hurts, and I'm actually growing annoyed by all the nagging. Let me rest.

"It's completely normal, especially in young unbonded Omegas experiencing a first heat. As long as she continues to take these potions, it's acceptable for her to sleep between each dose."

"And how will she take them if she won't wake for them? She hasn't changed position once, not even when we adjusted the temperature. My staff tell me—"

"I understand your concerns, but I implore you to check with us before altering the course. Can we revert the temperature back to— Thanks. In place of a nest or body heat, it's necessary to keep the room artificially warm—"

"Yes, yes, fine. The potions?"

"We'll administer the potions. Healer Crossley, you have the— Good. You may want to leave the room for this..."

"And why?"

They're talking again, waking me with their irritating and unbearably harsh voices.

"I'll irritate her lungs. Are you familiar with Ignisiscor? Yes, it may distress her." A pause. "It will distress her..."

"I've never seen it performed. Wouldn't a reviving spell be more appropriate?"

"No, that would be ineffective. I'll be conservative with the Ignisiscor. Just enough to rouse her. But I highly recommend that you leave. You may not be able to endure seeing her in pain, and you may endanger all of us-"

"Don't be absurd."

Maybe I move, because they stop talking. But I don't think I did. I can't move. I can only hear. And although I hear, I don't process; lethargy enshrouds me like a spell, and nothing moves me, not even the very real threat of pain.

"Fine. Roman will stay. Call me once it's done."

I don't hear him go. Maybe I sink back into blissful sleep. Maybe not.

Suddenly I am screaming. I am sleeping, and then I am screaming, and I don't know how or why or what I am, only that I can't breathe, and my lungs are full of fire, and I can't see for the pain. I'm sitting up. I'm writhing, screaming. My eyes are scrunched, and hot tears fall, and I grapple blindly and sink my nails into whoever was stupid enough to have given me their hands to hold.

"There, it's over, it's over..."

It is over. The fire is gone, and the pain with it, although breathing is still uncomfortable. I can see again. The room is overly bright. Healers surround me, supporting me, three of them. I hear gasping, and it takes me a while to realise that it's myself I'm hearing.

Cold and smooth copper against my mouth; potion after potion in little copper cups. And I'm drinking obediently, confused and frightened and in shock. My throat hurts. I'm blinking, trying to place their faces. My heart is racing. Then I'm being laid back on soft pillows.

The ceiling is painted. Curlicue flowers and frolicking dragons with long necks parade along the wooden beams.

People move around me. Healers talking.

I think there's something I need to attend to. Something important. And in addition to whatever that thing is, I'm also sure I'm developing a strep throat, and I want to tell them that, but I also want to sleep. I really want to sleep.

“Still no change?”

“More restless today, but my staff tell me she hasn’t woken once.”

Fingers press into the side of my throat, pressing up and down.

“Progressing well. Mating nodes are swelling. Feel here...”

Another press of fingers. I think about turning away, really think about it.

“Feel them? This is only a false heat, so they won’t process venom. You shouldn’t-”

The fingers withdraw.

“And if I do?”

“No point. You’ll only have to redo it in the next heat. We’ll go ahead and administer tonight’s potions, shall we?”

I make a closed-mouthed sound. Like a moan or a whine. It hurts my throat.

“Hermione?”

“She may be partially aware. I think the memory of the procedure may be-”

“She’s listening?”

“In a sense. She’s not likely to remember much of this after.”

“Is there a less... uncomfortable way she can be woken up for this? Roman told me she suffered last night, and I want to avoid a repeat if at all possible. Ignisiscor seems excessive-”

I whine again. I turn. My head hurts. I feel both very detached from my body and very trapped in it. I can feel every sensation but at the same time it kind of feels like it’s happening to someone else.

“Miss Gaunt? Can you-”

“Let me try.” A warm hand envelops one of mine. “Hermione.”

I move my fingers briefly in response.

The hand squeezes, and the voice grows warmer, more doting with just a hint of delight.

“Listen, you’re very sick, sweetling, and we’re going to need you to wake up to drink your potions. Just for a little while, and then you can go right back to sleep if you want.”

I move my fingers and my eyes flicker open before I have to shut them again; it’s incredibly bright, almost painfully so. But I do catch a glimpse of Draco staring intently at me.

I’m being helped upright. Cups go to my mouth and I drink blindly and compliantly.

“She’s very strong willed. I’ve never seen such resistance to the Sleep, and I’ve overseen many heats.”

“Yes, she is.” My hand is squeezed again, and something is moving around one of my fingers, something hard. “Will that change? After?”

I wish they’ll stop talking and leave me alone so I can go back to sleep.

I don’t wake up refreshed. I wake up tired. I struggle to wake, in fact, and I think the struggle plays out over several hours, but in the end, I am the winner.

When I’m finally fully awake, I blink around the room. It’s dark and quiet; I’m alone. Dusty sunlight penetrates the room from under the thick velvet curtains to creep across the marquetry floor.

My throat feels like sandpaper, and it’s painfully tender to the touch. I think I’m falling ill. Probably due to all the stress.

I shift to pick up my wand and to check the time. It’s two-forty-seven in the afternoon.

That can’t be right. It must be, but it can’t be.

I wave my wand to double check, but I appear to also be losing my voice; I have to clear my throat violently and resay the spell twice before my wand flashes *14:48* on the wall.

Right at that moment, an elf appears with a whip-like crack by the bed. It clasps thin knobbly hands together. “Mistress Hermione, you is awake at last!”

I sit up at once. “I’m sorry I overslept,” I apologise to it, once I’ve gotten over the shock of its sudden appearance. My voice is still coming out raspy. The house-elf notices and hands me a glass of water.

I take a sip. Swallowing hurts and attempting to talk with a disappearing voice is almost worse. “Is Draco here?”

“Master is coming back,” she says. “Kippy is telling him as soon as you was awaken. Kippy has been watching you since you started the long sleep.”

I ignore the house-elf’s passive aggressive swipe. *Long sleep, honestly...*

I slide shakily out of bed while ravenously eyeing the glass jar of meringues sitting on the bedside table. Christ, I’m hungry. But I should get dressed before Draco returns. Don’t want to look like a dosser. I can’t believe I slept through the morning. I’ve already missed

Advanced Charms and Transfiguration. If I'm quick I should be able to make it back in time for Herbology at four.

The walk-in wardrobe is as ghostly as before, and the bathroom is almost exactly how I've left it. Toothbrush is in a toothbrush holder on the counter, but the bath sheet I left hanging on the hook is gone. My Hogwarts robes are missing.

I turn to Kippy who's been following me and ask her if she knows where my robes are, emphasising through wide hand motions to make up for my whispery, almost inaudible voice.

"Kippy be cleaning it. Kippy be having it good as new when Mistress needs it again."

I need it now, and am about to frustratedly communicate that to her when the door slides open without warning and Draco steps in.

"So, you *are* up," he says gladly.

He definitely thinks I'm a dosser. How embarrassing.

"I'm so sorry I overslept," I whisper at him as loudly as I can. "I'll be ready to go soon..." *As soon as the house-elf returns me my Hogwarts robes...*

"Oh, poor girl, have you also lost your voice?" His face is filled with concern. He takes another step closer. "May I?" Without waiting for a response, he slides his hand under my jaw and presses along the left side of my neck. He's brought with him the scent of his cologne, and this close to me, it's mouth-wateringly potent.

Before I can stop myself, I'm taking great whiffs, my chin rising. It's a really quality fragrance, smoky and sharp and dewy and sweet. It's calming and addictive, and I want more of it.

He's smiling, smiling more when I redden.

What am I *doing*? Why am I sniffing him?

He doesn't seem to mind. His fingers curl around my neck, pulling me closer.

My cheek comes to rest against his chest. The fabric of his clothes is both smooth and textured, some mixture of wool and silk, imbued in that amazing cologne. My eyes flutter shut. My hands press up against his chest. It's good. I should ask him where he bought this. I should buy it for myself.

"Do I smell nice to you? I'm glad," he rumbles, voice like whiskey. "But you shouldn't be up just yet... Let's get you back into bed..."

My eyes fly open, my gaze landing automatically on the dragon ring wrapped around my finger. I try to focus, difficult with the way he's scratching lightly along my nape and pressing his thumb into a spot close to my jugular that's alleviating the pain in my throat. And that beautifully complex fragrance...

"I'm okay," I croak. My voice is clearing. "I'm fine, really. I should probably check on my parents... How are they doing?"

His hand stills momentarily, then resumes its gentle scratching. "Still no change. We are doing everything in our power to help them. There's no need to worry." His voice rumbles through his chest which rises and falls with regularity. It's lulling. I just woke up, but now I want to sleep again.

"My robes..." I mumble. I'm blinking sleepily. His thumb is still massaging my throat. His other hand plays with the dragon ring, moving it idly around my finger. I snuggle closer against him. He's so warm and nice-smelling and I like being close to him. He makes me feel safe.

"What about them?"

What about what? Oh. My robes.

"I need to- to change... The house-elf took it." Where is the house-elf? I'd forgotten all about her. What was her name again? "Kippy- Kippy took it. I need to change before going back to Hog-"

"Hush now, pet... Don't strain yourself. You're clearly still unwell. There's no question of you leaving. You must stay here and rest."

"But, I really ought to-"

He squeezes lightly. His thumb digs firmly into my throat in a way that reminds me of something Viktor once did. "I said hush. What you *ought* to do is to listen to me, Hermione. I think I've demonstrated that I know what I'm doing and can take care of you. I should like to think I've earned your vote of confidence by now..." He guides me back into the bedroom, his hand still wrapped around my nape. "Why don't you eat a little first, and we can talk about it after, hm?"

I nod. I *am* hungry. And there's already food set out on a large tray floating over the bed. Eggs and cheese and cold cuts. Yoghurt and muesli and fruit. Pastries. Hot chocolate. Juice.

I climb back into bed while Draco conjures a chair and drags it by the bed. He shrugs off his suit jacket and hangs it on the back of the chair as I pick up the cup of hot chocolate and blow on it. I hope this makes my throat feel better.

He doesn't sit on the chair. He sits beside me on the bed. "Not too much chocolate, sweetling." He unfolds and places my napkin over my knees, picks up a grape, and offers it to me. "Have some fruit first. Have this."

I obligingly move to take the grape, but he pulls back. When I drop my hand, confused and thinking I misread the gesture, he offers me the grape again, bringing it to my mouth. Again, I go to intercept it, and again he pulls back.

I look at him in pure confusion. “Erm, I can feed myself,” I say. I’m not *that* sick. But as if in mockery of my belief, my voice begins to weaken again. My throat feels swollen.

He shoots me a stern look. Even in the darkness his eyes refuse to darken; they’re glacial grey. His voice is cold; severe. “And if I tell you that I should feed you?”

“I can feed myself,” I insist, unsure.

His glacial eyes are fixed on me, unmoving. He’s quiet, but not still. He’s tapping one finger impatiently on his knee.

Then it dawns on me. This is some kind of weird test. “Alright, if you think you should,” I say reluctantly. “You’ve got my confidence.”

He smiles, offering me the grape again, and with great mortification, I part my lips to accept it. I really hope he doesn’t plan to keep feeding me like this.

He doesn’t, thank goodness. He’s now looking at his watch, tapping on it. “I have to go,” he says, frowning. “I have a meeting in fifteen minutes.” He stands and snaps his fingers, calling for his house-elf. “Clear the food when Hermione is done,” he tells it.

He looks down at me. “You can finish eating by yourself?”

I nod emphatically. He nods also, compassionate again. “Good girl. Eat and rest. I’ll try and come back between meetings to check on you, and I would like to see you resting in bed when I do.” He turns to go, stops, and makes a half turn. He points a finger at the cup in my hands. “Not too much chocolate.”

I look down. The thick liquid has been magically reduced by half.

The door clicks quietly shut, and I only pause for a few moments before I drain the cup.

Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

11 25

I make all sorts of plans while eating.

I'm going to get my robes from the house-elf. I'm going to contact my Head of House at Hogwarts. I'm going to check on my parents. I'm going to go to Madam Pomfrey for a pepper-up potion. I'm going to-

"Mistress Hermione, what is you doing?"

I blink in confusion. There's a house-elf standing in front of me, staring at me with globular eyes that are wide with worry.

"What do you mean?" I snap at it with my barely-there voice. It should know perfectly well what I'm doing. "I'm looking for Draco, of course. I need some... something from him..."

But what's the *something*?

I look at my empty hands. I look around. I'm in what looks like an indoor garden with sofas and bronze coffee tables. There's some kind of waterfall. Lots of flowers. Too-bright sunlight. I'm cold.

"Mistress Hermione?" the house-elf whispers. It's quaking with agitation. "Please follow Kippy, Mistress. Please come back to bed. You be sleeping. Please, Mistress."

I let it take my hand and lead me down a hallway of closed doors. It opens one and gently tugs me into the room.

It's warmer in here. Dark. Rumpled bed, with a chair beside it and a suit jacket hanging over its back.

Oh, yes, Draco was here, and he must have left his jacket.

Feeling like it's the most natural thing in the world to be doing, I take the jacket and climb into bed with it. It's soft and structured, with a silk lining. I put my nose in it. Smells strong and masculine; harsh and calming all at once. My eyes roll back in my head. It's carnal.

Yes, this is exactly what I need, this scent.

I don't even care that the house-elf is watching. Okay, I care a little. I don't want it here. This is a private affair. I don't want anyone here but-

"Oh, pet, look at you... You've been very hardworking, haven't you?"

It's Draco. He's standing by the bed, draped in shadow. I regard him with sated, sleepy eyes. I was sleeping; he woke me up. But it's good he's here.

He's wearing his white dress shirt, dark trousers, no jacket, no outer robes. Moving slowly to the bedside table, he undoes his cufflinks, one hand at a time. He places them carefully next to a glass of water, under the yellow pool of lamplight. Then, as though a thought has just occurred to him, he scoops them up again and offers them to me. "Do you want these, too?"

I shake my head. *Why would I want those?*

"No? Just the shirt, then?"

I burrow deeper into my cosy sanctuary where it smells like a creamy, comforting haze of cut grass and parchment and soft supple leather, until just my face is showing. I nod.

He begins to unbutton his dress shirt. He does it with idle grace, with slow moving fingers. His eyes trail lazily over me, but his voice is firm. "I'm going to need to hear you say it, Hermione. I'm going to need to hear you tell me what you want."

"I want the shirt."

"Whose shirt?"

"My throat hurts," I whine. But he narrows his eyes, and, chastened, I drop my gaze and rub my nose for comfort in one of the many articles of clothing that make up my little sanctuary, my bed in a bed. "Your shirt. I want your shirt. Please."

I don't know why I want it, but I do. I'm bewildered by how much I want it.

"Why do you want my shirt?"

Good question. "I don't know," I rasp. Maybe he can enlighten me.

"Why have you been taking my clothes, Hermione?" He has the shirt fully unbuttoned now. He shrugs it off, pulling at the sleeves to reveal broad rippling shoulders, hard smooth chest, and muscled abdomen.

The sight of him undressing in front of me makes my mouth water, my palms sweat, and my heart race in anxiety.

"I haven't..."

"You have been. Look at you, you have about half my wardrobe in bed with you... Kippy caught you several times going around the flat looking for my bedroom. You shouldn't lie to me, pet. I'll be happy to give you what you want, but you shouldn't lie to me..."

Distressed, embarrassed, I shrink away. "I'm not- I'm very sorry. I really don't remember..."

"You don't remember? Pity. Have you been sleepwalking then, pet?"

Have I?

"Healer Owen warned me you might do this. It's alright, pet. I'm not angry. I'm pleased. You're doing the right thing, following your instincts." He hands me the shirt with an expectant look, but I'm not sure anymore that I want it. I think I want to go home.

I don't move to take it. I lick my lips. "I want to go home. I feel strange."

"Strange?"

"Yes. I... don't feel well."

He leans over me to tuck his shirt into the pile I'm half buried in. Then, reaching down, he presses his fingers into the curve of my neck. "Would you like me to make you feel better?"

The immediate relief makes my fingers weaken. I relax into his hand and nose along his wrist. Smells good. I shiver. Press my legs together. So good.

"You like that, sweetling?" he murmurs, "Do you want me to continue? Or do you still want to go home? We'll have to stop this if you go home."

"No, no, don't stop, Draco, please..."

He obliges me, continuing to massage up my neck as I shiver at the sensation and debate licking his wrist. He sinks his weight onto the bed. "You shouldn't fight your instincts, pet," he hums, his eyes gleaming. "Fighting only delays the inevitable, you know..."

I think I've forgotten most of the past day or more. I say *I think* because beyond the sure knowledge that my recollection, like a moth-eaten cloth, is pitted with gaping holes- beyond that, I don't actually *know*.

I know I've been sick; I can be sure of that at least. I've been out of it for a while, clearly.

But my other memories confuse me. They come to my mind, half-sharp and nebulous: eating pastries and fruit, arguing with a house-elf, piling fragranced clothes around myself...

And the sound of quill on parchment, and the image of a sharp jaw and silver eyes and halo of golden hair illuminated by a dim light, and the sensation of a heavy male leg tucked against mine...

But these strange memories are discontinuous, just fragmented pictures and sensations; broken shells in an ocean of fugue, and I can't even be sure which parts are real and which must be fever dreams.

How long have I been sick? Where was I eating? Was Draco sleeping in here? *With me?*

Surely not!

But I did wake up partially buried in clothes- men's clothes, it would appear, so at least some of what I'm remembering aren't dreams; they really happened.

Now, because I panic-kicked them off me, the clothes are mostly strewn untidily across the bed. Some are even on the floor.

I inspect them fearfully. They are certainly men's clothes, and I dread to think they might be Draco's; what kind of loon am I turning into, to be pilfering and hoarding his clothes like this??

Feeling queasy, I grab my wand from the bedside table and tiptoe straight to the bathroom. I have to think about how to return the clothes to wherever they came from without anyone knowing.

I know there's a house-elf around, and I don't want it to come and check on me and find all these clothes I've apparently stolen. I can't explain why, but I have a strong suspicion that it's alerted if I cast a spell in the house.

Upon entering the walk-in closet, I'm immediately faced with another collection of clothes that aren't mine: Rows of robes and gowns and skirts and shirts hang in once empty spaces. Stacks of knitwear sit on the shelves. I pull gently at the drawers and see lingerie in one, swimwear in another, jewelled sandals in yet another. Other drawers contain scarves and belts and socks and gloves and all kinds of hair accessories.

I massage my temples as if I have a headache, which I feel I might get at any second. I don't think I can trust my own memory right now, but I am positive this was an empty walk-in closet before.

Did I also take all these beautiful things from other rooms in the house? If so, *where* do I return them to, and *how*?

After a hasty shower, I realise I have no clothes of my own and am forced to take one of the dresses that's in the closet. Choosing a cosy, oversized knit dress, I pull it over my head, slide open the opaque sliding doors, and walk back into the bedroom.

Draco and a house-elf are there.

He's seated comfortably next to the bed over which hovers a large tray resplendent with a variety of dishes. He's reading the papers. The house-elf is picking up clothes from the floor.

"You've made a terrible mess here," Draco comments. He hasn't looked up from whatever he's reading; his face is mostly covered by the newspaper.

I'm so embarrassed, my brain is winking out. Thankfully, he doesn't wait for a response. "How are you feeling this morning?" comes the sound of his voice.

"Good, thanks. I'm all better. Thanks for taking care of me," I ramble. I am better; I feel alert and my throat no longer hurts. But my heart is hammering nervously in my chest. I wonder what's going through his mind. Regret for having rescued and housed a heinous kleptomaniac, I suppose.

"You don't appear better to me," he responds in a chilly, distant voice. It sounds like his mind is somewhere else. The pages rustle as he flips to a different section. Black and white pictures move on the front and back covers. "Not judging by what you've done to your nest."

I don't know what he's talking about, and it's making me even more nervous. So, as spryly and vibrantly as I can, I say, "I'm all better and I'm ready to get out of your hair and go any time—"

"Put down your wand, get in bed, and have your breakfast. If we can even call it that. It's almost noon."

Interrupted into silence, I look towards the hovering tray. I don't want to eat, I just want to leave; but in addition to feeling nervous and guilty, I now also feel like a terribly inconvenient guest.

I hesitate uncertainly by the door to the walk-in closet as I try and pluck up the courage to tell him that I should probably just leave. I can feel the blood rushing to my head and my palms becoming sweaty.

The pages rustle some more, and the sharp sound of it frightens me. Timidly, I place my wand on the table, get into bed, and sit cross legged, exactly in between him and the pile of clothes that the house-elf is now working on folding and organising into neat stacks.

I decide that I'm going to eat as quickly as I can to be polite.

"Thank you very much for ordering breakfast," I say awkwardly. I watch as the tray lowers itself to settle just above my knees. "By the way, I couldn't find my school robes, so I borrowed this dress. I just found it in there... Is it your- your sister's? I hope she doesn't mind that I... borrowed it..."

I hear his disembodied voice from behind the paper:

"I'm an only child."

"Ah, okay, so it's your mother's dress."

"No. Everything in there is yours. They were purchased for you as you came with nothing."

I don't know what or how to respond to such an unnecessarily magnanimous gesture, especially given I'm leaving soon and won't be using any of it, so I whisper a quiet thanks. I can't see his face and that makes me feel very tense and apprehensive. I can't tell if he's angry. He sounds angry.

"Draco. I'm so, *so* sorry that I took your clothes," I anxiously offer after what feels like an eternity of painful silence.

He must be very angry about it, as of course he has every right to be. I really can't explain how his clothes got in bed with me— because of course they're *his* clothes, who else's would they be, but I'm afraid to admit that I have gaping holes in my memory.

Worse, I don't know what to do about the shapeless, indistinct, dream-like scenes in my head of him in bed with me.

I think those were dreams. No, I'm sure of it.

I really can't think of an excuse for why I am in possession of large quantities of his clothes that doesn't make me sound clinically insane, but I try anyway. "I don't know what came over me. Believe me, I—"

He lowers the papers, spreading it across the bed. He looks at me. It's a stern, piercing look. "Did you see your breakfast tray when you came back into the bedroom, Hermione?"

"...yes."

"Then why did you suggest that we leave right away? Is it polite to ignore food your host has prepared for you?"

"No," I admit. I feel terrible. "I'm very sorry. I was very stressed, very confused—"

"Don't make excuses. It cheapens the apology."

"I'm sorry," I say. I look down at the plate closest to me. French toast. I don't think I can eat now, even if I had wanted to before.

I chance a look up at him to find his gaze still on me. "Are you— Would you like some?" I offer cautiously, struggling to find the manners that have obviously deserted me. I'm offering him his own food. Christ.

"No. What are you going to eat first?"

The question, unexpected and somewhat arbitrary, stumps me. I look down at the tray and then towards the house-elf, but it's folding clothes with intense concentration. "I don't know," I say. I get a rippling feeling of *déjà vu*. "Maybe the- this french toast—"

"You'll eat the yoghurt and the fruit first. You will not have the hot chocolate today. You can have water or juice. Everything else, you may have if you're still hungry."

I nod agreeably and pick up a piece of fruit at random. I don't really care what I eat; I have no appetite, not when he's talking to me like this.

The house-elf is leaving with the stacks of neatly folded and de-wrinkled clothes levitated in front of her. It's a lot of clothes. Forgetting to begin to eat, I follow the elf with suspicious eyes.

Draco, chin in hand, observes me. “Is something wrong, pet?”

I shake my head. “No, I- nothing. Why is she taking them away?”

“Because I told her to. I told her to, because you deconstructed your nest.”

“My what?”

“Your nest. Why did you do that if you were not done with it?”

“I don’t know what that is,” I say distractedly. I’m looking at the house-elf making her way towards the door. I think I want to stop her. My eyes go agitatedly to Draco’s. “Why is she taking the clothes away?” I repeat in dumb consternation.

“Should she leave them?” he asks lightly. There’s now a slight smirk on his face, a smirk that could be attractive if it didn’t look like it was put there by my acute discomfort. He runs a finger over his mouth. “Should I tell her to leave my clothes here for you?”

“Yes,” I answer immediately. Yes. The room looks... incomplete without them.

I tell Draco what I’m thinking, and he nods towards his house-elf. “Leave everything. Leave us.”

The house-elf precariously places the clothes on the settee at the end of the bed.

After it disappears empty-handed, I pull the piles closer to me, then go back to my tray and pick up a slice of melon.

Draco watches me bite into it. His smirk softens into something distinctly more pleasant, and then fades.

“When you’re done eating, you can rebuild your nest,” he says. “You shouldn’t have taken it apart before the end of your heat. It’s a very rude thing to do, and it hurts my feelings. If you do something like that again, I will have the house-elves take it all away, and you’ll have nothing for your nest.”

I still don’t know what a nest or a heat is, at least not in this context, and I’m not sure I want to; I don’t like the sound of it- any of it.

I’m not sure I like how bossy he’s being either, although I’m in no position to judge or complain; I did steal his clothes and then dump them all over the floor, after all. I’d be put off too if someone did that to my things.

“Alright,” I say to be agreeable. “That’s fair. I really didn’t mean to er, to hurt the nest and your feelings, so I’m very sorry for that, and it won’t happen again.” I finish the melon and go to spear a slice of violently violet dragon fruit. “I do think I should probably look in on my parents and then go back to Hogwarts after breakfast,” I say resolutely. “I don’t like to continue to impose on you, and I don’t want to miss too much. I probably have a ton of work to catch up on...”

No need to deal with nests at Hogwarts, although I'll probably need to fix the kleptomania habit. I hope it was just a stress response.

Draco sighs deeply. His head comes off his chin. "Oh, pet," he says, "That's simply not going to be possible."

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

All my thanks to FreyaFallen and to ShadowSurfing for their invaluable help this chapter.

11 25

I pause with the slice of dragon fruit halfway to my mouth. “Pardon?” I say as politely as I can. I must not have heard him right.

“You can’t go back to Hogwarts.”

I recoil. “Why not?”

He eyes me pityingly. “You’re in heat, Hermione.”

I’m not sure if that’s meant to be explanatory; I only get more confused. “I’m in *what*?”

“You’re in heat, and Hogwarts won’t take you back, not until it’s over.”

“What’s a heat? When will it be over?”

He shrugs. “I don’t know. Days. A week... or longer.”

I put down my fork and stare at him in disbelief. I can feel my mouth slowly dropping open. “No,” I deny. It’s a denial that sounds like a plea. I shake my head. “No.”

He raises his brow. “No? Then you won’t mind if I do this.” He waves his hand, and the thick velvet curtains swing dramatically open. Instantly, the room is swamped with blinding sunlight.

I freeze like a villain in a vampire movie, but other than having to squint in the bright sunlight for a moment, nothing bad seems to be happening- at least I haven’t burst into flames or anything like that, so I shoot a questioning look at Draco.

He seems surprised. “Oh, that’s a development,” he exclaims, rising out of his chair and coming to me.

He grasps my chin, ignoring my “Hey!” of protest, and peers with interest into my eyes. His scrutiny is so intense that I wriggle with discomfort until he makes a low warning noise deep in his throat which makes me freeze.

“No more light sensitivity, then...” he murmurs. My face is still in his grip, although, unable to maintain eye contact, I am looking shyly away. He is so close to me that I can’t help but note his cologne. Smells pretty fucking good. Suddenly I remember why I had all his clothes in bed with me before. Suddenly it makes sense that I should have all his clothes in bed.

When he finally lets me go, I rub my jaw and push away the floating tray of food. As stealthily as I can, I scoot over to the piles of clothes ceded to me by the house-elf.

Draco is stroking his chin thoughtfully, his gaze tracking my movements. “It looks like you might be done with the Sleep,” he says, “although I’ll want it confirmed by a healer.”

“What’s the Sleep?” I mumble as I reach out, fist fabric, and slowly drag my textile catch over my lap. My voice sounds thick to my ears. I rifle through the stack of clothes as I speak, looking for the softest material I can find.

“Is that the- the heat?” I ask. “Is it the same thing? Does it have the same meaning as heats in the muggle world? So the heat is over? Does this mean I can go back to Hogwarts? And my parents? I can see them?”

I find a somewhat familiar looking cashmere throw and stop talking to unreel it and put it to my nose. I think this is the same throw that was in the room I first woke up in. Pleased with its fuzzy softness and the lingering scent of his cologne on it, I drape it over a nearby pillow.

I realise now that the entire room smells faintly like Draco. His clothes smell much stronger. Makes sense. I wonder if I could ask him to get in bed with me for just a little while. Just to really make sure the sheets catch his fragrance too. I want everything to smell as good as he does.

I’m so engrossed in my work, that I don’t even notice he has yet to reply me, and I only look up when his watch beeps.

It seems he’s been silently observing me piling his clothes around myself all this while. I thought I was being surreptitious about it, but evidently not. His eyes are glittering with restrained amusement, and he looks like he’s about to break into a smile, so I guess he’s not furious that I’m reappropriating his clothes again. That’s a relief.

Draco is still watching me with intense fascination. “I have to leave very soon for a lunch meeting,” he says, sounding regretful. He gives his watch a cursory look. “I only have time to answer one of your questions. What would you most like to know?”

“Er.” I am trying to remember all my previously posed questions, but my brain feels as dull and as torpid as mud, and the overpoweringly attractive scent isn’t helping. “I- *Must* you leave?”

The corner of Draco’s mouth moves into a pleased curl as he watches me working. “Is that truly what you want to know, pet?” he purrs. “I’ll only answer one question, so think it over carefully. Is that what you really, *really* want to know?”

He may as well be speaking to himself; I'm not paying the slightest sliver of attention; my mind's already moved on to other things. More important things. I bend over and put my face in the bed and then snatch up the pillows one by one and give them each a violent sniff.
“These all smell like detergent,” I declare, dropping them with a grimace. “I hate it. I *hate* the smell of detergent.”

“What do you want them to smell like then?” he questions, coming very close and putting one finger under my chin. His voice is warm and smooth as melting butter. “Hmm?”

The pressure of his finger against my chin forces me to lift my head and look him directly in his silver eyes. And still he applies firm pressure, until I have to rise to my knees. I move lethargically towards him, my mouth opening to inhale him. I feel my breathing coming faster. I’m pitching forward, guided by his hand on me, and my desire to smell and taste...

Suddenly, he straightens, his shoulders bristling. He summons his house-elf in a sharp voice. “Kippy!”

The house-elf appears by his side and bows deeply.

“Who’s come?” Draco snaps angrily at it. “I just sensed someone pass the threshold. I said not to admit anyone. My instructions were clear. Where’s Roman?”

“It would be your parents, Sir,” squeaks Kippy, coming out of the bow. “Kippy cannot keep them out. They be not taking no for an answer. Your father be reminding your staff and servants of who is the Lord of the Manor. Kippy is sorry for failing Master Draco.”

Draco scowls unhappily down at his watch. “I recall agreeing to meet directly at the restaurant,” he mutters crossly. “Tell them that we’re not ready.” He gestures his house-elf dismissively away before returning his attention to me.

His fingers slide up and down my jaw. His voice is thickening again. “Tell my parents to meet me at the restaurant... And tell them... Tell them I’ll be late...”

I’m blinking in hazy confusion. “Parents,” I mutter.

My parents!

Concern for them cuts through the denseness gathering in my head like the crack of the disappearing house-elf through the silence of the room. I shake my head to try and clear it, accidentally by doing so releasing myself from Draco’s light hold.

“My parents!” I exclaim at him, sitting back down with my legs folded under me. I massage my temples, trying to make the puzzle pieces of my thoughts click together.

“How are my parents doing?” I ask as I scrutinise the mound of fabric gathered around me. “If it’s possible, I’d really prefer to check on them before I go back to school.” I begin to disentangle myself from all the soft material I was draping around myself. *What was I doing with all this?*

"There's been no change in their status," Draco tersely replies. Annoyance filters subtly into and out of his voice. He's watching me free myself; he's frowning again; thinking about his own parents, no doubt. "They're stable. As for your seeing them or returning to school, I've told you that it's out of the question at this time. Our healers and I have agreed that the best place for you while you're in heat is here."

I fix him with a plaintive expression. "But you said that it was over!" I cry. "You said I was done with it. I'm done with it." I nod my head definitively. I'm starting to feel more alert now, more spirited. "Yeah, it's over. I feel much better"

"Sleep is not the same thing as heat, pet," he laughs. "The Sleep is only a part of it." He picks up a discarded throw and begins to swathe it around me. "I'll tell you what it is... I think it's important that you know..."

He lowers his voice as he begins, as though he's about to impart some dreadful knowledge that he would have liked to spare me from:

"The Sleep is a state of hibernation, triggered uniquely by pheromones produced by an unbonded Alpha. Do you know what that means for you? Sleep incapacitates you, and when you're incapacitated, an Alpha- *any* Alpha, that comes upon you, can force a bond. You would not be able to do anything to stop him. He would be able to bond to you without any difficulty. Without any..."

He pauses slightly in a mental search for the final word before his fingers spider across my collarbone, as he bends over to almost whisper it: "... *struggle*."

The dramatic delivery achieves its goal.

"*Incapacitated?*" I splutter in paranoid alarm. I try to move, but my upper arms are pinned a little too securely to my side. This sensation, together with his alarming words make me feel horribly... incapacitated.

In increasing agitation, I struggle to pull off the material he's bundling me in, but he stops me with a sound of warning- like a growl, almost. There's an impatient look in his eyes.

I stop and still, and he goes back to fixing the throw around me. "Unfortunately," he continues smoothly, "and I truly apologise for this, it seems that my proximity to you just as you were entering heat inadvertently triggered Sleep."

I think I must have made another sound of distress because his eyes flick up and meet mine. "But there's no need to worry..." he soothes, his mouth twitching slightly. "I would never permit another Alpha into my residence while you're in Sleep. You will be with no other Alpha but me."

I shoot him a grateful look, and this time his mouth forms a full smile.

"Do you understand why it's not a good idea for you to leave? You're no longer in Sleep, but while you're still in heat, someone else, someone far less in control of themselves than I am, could easily overpower you and bind you to themselves..."

"Alright, I understand," I say. "But as I'm not in Sleep anymore, I *can* defend myself, and I'm really good at magic, so... Yeah... I can't just, you know, stay in hiding for however long..."

The house-elf reappears. "Sir, your parents not be taking no for an answer. They be waiting on the terrace."

Draco sighs. "My parents don't seem to be the only ones who won't take no for an answer." He passes his hand across his forehead and slips me a wary look. "Listen, Hermione, I didn't want to tell you this now, but I'm afraid I have to be the deliverer of some bad news. Something terrible has happened to your parents' house. It was burned down just this morning. No one was hurt, of course, as no one was there, but it's been completely destroyed."

"How?" I gasp. "You don't mean to say... Do you think it was..."

"Arson, yes. I think..." He frowns and appears to waver for an instant before coming to a firm decision. "I think it might be best if I did bring you to see for yourself. We'll go right now. We'll take the car..."

"Your parents be waiting, Master Draco," his house-elf nervously reminds him.

Draco turns to it. "Tell them I'm under no illusions as to why they're here, but they'll have to wait," he says brusquely. "They can see her tonight. I'll meet them directly at La Pergola for lunch, and I'll be late. Tell Crossley to bring the car around."

Behind yellow fire brigade tape sits the blackened, melted shell of the terraced house that used to be my home. Passers-by slow their pace to ogle it. Muggles stand around on the pavement outside talking. Someone official-looking ducks under the tape and enters the burned out building.

I watch from the interior of the tinted car. Feels surreal, like I'm watching a news programme play out on the television.

"The muggles are still investigating the cause of the fire, but of course we know it was magical," I hear Draco say.

My eyes can't leave the sight of my charred home. I reach for the door handle. I don't know what I mean to do, but I feel like I must go in there. Draco intercepts me and grabs my hand. "We discussed this," he warns. His fingers wrap more firmly around mine. "You're not to leave the car."

I hear the mechanical sound of all the doors locking.

He pulls me so that I swivel to face him. “I know you’ve been through so much already, and I hate to put pressure on you, but this is the best time to discuss what to do about them.”

I wrench my eyes reluctantly away from the window. “What do you mean?”

“Our healers are relatively confident that they can be de-petrified as soon as next week. But they may be traumatised after, especially when they learn what’s happened to you, and when they see what’s become of their home.”

“I know,” I agree miserably.

“They will require their memories altered,” he says gently. “And...”

He hesitates, and I scan him sharply, fear for my parents seeping coldly into my veins. “*And?*” I demand to know.

He rubs his jaw, gaze slightly lowered as if he’s running through a list of possible options. “And I suspect this incident may just be the beginning. You’ve already defied the Gaunts, and they are a family famous for exacting revenge.” He motions for me to look out the window. “As you can see, they won’t hesitate to carry out their threats.”

“This is all my fault,” I murmur. “I need to find a way to reverse what they did to me, and soon...”

Draco seizes my hand. The pressure of his grip presses his ring uncomfortably into the bones of my fingers. “Reversing blood magic is not the most pressing issue at this moment,” he says. “It’s impossible anyway. Right now, we need to focus on what can be done. And what can be done is to keep you safe and to sort out your family’s situation immediately. They would be much safer if they went into hiding...”

I nod. I suppose I should have known that this would be a necessary step. While I continue to defy the Gaunts, my parents continue to be in danger.

“They would have to be sent far away,” Draco resumes. “Far from London. Perhaps even as far as a different continent. And that won’t even be enough. They would also be safer not remembering you for now.”

I tear my hand away in shock and rejection. “No. Never.”

“You’re dismissing my advice again?” he says coolly, brow arching.

I bite the inside of my lip. “I don’t disagree that it may be safer for them to go far away, but why do they have to forget me? I don’t see why that’s necessary.”

“You’re a bright girl, Hermione. Use that brain of yours. They’ll want to be with you- to see you, at least, and *you’ll* keep wanting to see them. And if you do, you will definitely lead the Gaunts directly to them.”

“Send them away, yes, but can’t they keep their memories of me?” I plead. “It will only be for a while, after all... They’ll understand...”

He shakes his head in sadness. “It’s too risky, and you know it. They’ll be confused and frightened. You must remember that they’re muggles. They won’t understand how our world works. They are in danger because of you. The Gaunts won’t hurt you, but they’ll have no problem hurting them. They already have!”

What he’s suggesting doesn’t make sense, but I’m deeply troubled by the idea of taking away their memories without their first consenting to it. “I’ll ask them first what they want to do,” I say resolutely. “I’ll talk to them when they wake up, lay out all the options… If they agree to it, then that’s settled… If not-”

Draco stops me with a brisk and sudden gesture. “It’s best for everyone if you never saw them again,” he tells me. His eyes bear unrelentingly on mine. His voice is deepening as he speaks, growing more emphatic; it’s not a voice to be argued against. “Don’t you want what’s best for them? You said that their safety was the most important thing, remember?”

“Yes,” I capitulate. I bite the inside of my lip again and let out a tired sigh. I look at him helplessly. He seems to innately understand how I’m feeling, because he puts an arm reassuringly around me and draws me in.

“You’re doing the right thing,” he murmurs. “I’ll make sure they’re far away and safe from the Gaunts….”

I resist the urge to put my face in his shoulder and cry; I steel myself. “When this is all over, their memories can be restored, of course?”

“Easily enough. I would never have suggested this recourse if there was a chance of the memory modification being permanent.”

I know I’ve read in a few places that memory modification is dicey magic at best, but I’m sure he’s right. He does have access to far more research than is publicly available. I have to let my doubt go.

“Leave everything to me,” he assures smilingly. His smile projects resolution; it’s comforting. He’s so warm and comforting, and he smells amazing. He leans back, bringing me to rest against his chest, as he says, “I will personally see to it that you are happily settled in your new home with your family by the end of the year.”

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

11 25

After Draco takes me back to his home, he leaves for his lunch meeting with his parents, leaving me to my own devices.

The first thing I do is request for Kippy to bring me parchment and a quill so that I can write to Hogwarts and request that all my schoolwork be sent to me by owl; and while the house-elf is searching for the material, I decide to explore Draco's house.

I vaguely remember most of the rooms from the night I arrived, but I do make a pleasant new discovery: What I had thought was a velvet-draped wall in the living room with the waterfall feature are actually long velvet curtains hiding French doors that open onto a terrace so large it has a miniature hedge garden in it. The terrace is framed by tall trees and bushes to give it privacy.

Draco said that I could go anywhere I liked within his home, but that for my own safety, I should not leave it, which is fine by me, so long as no Gaunt or Lestrange can get to me here.

Unfortunately, he's also ordered Roman, the gigantic half-troll, to stay there.

The imposing bodyguard doesn't look like he's left his post since that first night. He's in the room with the curving windows and marble table, standing in front of a door and squinting diligently with his beady eyes in the direction of the windows whose magical panes project a tranquil scene of mountains, lake, and dark forests that make it look like we're in the deeps of the Dolomites.

I hover around the table for a few seconds, deliberating whether to strike up a conversation with him. Just as I'm about to lose my nerve and flee, he growls out something.

I turn back. "Pardon?"

"Off limits," repeats the guard in his gruff voice. He shifts his gargantuan feet and makes a funny sound in the back of his throat before continuing. "My employer's instructions are to not let anyone past this door without his permission."

"But Draco said I could go anywhere in his house," I argue politely. "What's through there?"

"It leads to the apparition-safe areas, guest rooms, staff quarters, and entrance. It's off limits."

"I'm a guest," I laugh.

He shrugs.

"Right. Well, thanks for helping, er, guard me. I'm really grateful. I'm sure it's very boring work."

"Miss Hermione," interrupts the house-elf, returned. "Kippy has your writing materials. They be waiting you in your room."

"Oh, great!" I beam down at it. "Thanks, Kippy!"

It leads the way back to my bedroom where the thick velvet curtains have been pulled tight against the walls and only the sheers hang down over an open and atmospheric mountainous scene. It seems like the windows are all bespelled to display matching scenery. It's beautiful.

Draco's clothes lie rumpled on the bed in a half circle, exactly how I last left them. On one of the nightstands is a quill, a pot of ink, and some rolled up parchment.

There's no writing desk in the room; there's only the bed, its ottoman, and the nightstands. That doesn't deter me; with a flick of my wand, I soon have the quill and parchment hovering in front of me ready to take dictation.

"I'll come look for you in about twenty minutes," I tell Kippy. "I'll have it ready to be posted by then."

A short rap on the door prefices the arrival of two healers. I remember them. Owen and Crossley.

I frown at them as they enter. They hadn't even waited for permission to come in. How rude.

"How are we feeling this evening?" asks Healer Owen at once. He's wearing pristine white healer's robes. He looks as old as Dumbledore, although his beard is nowhere near as long.

"Fine, thanks," I mutter as I wedge another bundled shirt further into the gap between two pillows. "Is it evening already?"

"A simply delightful nest!" the younger Healer Crossley comments as he begins setting up a Healer's station right beside the bed. "Have you thought about using a big O or U pillow instead? You would find those more comfortable. We can have one of each purchased and sent here right away, if you'd like to try."

I survey my pillow stockade with displeasure. "Ah," I say, "Is this what a nest is, then?" I suppose it does look rather like a nest, especially with the way I've moulded its hodgepodge of pillows and linens and clothes into this comfortable cradling shape.

“Yes, and it’s a commendable nest. Very well constructed for a first attempt. Looks very safe and warm.”

It is, actually, and in no small part because I worked out a solution to the offensive detergent smell. If I remove the pillow covers and cover all the pillow inserts in whatever available fabric smells like Draco’s cologne, the detergent becomes negligible.

I look around for the rejected pillow covers. I can’t catch sight of them anywhere, but I do suddenly notice my parchment and quill, both hovering unattended about an arm’s length away, still waiting to be utilised.

“Oh!” I exclaim in dismay. “My letter!”

I remember that I’d grown so annoyed by the terrible detergent-smelling pillows that I’d decided to put off finishing the letter until I could fix the problem.

“We’ll just conduct some tests and be out of your hair, and then you can continue working on your nest and your letter,” says Healer Crossley kindly. He turns his wand into a slim-beamed torch. “Please look up and remain still for a second. Don’t blink.”

“This is an Omega thing, isn’t it?” I ask him as I look to the right and then to the left as directed while he shines his wand-torch into my eyes. “The nest?”

“Of course!”

Healer Owen approaches, careful not to touch any part of what I now know to be a nest. “Yes,” he mutters, as he pokes clinically at my neck. “You’re definitely out of Sleep. Does your throat still hurt? No? Good, good. It shouldn’t anymore.” He dims the light from his wand. “Everything seems to be in order. The last thing to do before we go is just to give you your usual potions. Healer Crossley’s going to measure them out now.”

I look at Healer Crossley sorting through vials. *Usual potions?*

“Now that you’re no longer in Sleep,” Healer Owen continues, “you can go ahead and take them on your own until you finish the course. We’ll remove the potions that were aiding you through Sleep, as you don’t need them anymore, and we’ll instruct your staff on how to prepare the rest.”

“What are the potions for?” I ask.

“They’re just blood strengtheners and the like.”

I watch the many liquids and powders being measured out and mixed in copper cups. “Blood strengtheners? *All* of them?”

“This is the blood strengthener,” offers Healer Crossley, brandishing one of the vials containing a dark blood-red potion.

“Okay. What about the rest?” I point at a vial full of pale-yellow powder. “What about that one? What is it for?”

“It maintains your temperature.”

I shake my head to express my scepticism. “I don’t know any temperature regulating substances that are that shade of yellow. Ostrich feathers and desert ants are the only ingredients currently used by potioneers in temperature regulation in humans, and with those, I would expect to see black, red, or ochre, when ground down.”

“You know your potions!” exclaims Healer Owen.

“Yes,” I reply. “And you wouldn’t add either ostrich feather or desert ant to- Is that diluted oyster sauce or leech juice?”

No reply from either.

The combined ingredients of yellow powder and black liquid are mixed carefully together and poured into a copper cup. Healer Crossley double checks the dosage and hands it to me.

He’s met with my shoulder as I pointedly turn away. “I’m not taking that,” I assert. “I’m not taking any more of these potions until you tell me exactly what’s in them and what they do.”

I’m dead serious too. I’m really not taking any of them. I think my mind’s going, and I wonder if it’s because of the potions. They must have some side effects.

Healer Crossley, holding the rejected cup uncertainly, turns to his superior for guidance.

“Now, now,” scolds Healer Owen, as he brings his bristling brows together in a frown. “If you don’t take your potions, we’ll have to tell Mr. Malfoy that you’re being difficult. We don’t want to do that, so why don’t you just take them, and then you can go back to sleeping in your nice nest.”

He’s trying to subdue me with the kind of look medical professionals love to give their obdurate patients. I’ve seen my parents employ it before.

“Tell him whatever you like,” I say pleasantly. They don’t know the real arrangement Draco and I have.

The two healers try and cajole me some more, but when they see that it’s useless, they give up and leave. After they’re gone, I kick away the pillows and finish writing my letter.

I wave my finished letter at Kippy the house-elf. “Would you kindly deliver this to Hogwarts, please.” I point at the name I’ve written on the front of it. “It has to go to Professor McGonagall, but really you can give it to any one of the staff.”

“Kippy cannot leave without permission from Master Draco.”

“Hmm. What about an owl? Could I perhaps borrow an owl?”

Kippy seems unsure. “Kippy be taking this and asking Master Draco’s permission to send it by owl,” it says, tugging the letter from my hand.

“Surely you don’t need his permission just for that,” I interject reasonably. “It’s just a letter. Oh, hang on, you must be connected to the floo network. I could try a head-only transport and speak to one of the professors that way...”

“Kippy be asking Master Draco’s permission to activate the floor,” reiterates the house-elf, bowing low.

“Is there anything that can be done without having to first obtain Draco’s permission?” I burst out in exasperation. Nothing in this house seems possible without his permission and I’m beginning to feel quite constrained.

“What do you need done, pet?” The eternally cool voice of Draco Malfoy penetrates the tense silence which Kippy and I are occupying.

I make a half-turn to face him as he comes down the hallway. “I’m trying to send a letter,” I say. “Oh, erm, hello, you alright?” I greet him, blushing slightly as he leans close to kiss me on the cheek. Now I’m embarrassed that he’s heard me complaining.

He draws back, smiling. “Hello you,” he says. “It can be exasperating at times, I’m aware, but my staff do tend to follow instructions to... err, to the letter.” His eyes skim the address on the envelope as he takes it from his house-elf. “To Hogwarts? Writing to your friends?”

“To my head of house. I wanted to request to receive homework by mail.”

“What a wonderful idea,” exclaims Draco, smiling broadly. “I’ll send it for you tomorrow morning.” He slips the letter into the inside of his suit jacket. “There’s no reason you shouldn’t continue your studies... You were aspiring to sit the NEWTs, I suppose? You know they can be easily administered anywhere. Many people choose to take them at home where they’re more comfortable. My cousin Seb sat for his in his villa in the Seychelles.”

I try and fail to picture myself on a beach writing an essay on centaur laws while a white-haired wizard in swim shorts invigilates from a beach chair. “Er, I think I’ll just continue at Hogwarts,” I say faintly.

“Mm...” Draco hums agreeably. He starts walking me back to my room, motioning for his house-elf to follow us. “Exams... School... I think only those mediocre people whose potential are fulfilled at the level of academic achievement put such stress on the importance of exams and school... For the truly talented, the adage that the world is their oyster holds true. You and I belong to the latter group, I hope...”

I nod earnestly. Truthfully, I think that schools and exams have their merits, and that there’s a clear correlation between academic performance and real-world success, but I don’t want him to lump me in with that apparently disappointing group of academic high achievers, so I keep my thoughts to myself. I want to remain in good standing with him.

"Yes," he continues, "I am astonished more people don't give up formal studies after their OWLs for more meaningful pursuits. But let's agree to leave that subject behind us for now. You need to get ready for dinner. My parents are coming, and they're anxious to meet you."

"They are?" I ask nervously.

"Yes. I've put them off for as long as I could, but I've run out of excuses. Betrothals are very formal, very serious matters in our world, and to have engaged ourselves into marriage so quickly and so secretively, well..."

I wince. "I'm so sorry you had to lie to them. I'm very grateful you've put yourself in the line of fire to help me. I feel really bad about it. I'll come clean to them. Maybe they could..."

"No, they wouldn't understand," says Draco, shutting me down before I can finish speaking. "They're very traditional. And besides, our situation benefits me too. They've started pressuring me to marry, and nothing but a concrete engagement could have silenced them."

"Oh! I see," I say, thinking. So he too is trying to escape societal pressures. "Wasn't there anyone you wanted to marry?"

He smiles. "You, apparently."

"Thanks," I reply, giggling. "I'm very flattered. But seriously, I bet you could get any woman you wanted."

His smile quirks a little higher on one side. I notice then how easily it can turn into a smirk. "Yes... That's true," he says.

Stopping before my door, he bends towards me. "I know how difficult it is for you, stubborn little thing, but can I count on you to do as you're asked tonight, without question or complaint, and to pretend to be a typical obedient fiancée while my parents are here? Can I count on your help?"

I agree readily- he's helped me so much and I'm happy to help him too. We're in this together.

"Good girl," he says, the praise falling smoothly from his lips. "Go with Kippy and change into evening dress."

-

After I have showered and the house-elf has zipped me into a pink pleated gown with a gold chain belt and neckline, and wrestled my hair into smooth waves, it leads me to the dining room, outside of which I find Draco Malfoy waiting with his parents.

They don't notice me right away, which gives me a chance to evaluate them.

Draco is talking to his father, an older version of him with longer hair tied back in a dark green ribbon, and a carriage that makes it clear by his every movement that he's a powerful, influential man and knows it.

Draco radiates influence too, but in a subtler, slicker way, I think, evident by the almost complacent smoothness inherent in his gestures. He's changed into a black velvet cocktail jacket, and his platinum hair, newly gelled, has been combed carefully back with a fine-toothed comb. He looks put together. He looks as delicious as sin, frankly. I think whoever he does eventually marry should look and smell as good as he, and be as charming and intelligent, or it would be such a waste.

Lady Malfoy, sheathed in a navy-blue dress, is settled on a lounge chair under a large contemporary artwork of orange shapes. She's the first to see me. "Oh, look who's joined us!" she exclaims. There's a touch of something mordant in her tone; I see her eyes slide straightaway to the glittering dragon wrapped around my finger.

A serving house-elf hurries to offer me an aperitif.

Lady Malfoy lifts herself and comes over to give me a kiss on each cheek. "You look simply lovely, my dear Ms. Gaunt."

I'm taken aback by her voice; I'd forgotten how weirdly deep and husky it is. I think it's the sort of voice that's more suited to someone of darker hair and eyes, like her sister Bella, than to someone so slight and with such light colouring as Narcissa Malfoy has.

The men turn and offer me compliments, and I am formally introduced to Draco's father, Lord Malfoy, whose given name is Lucius. It strikes me then how little I know about Draco's family. I didn't even know their names!

Lord Malfoy makes a comment that I think is meant to be a jibe:

"Draco drops the news of his engagement so casually, and hardly explains your new-found connection to the Gaunts, I suppose I must resign myself to only discovering that you're married when you start addressing me as Father." He laughs a short unpleasant laugh. "You're not already married, are you?"

Obviously, I'm not pure-blooded enough to understand the cultural intricacies that make up the insult. Draco is, however, and responds with a disregardful shrug of his shoulders and another one of those easy smirks. "If we were married, you'd know it without Hermione having to open her mouth," he drawls.

"Normally, and no doubt Morfin would have had boasted something similar with regards to the graft," says his father drily as he hands off his emptied champagne glass to a house-elf and accepts a new one in return. "If she were a Gaunt, you'd know it, etcetera etcetera..."

"Actually, I'm not really a Gaunt—" I begin, but Draco shoots me a hard look. "Of course you are, sweetling."

“Not a Gaunt?” says Lady Malfoy in surprise. “Why does she wish to throw off her name, Draco?”

“The grafting process was very hard on her, as I understand,” says Draco, reaching out to give me a rub on the back. “She’s naturally a little resentful...”

“She ought not to be,” pronounces his father coldly and severely. “What a privilege she has been afforded! I imagine it must have taken so long because of how impure her blood was, but better than stay a mud. I hope she understands how lucky she is that Lord Gaunt agreed to this, Draco.”

“Father, a little patience, please.”

“You don’t understand. I didn’t *ask* to be a Gaunt,” I but in, indignant, but Draco puts up a hand. “Be quiet, sweetling. We’re talking.”

I’m dumbstruck by his curtness. I know he’s only putting on an act for his parents, but it’s still a shock. And his parents... No wonder he didn’t want to tell them the truth about the engagement. They don’t seem like nice, caring people. In fact, there’s something vaguely cold and repellent about them. How did they ever produce such an admirably and secretly kind son as Draco?

“As bold as a Gaunt, I’ll give her that,” remarks Lord Malfoy. “If it weren’t for Parseltongue, her family would look better in Gryffindor colours. Is it true you can speak to snakes, Ms. Gaunt?”

Draco gives me a nod to go ahead and answer.

“Oh, absolutely,” I address his father quietly, putting on my sweetest smile. “In fact, some might observe that I’m speaking with snakes right now.”

There’s some silence as they reflect on my answer and try to figure out whether to be offended by it or not. Draco is clearly trying not to laugh. He hides it by taking a long draught from his glass.

He hands the glass off to a house-elf. “I haven’t been as taken with anyone as I have been with Hermione,” he professes, sliding his arm around my waist and landing a kiss on my hair. He chuckles. “Snakes indeed...”

Just as I’m about to breathe a sigh of relief that I haven’t upset him, he unexpectedly adds, with a menacing tightening of his hand around my waist, and a coldness to his voice that doesn’t sound pretended in the slightest:

“Next time, however, that you are posed a question by a member of our family, you will remember to answer directly and with the respect the person is due.” There’s a hint in his gaze; a warning. “Can I count on you to do that, Hermione?” he asks.

I *know* he’s only pretending, and I *know* I shouldn’t take offence at the way he’s talking to me, but it’s difficult, and I can only manage an unhappy nod.

He doesn't move. He's waiting for something. And suddenly I'm aware of the heaviness of his hand resting against my hip. It's an oppressive feeling.

"Yes," I say, my tongue moving thickly.

"Yes, who?"

"Yes, Draco."

He smiles. Some gaiety returns to his clear grey eyes. "That's better," he says, pressing another kiss onto my temple and dragging me into a one-armed embrace, so that my face presses against the velvet breast of his jacket. "I know you'll do better next time..."

I take a deep shuddering breath and calm down when a wave of cologne hits me. Fuck me, this is better than drugs. Not that I've done any.

"Speaking of snakes, why don't you demonstrate your proficiency in parseltongue to my doubting parents so we can move past this topic?" he suggests.

Letting go of me to draw his wand, he curves it in the air and casts a nonverbal spell.

A brightly coloured snake- another boomslang, appears in twisting coils through the air before dropping onto the rug.

"Draco!" His mother says reproachfully, moving her knees hastily back. "You could have warned us you were going to do that."

"I'm sorry, Mother. I thought it best to get this over with. You know you were going to ask to see her speak in Parseltongue, and you didn't want me to conjure the snake over dinner, did you?"

His mother shudders but makes no further complaint, and Draco presses me towards the boomslang encouragingly. "Tell the snake to do something, sweetling. Quickly, before Mother faints."

The snake, vibrating with indignance, has its neck raised high, and its eyes fixed on me. "You're the same witch from before," it says. "Why do you people keep summoning me? Do you need something?"

I automatically put my hand out for it to sniff, like it's a dog. "No... They just want to see us interact because they don't believe I can talk to snakes."

"Well, that's rude. Want me to kill them? I'll do it."

I laugh. "Thanks, but you definitely shouldn't be killing people. Anyway, I didn't believe I could talk to you either, so I don't really blame them. Can I hold you?"

"Of course. I like you Speakers. I won't bite." Swaying slightly, it descends on my palm, and then suddenly, it's gone.

“That was a sufficient display,” says Draco, stowing his wand. “You shouldn’t have let it come close enough to harm you, sweetling.”

“It wouldn’t have,” I say.

Lord Malfoy, having surrendered to his fascination, has come forward. “Remarkable,” he says. “You’re still enrolled at Hogwarts, correct? In Gryffindor house? Your Lord Father should demand a re-sort.”

I’m not sure if an answer is expected, so I just nod, which also seems to be a sufficient display; I’m blessed with looks of grudging approval.

“Shall we go into dinner?” suggests Lady Malfoy, her composure recovered.

The doors to the dining room open themselves, and we enter.

-

The dining room is an intimate space. Dark wine racks look down on a table just big enough for eight people. There’s only the four of us. I’m seated opposite Draco, next to his mother.

At a buffet table placed against the wall, a house-elf pours olive oil into individual white dipping dishes. Another walks between us, filling our glasses with sparkling water and dropping little slices of lemon on the cracking ice.

A third house-elf brings out a fancy sculpted cruet set that holds crystal stoppered bottles full of liquid. It’s put directly in front of me, and I give it a passing glance. Sauces, I guess. Sauces or syrups.

I feel uncomfortable at being the first to be served, even if it’s just sauces. I hope the house-elf quickly returns with everyone else’s.

But it doesn’t come back, and after a few minutes of conversation, Draco’s mother says to me, with a flighty gesture of her hand: “It’s probably best if you take those quickly.”

I look down at the cruet set with its sauces that she’s indicating.

Not sauces. *Potions*.

Realisation is a cold finger down my neck.

“Oh, these?” I frown. “The healers must have misunderstood me. I told them I wasn’t going to take the potions anymore...”

I’m treated to a row of blank faces.

"At least not until I know exactly what they're for and what's in them," I finish nervously.

Narcissa Malfoy's brows raise, and she looks at me like I've just declared myself to be mentally ill. "Our healers are the best, dear," she says. "We never argue with them."

"I'm sure they are," I agree, to be accommodating; but I don't make the slightest move towards the stoppered potion bottles.

"Enough dallying, if you please, Ms. Gaunt," says Lord Malfoy curtly. "I'm famished."

It feels distinctly like I'm in some sort of mental tug-of-war; and if I am, I would like to be able to count on Draco as my teammate. I shoot him a meaningful look, hoping he gets the message and gets me out of this awkward situation, but he's sipping his drink and bathing me with his cool detached gaze, and he says nothing.

Left to fend for myself, I push away the potions, which isn't easy; the twisty silver tray they're housed in is deceptively heavy and refuses to slide against the placemat. But I have to make a point. I'm not taking the blasted potions.

"I think I'll pass for now," I say firmly, and to throw them a bone, add: "Maybe after dinner... We'll see..."

"Those potions have to be taken on an empty stomach," Draco states.

I look at him searchingly; his face is impenetrable. Another cold sensation trickles down my spine. I feel slightly confounded. *Why isn't he taking my side?*

"I'm waiting to see the list of ingredients in them first," I venture to say. "They're giving me all sorts of side-effects..."

"What kind of side-effects?" enquires his mother.

"Just, err, unpleasant kinds..."

Draco repeats the question in a humourless tone: "What kind of side-effects?"

I hesitate for a second. "I- I've been feeling strange. Fogged up and tired, like I just want to lie in bed. I haven't been able to think very clearly, and I- I find myself doing things I- that I wouldn't normally do-"

"What do you need to be thinking about?" laughs Lord Malfoy. "Lie in bed all day if you want to. Be thankful you have the luxury. Not all of us are so lucky."

His words incense me, and it's taking everything in me to not respond with something cutting; I don't want Draco publicly chastising me again. In fact, I find it a little repellent the way he's so easily slid into the role of bossy and arrogant heir.

I look to him once more, wishing for him to interpose, to say something in my defence. It's clear I don't want to drink the potions, not right now!

"Those aren't side-effects," Draco says. He's begun speaking very slowly, as though he's explaining the mechanics of something very simple to someone very simple. It's making me feel sick.

"Oh?" I smile politely. "How do you know? Do you know what's in the potions then? Could you tell me what each one does?"

"Certainly." He returns my smile. "But it would take me a long time to go through every ingredient with you, and my poor parents may have starved to death by then. Dinner can't be served until you finish your potions." His fingers trace the sweating body of his glass. I watch them move up and down. His eyes are as cold and as clear as the swirling ice. "Drink them first, and we can talk about it later, hm?"

His parents are both looking at me. They look nettled, as though I really am withholding food from them for some petty purpose.

I give them all a tight smile. "I'm sorry," I hear myself say, "I didn't know I was holding up dinner..."

I look down at the potions. Perfectly positioned, perfectly measured potions in crystal bottles. They look like poison to me. They may as well be. My chest feels like a tight band around my heart.

I pick up the nearest bottle, unstopper it, and force myself to drink its contents. Five more to go.

I drink them all, my furious gaze burning into the table as I do. I can't look at anyone. I feel so betrayed by Draco. So betrayed.

When the last bottle is empty, Kippy comes to take away the cruet set. She lifts the heavy thing, her skinny arms working, and brings it to Draco. He picks up one obviously-emptied bottle and inspects it pointedly. He does that six times, with each bottle, and then he looks up at all of us and smiles; if there had been a tug-of-war, he is the sole victor- and it feels awfully like he may have been my opponent.

Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains sex and dub-con/non-con/rape. I hope this warning doesn't surprise you. If it does, how did you get to chapter 18 without looking at the tags???

11 25

I go through dinner seething in near-silence, taking token bites out of everything that's put in front of me, taking small sips from uncountable glasses of wine, and answering questions with icy politeness.

Nobody acknowledges the shift in atmosphere; Draco talks with his father about a deal they're working on, and Lady Malfoy admires her own jewellery as she eats.

During the seventh or eighth course- it's hard to remember which one, she looks up at me and says, "What colour stones do you like, Ms. Gaunt? And don't feel you must say green. I've always been partial to pastels myself."

"I don't know," I say into my food, and try to make myself look pre-occupied by the act of eating so that she doesn't keep talking to me.

"Well, you really must find out what you like soon," she says. "Or you'll risk receiving pastel stones from us. Do you like pink diamonds?"

"No, thank you."

"You're wearing a pink dress so you must like pink. What about padparadschas?"

"No, thank you."

"Never mind, I'll ask Draco what he wants you to have," she decides.

Draco, on hearing his name spoken, turns his head to our end of the table. "What did you want to ask me, Mother?"

"What would you like your fiancée to receive from us, dear? For the betrothal gifts? She doesn't seem to much like anything, or to even know what she wants."

Draco's brow goes up. "Really?" he hums. His eyes slide to me. "I'm surprised to hear that. She's normally very opinionated..."

I bite my tongue and busy myself with handing off my near-full plate to a house-elf.

“Don’t muggles wear jewellery?” asks his mother.

“I should imagine so,” Draco responds. “Not that their habits are of any relevance. Hermione is a pureblood.”

“Take her to the vaults and show her a selection,” suggests Lord Malfoy. He settles back in his chair to watch the dessert trolley being rolled in. “I guarantee she’ll know what she wants as soon as she sees it. What kind of cake is that? Chocolate-?”

“There’s no need to go through all that trouble,” says Draco to his mother. “Send a photo list to me and I’ll pick from there.”

“I think it’s important to *like* what one wears,” says Lady Malfoy. “Some personality traits endure even after marriage, you know. I wear these boring dark colours to please your father, but I never stopped liking pastels...”

“I buy you whatever you like,” protests Lord Malfoy.

“Yes, that’s true, but when I wear a light-coloured dress, you always say it washes me out...”

The dessert trolley is brought around to me, and I shift all the way around in my chair, glad to be given the opportunity to face away from the Malfoys and to have something new to pretend to pay attention to.

“You look beautiful in any colour,” Lord Malfoy is saying. “But dark tones suit Malfoy colouring best...”

I dip my head to look at one of the tarts in the bottom tray of the trolley. “What’s that?” I ask the house-elf.

“Passionfruit and redcurrant tart, Mistress.”

“And that? What’s that?”

“Chocolate tiramisu, Mistress.”

“And the one behind it?”

“Pistach-”

“Hermione will have whatever I’m having,” Draco’s voice rings out.

I straighten and look directly in his face, and then quickly scan his plate. He’s got profiteroles as well as some kind of orange dessert with cream. They don’t look half bad. I might have picked them myself, given the chance. But now I’m not going to.

I take a deep breath. “I want the chocolate tiramisu,” I announce firmly.

“If the girl wants chocolate tiramisu-” begins his mother.

“She’ll have what I’m having.”

“I don’t want what you’re having,” I state, trembling a little as I speak; I sound unfortunately petulant, which is not at all what I was aiming for, and doesn’t do me any favours.

His mother has fallen silent. His father moves his gaze between the three of us, a slight frown on his face.

Draco gestures at his house-elf, and a small plate of profiteroles and a bowl of sliced candied oranges heaped on thick yoghurt are slid in front of me.

After a few minutes, Lady Malfoy says, “I’ll send you a list of jewellery for Hermione that you can choose from, Draco dear. A selection of heirloom pieces and perhaps some new bespoke ones? We could reset some stones… I’ll talk to our jewellers…”

I don’t touch either the profiteroles or the fruit. I drink dessert wine until my head is swimming, and when the house-elves come to collect the plates, they look with dismay upon my untouched portions and throw nervous glances at Draco.

“Shall we go on the terrace?” asks his mother. “My legs are falling asleep…”

Lord Malfoy is already pushing his chair back. Draco looks at my plate, where the profiteroles sit sagging in sad little puddles of melting vanilla ice cream. He doesn’t seem surprised. “Are you full, sweetling?” he asks sweetly.

I shake my head.

His brow shoots up. “No? Then have some dessert.”

“I didn’t want these,” I say, glaring at my plate. Emboldened by alcohol as I am, I still find myself unable to make eye contact with him. “I *don’t* want these. I want to decide things for myself. I want you to stop ordering me around. I want you to stop being such a wanker—”

“*What?*” comes his wispy-cold reply.

I don’t look up. My hands are sweating. “You heard me,” I hear me say.

Grind of his chair moving.

Within a few seconds, he’s beside me; I smell him before I see him, an intense mouth-watering smell. He takes up my spoon. Dips it into the bowl of honeyed orange. “Omegas, I’ve been told, remain puerile and emotionally immature until marriage,” he says pleasantly.

"I'm not sure I believed that, until this moment. If you're going to act like a child, you will be treated like a child." He brings the spoon up to my mouth. "Open up, sweetling."

I begin to open my mouth, catch myself at the last second, and in a force of confusion and denial, shove fretfully at his hand.

He catches my wrist and twists, but it's too late; the sticky contents of the spoon go flying.

I hear Lady Malfoy gasp.

Finally, I look up.

Draco, his black velvet jacket splattered just a little with orange and cream, is paling; his eyes flash like lightning.

"Well!" exclaims his father, his own eyes flashing grey anger at me. "Well!" He turns very stiffly to his son. "A word, Draco, if you please. In private."

Draco's eyes laser into me; I fight the compulsion to apologise.

He jerks his head in a nod, and without a word to me, the three of them leave.

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Leaving just my dessert still sitting on the table, the house-elves clear everything else and disappear through another door.

I contemplate following them, but after a moment's consideration, I get up and scurry over to the one the Malfoys exited by and put my ear against it. There is a privacy charm in place; I'm unable to hear anything.

I unlink my wand from the chain belt at my waist and take down the privacy charm as discreetly as I can.

Immediately, I hear Draco's father speaking:

"... and while the news of your moving in the direction of settling down and producing Malfoy heirs was an agreeable one, unconventional and rushed as I thought your engagement to have been, if you ask my advice, this is a poor match."

"I do not ask it," Draco says.

There is a pause, and then I hear the cold voice of Lucius Malfoy again: "Nevertheless, I am your father and head of this household so I will give it to you. In your place I should dissolve the engagement and return her to the Gaunts. This whole business has been highly irregular. What is she doing living here? She should still be in her Lord Father's home. And we should

have had a betrothal ceremony... I cannot say I'm impressed with how this has been handled.”

“If it will satisfy you, we will have the betrothal ceremony whenever you like.”

“You mean to press on with this engagement? After she has laid a hand on you? Draco... This is unacceptable! She would have earned my full censure. Call for her Lord Father to take her—”

“I will not!” Draco cuts in vehemently.

More silence.

“That's not my style,” Draco says finally, his voice returned to normal. “I prefer to correct her myself. If you will excuse us from the rest of the evening...”

“She's uncultivated, Draco,” his mother implores. “It was evident from the beginning. When I first saw her in Hogwarts... I was shocked by the way she carries herself. And I can't say that Gaunt blood has improved her.”

“Your mother is right. The girl's been nothing but fractious all evening. That comment about snakes... She meant to mock us. It is my opinion that she be returned to her family. Grafting a mudblood at that age... I don't know what they were thinking... Whether or not she's capable of improvement or is beyond hope is not up to me to decide. Let Lord Gaunt deal with—”

“It's up to *me* to decide,” Draco interjects coldly. “And I'll thank you not to call my fiancée a mudblood.”

“She's very pretty, and parseltongue is a desirable trait, but surely those alone do not make this match for you, Draco?” asks his mother in a strange tone.

“I want what I want!” snaps Draco, his voice threatening to break into that of a spoiled child's about to throw a tantrum.

An interval of long silence is broken by his mother, who says, in a manner clearly meant to sound reasonable and placating, “That's fine darling. But you also told us that you rushed into this engagement because you were smitten with each other, and I must be honest with you, my son, I saw no affection from her tonight.”

“I warned you that she's not yet ready, and you still insisted on coming. And I have to say I can more easily excuse her behaviour than yours.”

“*Ours-?*” I hear the shocked interjection of Lady Malfoy, while his father coldly says, “Watch how you speak to us, Draco.”

“I apologise. I didn't mean that as impertinence against you, I only meant to justify Hermione's actions. She's feeling out of her depth, she's new to this, and she's probably still unbalanced by the influence of Gaunt blood, which as you say is infamous for being volatile,

and which has probably intensified her naturally headstrong personality... Can we be surprised that she is very reactive right now?"

Someone mutters something; I can't make out what they say.

"Oh?" returns Draco. "Then why didn't you give me a second to handle it? Why did you drag me out immediately to say *return her to the Gaunts*? Return her to the Gaunts? Really? Do you wish me to look like a fool, bested by an Omega from a crumbling House? Lord Gaunt will crow that even his fledgling snake cannot be managed by us. We will be a laughingstock. Is that what you want, Father?"

There's an even longer silence.

"You have not yet disappointed us by your choices. Don't begin now," warns his father. "I'll be writing to you tomorrow when I have processed my thoughts on this matter. Come, Narcissa."

I take those words as my cue to hastily re-install the privacy charms and scramble back.

A minute later, Draco re-enters, alone.

"What was that?" he snaps immediately.

Although he's furious, to my surprise, his voice no longer sounds pompous or jeering. Rather, he sounds chagrined, and somewhat concerned. He runs his hand over his blonde hair and looks at me with eyes that, while still smoking with anger, also hint at his befuddlement. "Have you *entirely* lost the plot? What's the matter with you?"

"*What?* What's the matter with *me*?"

"I asked if you could pretend to be the *obedient* fiancée, and you agreed! I told you how traditional my parents are. I thought I could count on you, Hermione!"

"But you were being so- so unbearably controlling!" I accuse defensively. "You made me- The dessert, the potions-"

"I was playing the part! Just as *you* were supposed to!"

I clap my hand over my mouth. "But it- It felt so real, it made me- I forgot all about-"

"Of course, it should feel real, that's what *playing the part* means!"

"I'm sorry!" I wince. "I honestly quite forgot it was an act... I mean it felt- And you were so-"

"That's no excuse. You were apprised as to what sort of behaviour my parents expected to see. You were supposed to defer to me, not hit back at me. Striking your fiancé... The nerve! Now they are pushing for me to cast you off. They'll certainly expect me to discipline you. And we're lucky it was only my parents, and that I was able to talk them out of calling the Gaunts to come and pick you up. If anyone else had been there..."

I cast my eyes down as he paces; I feel like an ingrate, deserving of his rejection. “I am so, so sorry!” I cry. I blink back tears; my anger is fast turning into guilt. “I don’t know what came over me! I was under a lot of stress, and I felt pressured into drinking the potions, and I’m really not responding well to them. I’m a fraction of myself. I lose my train of thought, my memories even...”

“What makes you think the potions are to blame?” he says coldly, stopping to glare me down with the full brunt of his disappointment. “You don’t think it has anything to do with the blood adoption, or the stress of losing your home or the fact that you’re still in heat? Why do you suspect my healers? If you suspect my healers, you suspect *me*. Are you telling me that you suspect me of- Of what, exactly, Hermione? You think I’m poisoning you?”

I shake my head, ashamed beyond capability of speech. What’s *wrong* with me?

He shakes his head in disgust. “Why am I even helping you?” he says to himself. He strides to the door and wrenches it open.

“Where are you going?” I ask nervously.

“To my room, to change my shirt,” he says, giving me a disparaging look. “Come along if you like. Or don’t. I’m not *making* you do anything, and I don’t want you misconstruing my words anymore. You can leave. My parents already left.” He snaps his fingers, summoning a house-elf. “Give Ms. Gaunt whatever she wants to eat, and you have my permission to take her to her Lord Father’s house when she’s done.”

“I don’t want to go to the Gaunts,” I say in a small voice. “Please.”

“Legally, they’re your family, and they’ll have sole rights over you once I take my ring back. I can’t allow you to go anywhere but to them. I already have so many fires to put out, thanks to your ridiculous show at dinner. I don’t need the Gaunts accusing me of losing their Omega on top of all that.”

Helplessly, I follow him.

We go down the hallway until we reach a door. He opens it a fraction. “Are you coming in or are you leaving? Decide now.”

“I-” I squeak. “I-”

He shakes his head, exhaling exasperation, and turning away from me, pushes the door to his room wide open to enter.

Immediately, I’m hit by a blast of fragrance coming from his room.

Before I know it, I’m inside. I’m inside taking big, greedy breaths.

Draco is ahead, shrugging out of his stained dinner jacket. He casts a look back over his shoulder. Sheen of silver eyes in the dimness. He smiles. “Close the door, will you, pet?”

Once the door is closed, the room is near black; cool as a cave. Deeper in, in the attached walk-in closet, a light, dimmed by the semi-opaque sliding doors, flashes on.

I throw a quick coup d'œil around the room as I sniff the air violently. It smells so good in here, and I really, really like it. I like it so much I think I can actually *feel* my eyes dilating.

Draco, who has disappeared into his walk-in closet, seems to be talking to me. Trying to clear my head, regretting all those glasses of wine, I approach the backlit doors with tentative steps. “Pardon?” I venture.

“Do you think you deserve to be punished for throwing tantrums?” he asks, his voice raised and clear. “Because my parents seem to think so, and they seem to think that the appropriate punishment is to dissolve our engagement and throw you out.”

“I’m sorry about that. Thank you for not throwing me out, I- I’m very sorry I’ve behaved so badly-”

“And can you blame them?” comes his blaming voice. “You act nothing like a fiancée, Hermione. You’re so skittish, so sullen, so unhappy to be here. Who would believe that we’re in love? My parents certainly didn’t believe it.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat. “And I know it doesn’t excuse my rudeness, but I was- It felt so real, and so upsetting and the healers earlier, they were so... *Dismissive*, like I wasn’t a real person, and your parents... And when the potions came, I- I did lose it, I didn’t handle it well at all, and I feel terrible-”

The doors slide open, and Draco emerges completely shirtless, wearing only boxers. He clicks his tongue in reproach. “There you are again, being rude and sullen. A proper pure-blooded fiancée would not have answered me like this.”

“I don’t know how I’m supposed to answer you,” I tell him quietly. I’m at a loss. I feel like a fish out of water. And I don’t know where to look; I really don’t want to look at him, but I’m worried he’ll take it as more rude behaviour on my part if I don’t, so I try to concentrate on his face, and not to let my gaze run curiously down his body.

“I don’t know what the correct etiquette is,” I say. “Maybe if there were books that I could get some instruction from...”

“There are no books on this, but I *can* instruct you if you’re serious about this.”

“I am, I’m serious about this.”

“That’s the attitude I want to see. I want you to take this seriously. I want to see you *trying*. Because I guarantee you that if we have a repeat of tonight, my father will demand you be sent back, and I won’t disobey a direct order from him. Hierarchy is paramount. This is how our world works. Do you get it now?”

I nod earnestly.

“Let’s begin with your apology. Don’t use it to make excuses. I’ve told you this before. Give me a simple apology and promise you’ll do better next time.”

“I’m very sorry, and I promise that I will do better next time.”

“Tell me you’ll be loving. Tell me you’ll be a good Omega.”

“I’ll be loving,” I say. I hesitate; try not to choke on the next words. “I’ll be a good Omega...”

“Not good enough.” He makes a sharp gesture with his chin at the bed. “Sit down. Say it until it sounds natural.”

I sit gingerly at the edge of his bed and recite the words until he cuts me off.

“And how does a good loving Omega behave towards her Alpha?” he asks.

I don’t know the answer to that. All I know is that it smells heavenly in here. That’s all I’m aware of. That and the fact that he’s *half-undressed*.

“Kiss me and tell me you’ll be a good and loving Omega.”

“Erm...” I squint nervously at him. “Kiss? You mean-?”

“Stand up and kiss me and tell me you’ll be a good and loving Omega.”

I stand up. My head spins. I feel strange and dizzy, but I move slowly and purposefully, determined not to betray just how intoxicated I am. I go for his cheek, leaning my body as far from his as I’m able. He’s *half-naked!*

He laughs and takes a step back. “Kiss me properly.”

“Properly?” I parrot perturbedly. “You mean- As in- On- On the mouth? But I... I don’t know how.”

“You don’t know how?”

My face reddens. “I’ve never, erm, kissed anyone before...”

“Never? Not even once?”

I shake my head. “No. I mean- I thought I would, with Viktor, but I never saw him again after the ball, the Yule Ball, and- I mean, I *have* had opportunities, I suppose, I’m not a social pariah, but I’ve been avoiding getting too close with- with anyone, and I’m sorry if that’s not the right answer, but I really-”

He puts up his hand to stop me. “I keep forgetting how innocent you are,” he says. “You’re totally inexperienced, I realise that now... You’re a blank slate...” He slides his lower lip in

between his teeth as he appraises me intensely. “You need me to teach you everything.”

It sounds ominous; I hope he’s not suggesting he teach me how to *kiss*.

“I don’t know if that’s really necessary-” I begin.

He hushes me. “You’re supposed to be a good and loving Omega, remember? Stay in character.” He gives me that half-smile that’s starting to look more and more like a smirk. “Don’t worry. I’ll only teach you what I think you need to know.”

“Okay...”

“Kiss me on the mouth and tell me you’ll be good and loving to me.”

I don’t want to, but I take a quick breath, step forward, and, holding my breath in, kiss him hurriedly on the mouth. I step back. “I’ll be good and loving to you, Draco,” I say.

“Again.”

I take another quick breath and step forward, my lips pressed together in nervous agitation. I give him another quick peck on his mouth and begin to withdraw; but just before I can properly step away, his hand comes to rest around the back of my neck.

“Stop,” he whispers softly into the inch of space that separates us. “Stop. Just breathe.”

I look at his eyes, his mouth, and then his eyes again. When I finally let my breath go, it’s as shaky as my nerves.

“Breathe first,” he smiles. “You’re doing so well, pet. Breathe.”

I take a deep breath, and at once, I’m engulfed by the scent of him. Intense, heady, addictive. Reeling slightly, I find myself falling forwards into him, my mouth parting.

For the third time, my mouth finds his, and this time, he participates in the kiss. His hand, firm against the back of my neck, keeps me in place as his lips slant across mine in slow exploration.

The kiss seems to go on and on, his mouth moving now softly, now harshly against mine. The contrast in sensations feels incredibly good.

Eventually, the kiss progresses south. His mouth moves down over my bared throat, and he hums scented breath across my skin as I pant sharply into the air, aroused and unsure.

“So...” he stops kissing me to murmur, “This *Viktor*... You once told me he made a mark on you? Where exactly?”

“On my collarbone,” I breathe, touching the spot through the fabric of my clothes. “It wasn’t a mark, though, it was just his- his-” I grimace. “It was more like a lick.”

He touches the spot. “If you’re playing the good and loving Omega,” he says, smiling at me, “then I’m playing the jealous, possessive Alpha.” His fingers jump from the fabric of the gown to its halterneck-chain. He traces it up along the curve of my neck. “And a jealous, possessive Alpha would want to look at what’s been done to his woman...”

Before I realise what’s happening, he’s unlinked the chain by the hook at the back. The top of my gown falls away from me. I squeak and instantly put my arms up to cover my bare breasts.

“Draco!” I splutter, mortified.

“Shh.” His finger grazes my collarbone. “And a jealous Alpha would lick just here,” he continues, ignoring my distress. He lowers his head; I feel the wet swipe of his tongue. “To cover the scent of the competing Alpha, of course. To mark his territory...” He licks again in the same place, more force this time, and his mouth closes on my skin, the edge of his teeth digging in for just a slight second.

I shiver and instantly still.

“Not yet,” he whispers into my neck. His voice shivers slightly with his exhale. “Not just yet, my very good Omega...” His tongue licks across my collarbone again. His hand goes to the chain belt at my waist and unhooks that too. With a whisper of silky fabric and a light clinking of gold chains, the gown falls clean away from me.

I squeak and cover myself as best as I can with tensed arms, but he gives me a light shove backwards, and I have to throw my arms out to try and catch my fall. With a loud gasp, I land on the bed.

The world is spinning, and in the time that it takes to sort out my head, he’s covered the short distance my fall has afforded me. He’s on the bed; it shifts as he settles himself beside me. He’s on his knees, towering over me.

My gaze travels from the V of his lower abdomen, where his boxers sit low on his hips, up the sculpted lines of his abs and his pectorals, and to his face. He is very, very attractive.

It makes me feel even more self-conscious, even more unsure. Wrapping my hands around myself, I try to curl my body away.

“Don’t do that. I want to look at you.”

I shake my head no.

“Be a good Omega,” he says in his liquid drawl. “That’s what you’re trying to be, remember? Be good.”

I do remember, and it takes all my willpower to relax my limbs; but I still keep them over my chest.

“Let me see you,” Draco says coaxingly, his voice low and unyielding.

Swallowing hard, I force my arms against my side.

I try not to squirm as his gaze travels in scrutiny down my body.

“You’re a very pretty Omega,” he observes. “Tiny waist, nice breasts... Your hips are just a tad wider than your breasts.” His finger touches my waist, just above my belly button, my breast, just under my nipple, and my hipbone, over my knickers. “Perfect. You’re a very pretty, perfect Omega. Stubborn, though.” His eyes go to my face, rove across my face. He reaches out to play with a lock of my hair. “You don’t look anything like a Gaunt. But that doesn’t matter, does it?”

I don’t think I’m meant to answer, so I don’t. I lie stiffly as he takes his time looking at me. I’m embarrassed and flattered and confused and petrified. I’m not sure what’s happening, but I’m sure this will be over soon. He just wants to see that I can pretend to be obedient, and then this will be over. *This will be over soon, this will be over soon, this will be-*

“You’re so tense, so tightly wound,” he observes. “You should release some of that tension. Do you know what would help?” He smiles, cool and casual. “An orgasm. You should try bringing yourself to orgasm.”

I’m so astonished by his frank suggestion that I can feel my mouth drop open. I stare at him with widening eyes.

He takes my astonished silence for some kind of response. “Ah, you couldn’t?” he questions understandingly. “I forgot my ring stops you from touching yourself. Did it hurt you when you tried?”

“*What?*” I exclaim, forgetting for a minute to be embarrassed. I lift my hand to look with horror at the ring. “It *what?* It will *hurt* me?”

“Oh, so you haven’t tried it!” he says, looking pleased. “You are such an innocent little thing. Why don’t you try now if you don’t believe me?”

“I don’t need to, I believe you,” I quickly assure him.

He takes my hand and taps on the ring. “You have my permission to touch yourself for pleasure tonight. There, that should take care of it.”

“Erm, okay, thanks,” I say. I make a mental note to remove the ring at the next opportunity I get.

“Go ahead, pet. Give it a go.”

“I really don’t want to,” I respond in a mortified whisper.

“Sure, you do,” he says kindly. He takes my wrist and dragging it down, positions it between my legs for me. “Touch yourself.”

I shake my head. I don’t want to do this in front of him, and anyway I’m genuinely afraid the ring will hurt me if I try.

“Just a little. Like this.” He starts me in the movement, pressing my fingers down for me. There’s no pain, and the pressure introduces a slightly pleasurable sensation in my body, just tantalising enough to distract me. “Keep on going,” he encourages.

He withdraws his guiding hand and watches me tentatively touch myself. There’s no pain, but neither is there the usual pleasure I can draw out of myself when I’m alone. It’s neither particularly good nor bad. It’s embarrassing, and the embarrassment is a block in my brain. But I continue moving my hand, hoping he’s satisfied with this display and will let me stop.

“Feel good?” he asks.

I nod quickly.

“Don’t lie, pet,” he laughs. “It’s okay if you can’t make yourself feel good. It means you’re innocent. You require an Alpha’s touch.”

“Let me do it for you,” he says, and before I can protest, he’s swept aside my fingers, and his own slides experimentally down my covered slit. He presses as he moves, until he reaches a spot that makes my hips lift and my thighs part slightly. *Fuck.*

“Right here?” he murmurs. He focuses on the spot with slow movements. My hand goes to rest against his thigh. I don’t know if I want him to stop. This is good. This is so unbelievably good. My hips lift higher. My knees begin to collapse away from each other.

“Oh, look at this, you’re so wet already,” he says, “You’ve made your knickers all wet.” Sliding his hand boldly down said knickers, he presses the tips of his fingers into my covered entrance. I can feel my own dampness against my thighs.

“I’m sorry,” I croak; my first words since he began touching me. I don’t think my face can possibly get any hotter. Is it possible to die of mortification? I think I’m about to find out.

He looks into my eyes. “You don’t have to apologise for that. It’s a natural response and it means that you like me very, very much. But we’re going to have to remove these. They’re soaked through.”

I shake my head; I don’t want to pretend to be a good Omega anymore; but he’s already peeling my underwear off me. Frightened, I grab at the elastic. This is too much. This is going too far. “No,” I protest, trying to pull them back up, but his fingers slide under the fabric and make light skin-to-skin contact with my clit, and my no turns into a funny sounding groan even as my eyes widen at his boldness.

“Your mind and your body are at such odds with each other,” he observes as he pulls my knickers down to my knees and resumes slowly petting my little button. “Part your legs for me, pet.”

I give him an inch of space and am rewarded with more of his stroking fingers.

“You should try to become more attuned to your physical needs,” he says, as he suddenly slides a finger into me. I cry out; my hands grasp at the sheets; my lower body clenches down

on him. He squeezes another finger into my protesting pussy and hooks them up, as though he's trying to meet his thumb that's now petting my clit. I give him a shocked, strangled groan.

He hums pleasedly through a smug smile. "You know what they say about bonding? Two people completely attuned to one another. The ultimate pleasure. Haven't you ever been curious as to what that feels like? Part your legs some more."

"*Bonding?* I don't want to bond," I gasp out.

"Mm, I know. Part your legs. Yes, just like that. *More.* And tell me what you're doing."

"I'm parting my legs," I whisper.

"For whom?"

"For you." My voice trembles. Inexplicably, my eyes are filling up with tears.

"Why?"

"Because- because-"

"Because I asked you to?"

I nod and sniffle.

"Don't cry, sweetling. It makes me sad when you cry. You don't want me to be sad, do you?"

I shake my head.

"You want to make me happy? You make me happy when you do what I ask you to."

"I don't want- I don't want-"

"Hush now. I don't want to hear what you don't want." He pulls his fingers unceremoniously from my dripping pussy and uses his knees to push my legs wider apart as I try to hold back my tears and my words.

"Good girl," Draco murmurs, positioning himself right between my spread legs and lowering himself to kiss up and down my neck. "I don't want any more tears from you, all right?" He kisses me again, on the mouth. His fragrance is everywhere around me, and it's staining; wherever he touches me, he leaves his smell.

His hands squeeze my thighs, roam up my body... It feels like he's trying to touch me everywhere; to stamp his scent into every inch of my skin. I notice that his bare legs rest along the length of mine; I no longer feel the silky drag of his boxers.

Puzzled, I look down, catch sight of his standing member, freed and on display, and swallow a sob of fear. He's *naked!* He's *large!*

“Shh,” he adjures. “I can see you’re trying so hard to be a good Omega, and I’m very proud of you. You’re doing very well. Just breathe.”

I struggle to manage my panic; my breathing is nowhere near even. But I inhale enough of his scent to distract me, and eventually I’m abuzz, adrift in the pleasure of the fragrance filling my nostrils.

“Good?” he asks, compassionate.

I nod. “You smell really nice.” He does; he smells like all the things I like. He smells as cool as his voice, as sharp as his gaze. I can’t get enough of it.

“You smell really nice to me too, sweetling,” he answers, lowering his body and burying his face in my hair. His naked hips brush my inner thighs, and I feel *it* at my entrance. It’s warm, blunt, and wide. He glides *it* easily through my moist folds, and then, with a little push, he’s sliding into me.

My walls part for him and a tremor runs through them; a preface to an orgasm.

“Don’t-” I whimper belatedly, as he sighs into my hair, his breath escaping in a slow intimate hiss of air that matches the slowness with which he’s introducing his body into mine.

My eyes are watering from the pain of his entrance, and I jerk back as he thrusts forward.
“Ow, stop,” I cry. “That really, really hurts. That hurts.”

“What kind of hurt?” he asks, concern rising in his voice and eyes. “Describe it.”

“It burns,” I whimper. I push desperately at him, trying to get him off me.

He moves again, advancing effortlessly against my counterforce and sliding into me in another unpleasant stretch. “This burns?”

“Yes!” I cry out. *Why isn’t he stopping?*

“It’s because you’re so tense, sweetling,” he says. “It’s not supposed to hurt. You’re clamping down. Just relax.”

“I don’t- it hurts! Please!”

“Let’s take a break then,” he murmurs, kissing my eyes. He stops moving but remains where he is, buried fully in me. I *think* he’s fully in me; I can’t tell; I only know how uncomfortable I am, how stretched open...

“Relax,” he murmurs. “Deep breaths now. Relax. You’ll get used to it. It’s not so bad, you’ll see...”

In a way, it’s worse when he’s stopped. Although the sting of pain is largely drawn away, left in its place is the intrusive intimacy of him in me.

I don't know how long he gives me, but after some time, he begins sliding gently in again and asks, "It doesn't hurt anymore, does it?"

"Not really, but it- it-"

"It's intense?"

"Yes," I plead. "Please take it out, please, *please...*"

"But it doesn't hurt anymore."

"No, but-"

"Then why would you want to stop?" he asks. "This is what loving fiancées like to do. They like to make their men happy." He rears back a little. His hands glide over my trembling thighs. "You want me to be happy, don't you?"

"Yes, but-"

"Then tell me you want to make me happy. Tell me you'll only be happy if I'm happy."

"I want to make you happy," I choke out. "I'll only be happy when you're happy."

He kisses me, slipping his tongue into my gasping mouth as easily as his organ is penetrating my depths. He's pushing into me again, sinking into yielding muscle.

"Draco," I squeak in distress.

He mistakes my tone for encouragement and drives himself deeper into me; over and over, deeper and deeper. He kisses me as he pumps his flesh slickly into mine.

"Draco!" I cry.

"Mm, I know, it feels so good. You want to come already, don't you?"

"I- I don't-"

"Shh. I know you want to come. Be patient. I want us to come together."

Certainly, some part of me enjoys this, if my audible wetness is anything to go by, but there's something about his statement that fills me with horror, and part of it is the realisation that he's going to ejaculate at some point. I may be a virgin, but I know what happens when a man ejaculates.

Panicking slightly, I try to buck him off. "Don't! I don't want to, please. I want to stop! I'm not on birth control!"

He frowns at me. "Birth control? What's that?"

"Birth control?" I stammer. "It's- I could get pregnant without it-"

“Oh!” He laughs. Hint of condescension in his humorous laughter and in his grey eyes.
“That’s not how it works. You’re unbonded. You won’t get pregnant until we bond.”

And, as if all this talk is urging him on, he’s speeding up his movements, pistonning his stiff rod into my aching tunnel, massaging my breasts in his palms, a look of possession in his eyes. I writhe under him, unable to keep out the intense sensations.

“I’m going to come in you,” he tells me. “All right?”

I don’t want him to. Oh God, I don’t want him to. How do I tell him that I don’t want him to? How do I make him understand that I’m serious? “Ermm, I really don’t think it’s a good idea,” I attempt, trying to keep my gasping to a minimum as he thrusts me into the bed. “Please, we should stop now. I’m not on birth control...”

He patiently waits for me to finish my barely coherent mumbling. Then he tells me again, “I’m going to come in you. All right?”

This time, I nod dumbly.

A groan escapes him. He surges forward, screwing me with everything he has. He’s screwing deep into me like he’s trying to put down roots, his movements and his breathing becoming jerky, almost frantic.

Pleasure pulls my hips upwards to meet his. I squirm around his impaling cock, angling myself to receive each jolt of pleasure on my sweet spot. I think I’m going to-

“Oh, no, no,” he growls. “That’s not how this is going to go, pet. You’re not allowed to come tonight. That will teach you to try and deny me.”

As soon as he says those words, the spiral of pleasure ceases its rise. But I’m barely processing the meaning of his words; animal instinct has me trying to recapture the feeling of the orgasm that’s just within reach. I tilt my hips and rub against him, on the edge and waiting to fall off it as he takes us closer and closer. I want to- *I want to-*

Finally, with one last thrust, he gasps and then groans, his eyes blanking and his hips rocking rhythmically and insistently into mine. I feel him pulsing in my body. I think I can *feel* the liquid of his ejaculation. Oh God. Oh, dear God.

After he’s finished, he kisses me, sweet and lazy, as I look at the ceiling and try to ignore my unfulfilled pleasure and the stifling weight of his body on mine. He pulls out. Long drag of hot flesh. My pussy, still hoping to find release, throbs around him as he slowly extricates his member.

Leaning back, on his knees, he surveys me. He lifts my unresisting hips and settles something soft under me. A pillow, I think. He runs a finger up my slit. “Keep it all in, there’s a good girl. Not one drop escapes, understand?”

I give him another nod, I think. I think I’m in shock.

Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

11 25

I'm woken up in the morning by the sound of a door sliding softly shut. It's Draco, exiting his walk-in closet fresh faced and perfectly groomed. He glances a look at me, sees that I'm awake and staring at him, and comes straight to the bed.

"Good morning, pet," he says, bending over me and trailing his fingers lightly over my collarbone. "Did I wake you? I tried to be quiet, but you're a very light sleeper..."

I shiver and shift. I've already shifted in my sleep; the pillow is in the vicinity of my ankles. My lower back hurts.

Draco's eyes wander down the blanket that covers my body. "How are you feeling?" he asks. He tries to peel back the blanket, stopping when I tighten my hold on it and flinch away. He frowns. "What's the matter? You're not in any pain, are you?"

"I-" My voice is dry and raspy. I try to clear my throat, swallowing a few times.

He straightens and clicks his fingers to summon a house-elf. "Give Hermione a glass of water."

I take the water and sit up to sip on it.

"Are you in any pain?" asks Draco.

I shake my head warily. I don't think I'm in any pain, but I hardly slept, and when I did eventually, slept very poorly. I feel confounded. And to make matters worse, I'm still sexually charged.

"Good." He smiles. "You had me worried for a minute there. Listen, I want you to know how much last night meant to me. I didn't expect it to go that way, especially given you'd never done that with anyone else before. Well, maybe you have, and you only pretended to be a virgin as part of the good Omega act- You don't have to tell me. It's not important. Last night was... It was near perfect."

"But I didn't-" I begin in an indignant, confused splutter. "I didn't-"

"I know," he cuts in, looking a little guilty. "I know you didn't get to... finish. I apologise for that, I lost myself in the role. I think we both did." He laughs, still guilty, and runs a light hand over his slicked-back hair. "But I'll make it up to you later, I promise. And this can be

our safe space, what do you think? Where we can indulge in our base urges and give in to these instincts knowing we're doing so with somebody we like and trust and respect."

I stare at him, at a complete loss for words. He clearly thinks I wanted what happened last night, and I want to clear the air, because I *didn't*; but if he thinks I did, then I suppose I must have said or done something to have given him that impression?

"You don't have to decide now," he hastens to say. "Take your time. I have to go anyway- I have a meeting. But I'll see you in the afternoon to bring you your potions myself, and then, after, we can continue our... roleplay." He winks. "You stay in bed as long as you want, pet."

As soon as he leaves, I lift the sheets to inspect my body. There's no blood *there* even though *there* feels tender and sensitive, and my own investigating fingers moving around the area send urgent signals of need up to my brain: I need to come.

Casting nervous glances at the door, I shimmy down the sheets and touch myself again, this time in exploration and not just in inspection.

I'm highly aware- the rational part of me, that is, that in normal circumstances, I would want to immediately leave Draco's bed and Draco's room, and go scrub myself clean; but right now, I want to orgasm.

I'll orgasm first, here, in his nice-smelling bed in his nice-smelling room, and then I'll leave.

My fingers rub around my pussy. It's so sensitive, I almost don't want to touch it, but the pleasure it brings is so good that I keep rubbing. If I continue like this, I'll come very quickly. I press harder, rub harder. I'm going to come *so hard*-

Flare of pain in my clit.

It's so sudden and so shocking that I immediately stop what I'm doing.

What the fuck?

Very cautiously, I press the spot again. What have I done? Have I hurt a nerve? I press gingerly around, anticipating pain. Feeling none, I shrug it off and begin again to touch myself in search of pleasure.

Pain again. I cry out.

At once, I recall what Draco told me last night about his ring stopping me from touching myself.

Hastily, I try to work it off my finger. But it won't be removed. The furthest it slides up is to my knuckle. It won't go beyond that.

I pick up my wand from where it's sitting on one of the nightstands and try to remove the ring by magic. To no avail.

I decide that the best thing to do is go for a cold shower; only, I can't rile up enough willpower to stop what I'm doing and leave the bed. I'm too sexually worked up. My sex throbs with need. I have to keep trying to orgasm.

I rub myself until my fingers cramp, then I end up simply humping his pillows. I hump the pillows pathetically, drift into a dim restless sleep, wake up, and hump the pillows again until the door opens, and a suited Draco enters.

Mortified, I freeze. I'd been so absorbed by lust, desperation, and frustration that I'd managed to completely forget about the world outside my desire to come. *Have I been doing this for hours?*

Draco immediately spots me where I am lying in the bed partially concealed by pillows and sheets. "Hello, sweetling," he greets. "Are you ready for your potions?" He steps further into the room. He's followed closely by a house-elf bearing a tray with little potion-filled cruets.

I'm on my front, covered by the blanket, with my body wrapped around a pillow. Turning my head to the side, I return his greeting in what I hope sounds like a perfectly casual tone.

His eyes are drinking me in. He looks carefully around the room then back at me. His lips curl faintly up. "Have you yet to get out of bed, pet?" he asks, sounding amused.

"I was up earlier," I lie. "But I didn't feel well..."

He clicks his tongue sympathetically. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, it's probably nothing," I reply, still trying to sound as normal as possible. "I was just tired. I didn't sleep well last night..."

"I see," he frowns. "You did seem a little disoriented this morning. Here, let me take a look at you..." He gestures to his house-elf to set the tray down, then dismisses it.

I pass my hand nervously over my forehead as he puts his knee on the bed and leans over me. My heartbeat has sped up, and my skin is prickling. "I'm fine," I mumble weakly.

"You're sweating," he exclaims. "It must be all these blankets. Why are you-?" He tugs the sheets out of my hand and pulls it away from my body. Then he laughs. "Tsk. You didn't leave my bed at all, did you, little lying Omega?" he says delightedly. "You're still naked..."

He peels the sheet back further; his eyes freely take in the sight of my shamed body being revealed bit by bit to his gaze. He places his hand on my bare upper thigh.

His touch makes me feel even hotter. I shiver and exhale. "I did get out of bed," I protest, clinging onto the pillow by which I'm still able to mostly hide the parts that are most important to hide.

"I see..." he says pleasantly. "And then you felt so ill that you had to take off all your clothes and get back into bed?" His hand moves caressingly up and down my thigh as he speaks while my heart hammers and my pussy gushes. I need to-

I realise that I've begun humping the pillow. Draco laughs again, softly, and tries to take it from me.

I wrap myself tighter around it; it feels like my shield and my lifeline.

"Let go," he murmurs lowly. "You don't need this. I'm here."

Reluctantly, I let the pillow go. Draco pushes gently on my hip, repositioning me so I'm no longer lying on my side but on my back.

It feels horribly like a repeat of last night. Only, now, I'm consumed by the need to orgasm. I really, really need to come. I really, really need to. I can feel my breathing hitch as his hand snakes purposefully down my thigh into the shadows between my legs and his fingers sweep around the soaking, swollen entrance of my pussy.

"My, my," he says, smirking. "Have you been busy playing with yourself, pet? You've made a lovely little mess..."

I shake my head and claw for the sheets. "I haven't been doing anything."

"Really? So, you mean to tell me that all this..." He drags his finger up my slippery pussy to my clit. "...is just because you were so happy to see me?"

I moan a non-response and buck my hips into his finger until he withdraws his hand.

"Please," I gasp.

"Please?" he echoes.

I flush.

"You didn't answer me yet, pet." He taps lightly on my clit, once. "Please is not an answer. Are you happy to see me?"

I shudder a full-body shudder. I can feel my pussy gush some more. "Oh, my God..." I pant. "Oh my God, yes..."

His brow goes up. "Show me what you've been doing all morning, pet," he commands, straightening and shrugging off his suit jacket.

I shake my head; but my fingers are already going to my pussy. I touch myself. Same rhythm I've been rehearsing for hours. Same pain. I yelp when it comes and look miserably up at him.

Draco shakes his head sadly. "No wonder you don't feel well," he sympathises. He's unbuttoning his shirt. "No wonder you're so happy to see me. What were you hoping I could do for you, pet?"

I lick my lips. "I need to..." I whisper.

"You need to what?"

I open my mouth to speak. But I can't bring myself to articulate the rest of the sentence. I'm so ashamed.

I close my mouth. Swallow. Watch him as he undresses. He's got his shirt off and he's undoing his belt now. The shape of his dick strains the fabric of his trousers.

Highly aroused as I am, I'm frightened by the sight, frightened by where this looks like it's heading. I only wanted to orgasm, I don't want to have sex with him again!

"What do you need to?" he prompts. He's busy, his fingers unbuckling and unbuttoning and unzipping, but he pauses to smile at me. "You know I'll be happy to give you what you want, but you'll have to ask me for it, pet."

I try to clear my mind. "I need to..." I lift my hand. "I need to remove this ring, please..."

He stares at it.

"I don't think you know how to roleplay," he laughs shortly. He stops undressing to stroke my sensitive pussy, gently circling that special spot with his thumb. "Don't break character now, all right?"

My breathing hitches again; I let out a long, undignified moan. My thighs strain as I lift my hips and try and angle my clit towards his teasing thumb.

"Good Omegas don't ever ask to take off their engagement rings," says Draco, still teasing my clit. "And only good Omegas get given what they want. So... Do you think you want to be a good Omega?"

"...yes. Oh, God, yes..."

"Then tell me what you really want, pet."

"I want... I want to come..."

"So? What does that have to do with me?"

"I- Please help me, Draco," I entreat. Fuck it, I'll role-play until I get my orgasm and deal with the shame afterwards. And the ring. "Please help me come. I'll be..." *What was it?* "... good and loving. I'll be good and loving."

He smiles approvingly. "Look at my beautiful bride to be, trying so hard to please me," he coos. He's gone back to undressing. Now his boxers are gone; on the floor. He's naked. I look from his member, terrifyingly enormous and angry looking, to his face. He doesn't look terrifying or angry; he looks handsome and complacent.

"See..." he hums, complacent. "You can behave if you want to." Bending over me, he brings his mouth to my ear. Immediately, his signature scent, so intense, floods my senses. "Let's take it from the top, shall we?" he whispers. He licks my ear; little flick. "Your Alpha's just come home. How do you think he should be greeted by his sweet and loving fiancée?"

I turn and meet my mouth to his. Our tongues meet, licking and tasting as our lips slide against each other. I have to taste him. I have to taste his smell.

When he breaks the kiss, I'm so dazed I've already almost forgotten where I am, what I am.

"Are you happy to see me?" he questions, looking at me with eyes like molten silver.

I nod breathlessly. "I'm so happy to see you, Draco."

"I'm happy to see you too, sweetling," he murmurs, mouthing kisses down my neck. His skin glides over mine. He's pressing his torso between my thighs, spreading them wide open. His platinum blonde head dips and goes to my chest, and his mouth closes over a nipple. I arch my back and clutch at him and moan as his mouth moves from one nipple to another, laving them with his tongue. It's sending electric pleasure down my body to my core.

The sensation has me automatically trying to increase my pleasure by scissoring my legs, impossible with him squarely in between them, and I end up rocking against him in desperate lust. I need... More... *Friction*...

Draco raises his head from my chest. He blinks at me, silver eyes hazy with lust. "Greedy girl, you can't even wait. You want me in you already."

What I want is to come. I just really, really want to come. I don't know about having sex. I don't think I want to, but I suppose it wouldn't be fair of me to ask for an orgasm without giving him sex?

He doesn't wait for an answer anyway; he comes back up for another mind-melting kiss, teasing the nerves of my mouth with his tongue while running the smooth head of his prick firmly up and down my ready pussy. Each time it passes over my clit, my breath hitches.

Just as I'm settling into the sensation, ready to let it take me to the promised orgasm, he guides it down to my entrance.

I freeze.

Little push. The pressure breaks into pleasure. Simultaneously, we groan into the kiss. With how aroused I am, he's sliding into me so easily I know I would feel embarrassed if I weren't so drugged with lust and so eager to ride it to its apex.

He draws back a little and then reaches down to grab my hip as if to steady me. Another push. His entire length slides home in one long, drawn-out move. "That's it," he whispers coaxingly as my eyes roll back and I pant and moan. "You've got all of it." He presses his hips forward, pressing my little button deliciously between us.

"Oh," I moan, delirious with pleasure. "Ohhh!"

Ohh, I definitely want this. Screwing my eyes shut, I wrap my legs instinctively around him and rub my clit against the wall of his body. It feels so natural to do this, so good...

"Be a good girl and focus on me," Draco instructs.

I nod. Okay. Okay. Focus. Focus on how good this feels. If I can *just-*

He clicks his tongue and pulls away, making me whine at the loss of contact. “Only good girls get to come,” he chides. “And good girls put their Alpha’s pleasure first.”

“What?” I pant, confused and frustrated; the push for pleasure makes it hard to focus on anything else. “What do you mean?”

He shakes his head, appearing put off by whatever new failing he’s discovered in me. He doesn’t *sound* put off, however. “I see you’re going to need training in this too...” he purrs. Tapping the engagement ring, he says, “You won’t be able to come except when I do or when I say you can. There. The ring will take care of that.”

I stare at it, half in disbelief. “I hate this ring!” I wail. “Why are you doing this?”

“It’s for your own good, sweetling,” he assures, resuming his slow and steady fucking of me.

He’s taking his time fucking me. I shudder with each thrust and adjust my hips to meet his squarely. “Please just let me come,” I beg. I’m urging him on, trying to increase the action. “Please.”

“I will,” he says generously. “Stop trying to make it happen. I’ll get us there. Accept that and give up control. You’ll come only when I come, and nothing you do is going to change that outcome. Accept it.”

It’s hard to do but I swallow my frustration and will myself to lay passively back as he pounds into me.

Draco growls in appreciation. “Good girl,” he praises. “Just like that. Just focus on me. Think about how good you’re making it feel for me.”

I grind my teeth and twitch and whimper as he fucks me steadily. He’s beginning to fuck deeper into me. Each successive stroke pulls progressively higher-pitched sounds out of my throat. It’s taking a lot not to rock into his thrusts, not to chase the orgasm.

“You feel so fucking good,” he exhales. “So hot, so tight, so wet. What a good, obedient Omega you’re being. Since you’re being so good, I’m going to let you have my seed. You ready to milk me, pet? You ready to take my seed?”

A spark of alarm sears through the mind-bending lust. “Please not inside this time, Draco,” I plead.

“Shh. Take a nice deep breath and relax now. We’re going to come together this time.”

I give him a vehement shake of the head. “No. No, Draco, I’m *serious*. ”

He looks surprised. He slows his movements; not quite a pause. “I guess my sweetling doesn’t want to come today either,” he says regretfully. “Let’s see how you feel about this tomorrow.”

“Oh, God. Please,” I sob, breaking down at the prospect of another day of this. “Please. I have to come, please. This isn’t- This isn’t part of the roleplay, please...”

He strokes my cheek. “Don’t cry, sweetling,” he adjures. He’s circling his hips, in me to the hilt. “Just be a good girl and tell me you’re ready to take my come in your pussy, and I’ll make us both very happy.”

I desperately need to come. And what he’s doing, that circular motion- it’s driving me crazy. My clit is twitching. My stomach feels molten with vibrating pleasure. I can’t take much more of this.

“Please just let me come,” I relent. “I’m ready- I’m ready to take your come...”

“Where?”

“In my pussy, I- I’m ready to take your come in my pussy...”

“That’s right, you are,” he rumbles in my ear. He sounds like sex; he smells like sex. “Your pretty pussy is going to take all of it.”

The fucking resumes in earnest. He’s hammering into me, relentless in his own search for pleasure. The length of his dick strokes my insides. His hipbone grinds rhythmically against my clit.

“Draco,” I choke, nearly seeing stars. My hands go up to his shoulders. “Draco- Ah!”

He likes it. His breathing hitches. His movements start to get more imprecise. I recognise what’s coming. I hope he’s not serious about finishing in me. *Oh, God, please don’t finish in me-*

The head of his dick slams against my womb and stays there. He tenses up. “Take it...” he grits out. “Fuck. Take it, take it...”

I feel him convulse. Without warning, my body follows right after him. Like a dam bursting, all the pressure releases in waves, drowning out the ripening anxiety, sweeping it away. I cry out as my pussy clamps down on his dick and his mouth takes mine in a rough kiss.

Each pulse of his dick is followed by a spasm from my copycat pussy. He’s groaning in a guttural way. He’s filling me up. I come for as long he does, gasping with each contraction until I feel like I’m about to melt into the bed.

When we’re done, he detangles himself from me and rolls onto his side.

I lie where I am, fighting to keep my eyes open. I think I’d like to sleep now.

Draco pulls my arm towards him. “That was fun,” he sighs with satisfaction as he strokes my limp arm. “Did you have fun, pet?”

“Yes, Draco,” I mumble tiredly. My cervix feels tender, my thigh muscles are sore, and my pussy is a wet mess, but I opt to ignore the discomfort. I’m just thankful I’m no longer slave

to my senses.

Sighing, I shift and turn to look at Draco. “So... I guess we’re not roleplaying anymore?” I ask. Rhetorical question. “Since we’re not pretending to be Alpha and Omega anymore, could you perhaps tell me how to remove this ring, please...?”

“You know our engagement is the only reason you’re allowed to shelter here,” he says. “Once the ring is off your hand...” He leaves the sentence unfinished, leaving me to deduce the consequence myself.

“But no one will know if I’m not wearing it.”

He laughs. “It’s a magical ring, Hermione.”

“But what if I take it off only for a little while?” I persist. “Like when I’m sleeping or bathing.”

He appears to be thinking about it. He twists the ring round and round my finger as he purses his lips a little to one side and I cross imaginary fingers in high hope. I’m sure he’ll say yes. Of course, he’ll say-

“No,” he says decisively. “I know how you feel, and I do sympathise, but it’s not a good idea.” His gaze flies from the ring to my eyes while his hand goes to my cheek. He strokes it, once, then wraps his fingers around my nape. His thumb digs into my pulse.

His voice drops in tone; he’s smiling. “Don’t ask me this anymore, okay?”

I feel my lower lip growing longer. But I nod diffidently. “Okay, I understand. But what about the- the... er, restrictions that you put on it? I don’t want the ring to hurt me. Could you please undo your commands?”

His smile becomes cheeky. “Why, pet, already eager to touch yourself again?”

“It’s not that,” I splutter, embarrassed. “It’s just-”

He’s still smirking. “Tell you what,” he says. “The next time you want to touch yourself, let me know and I’ll make sure the ring doesn’t hurt you. Or, better yet, come straight here to bed. From now on, as long as we’re in here, whatever we do should be done as Alpha and Omega.”

An idea strikes me.

“You mean we will always... roleplay while we’re in your bedroom?” I ask, seeking clarification. “And *only* in your bedroom?”

“Exactly.”

I’m not sure I like roleplaying Alpha and Omega but at least now there are rules to this. I like rules. They make me feel safe.

Nodding my agreement, I make to get up, looking around for my wand. I need to conjure myself a bathrobe, and then I need to get out of here and take a shower.

“Where are you going?” demands Draco, placing his hand on my abdomen.

“Out. We, er, aren’t, er… roleplaying anymore, so…”

He laughs loudly. “I’ve never been with anyone in such a hurry to leave my bed,” he declares. “Lie down.”

“But-”

“Lie down.”

I sink back down.

“Good girl,” he purrs. He turns. He’s a line of sleek muscles. “Now… Is my very good girl ready for her potions?”

Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

11 25

I'm on my back, my thighs around Draco's face as he licks, licks, *licks*-

My head is swimming. There's something to this safe space idea, I think. I could really get used to this.

My fingers tighten on the sheets as he squeezes my thighs and curls his tongue around my clit. His lips close over it, sucking gently. I stiffen and buck into his mouth. "Draco—"

He makes a contented sound. "...yes."

"Please," I pant. "I have to—" I stop to correct myself. "Please let me come, Draco."

"You know what to ask for," he hums as he kisses a wet path up my pelvis, around my navel, and through my breasts. "I know you know. Ask me properly..."

He's looking up at me from in between my breasts. He's very attractive, *incredibly* attractive; but there's a smug look in his eye I hate. I hate this.

But he thrusts his fingers into my pussy, and he turns his oral attention on my nipples, and I quiver and yield to lust again. My hands go into his hair. I arch into his mouth.

"Please, Draco, please fuck me. I'm ready to take your come..."

When Draco goes to shower, I stumble straight out of bed. His freshly-injected semen spills out of me, down my thighs into the sheets and onto the floor.

Yuck.

I shudder in disgust and go for my wand to clean the multiple splats and stains.

I have to be fast. If he comes out and sees what I'm doing, he might be angry. He told me to stay and *keep it all in*, but obviously I'm not going to. I'm going to take the opportunity to

end this extended role-play. As carnally enjoyable as it can be and has been, I don't really like it.

I conjure myself a simple dress, cross the room, and open the door as quickly and as quietly as I can.

Draco's bedroom smells so good that even though I've been in here for two whole days and should already be adjusted to it, the air outside smells fairly antiseptic in comparison, and I almost feel like shutting the door and going back to bed.

But the new air also clears my head somewhat, and clear-headed me wants out of Draco's bedroom.

I step out and close the door.

A house-elf immediately discovers me. Thankfully, it only asks me if I want something to eat, so I ask for breakfast, and then I hurry back to the guest room, lock the door behind me, rush to the bathroom, and commit myself to twenty minutes of soap and water.

After I've cleaned up, I go back out, and the house-elf walks me to a small dining room that gives onto the terrace. Draco is at the table, eating. I'm shown to the seat opposite him where a place setting, colourful with bowls of fresh fruit and yoghurt and little pots of confiture, is waiting for me.

"Can Pipsy bring Miss Hermione a drink?" the house-elf asks me.

"Oh, yes, please. Hot chocolate if there's any?"

Draco, going through a pile of correspondence, waves his hand absent-mindedly. "No," he objects, speaking without looking. "No chocolate. Just bring her water."

I clear my throat. "Er, Draco?"

He looks up.

"Er, I thought that we're not, you know, roleplaying anymore," I say.

He gives me a confused look.

"You remember?" I stumble on in an embarrassed undertone. "We decided we wouldn't do that outside the- outside your *bedroom*?"

"Oh, yes." He smiles. "I apologise. Carry on."

"Thanks!" I say brightly. What a relief.

I turn back to the house-elf. "Hot chocolate, please."

It bows and bustles off.

“What will you be doing today, pet?” enquires Draco, setting down a letter.

“I don’t know. Are there any news of my parents? I really feel that I should check on them.”

“Your parents?” He frowns. “But they’ve already left.”

“They *left?* *What?*” I gaze bewilderedly at him. “They woke up? But... but... Why didn’t I know about this!”

“You do.”

“No, I didn’t!” I cry, pushing my chair back and getting to my feet. “Nobody told me! I- I wanted to see them! Where did they go?”

“Of course, you knew, I told you about it.” He sits back in his chair. “I asked if you wanted to visit them before they left, and you said that you thought you did, but that if it would make things easier, they should just leave as soon as they were able. You said you wanted to do what was best for them.” He gives me a puzzled frown. “Don’t you remember? We had this conversation multiple times...”

“I...” I put my hand to my head. “We *did*? ”

“Yes, when we were in the car in front of their home, and yesterday again, in bed... Perhaps you were too distracted to keep track?” His lips curl up briefly. “For what it’s worth, I thought it was a very admirable decision you made.”

“Where did they go?” I ask, flushing. I’m embarrassed and upset. I can’t believe myself!

“Australia.”

“*Australia!*”

“Yes. They should just have arrived. We’ve purchased them a very beautiful house in the country, in muggle territory with vineyards all around. I will have an assistant send over some photos for you. Remind me if I forget, will you? I have another important thing to talk to you about now. Sit down, pet.” He waits for me to retake my seat. “I received a disappointing reply from your Head of House indicating that it would be pointless to send you homework as they will be on topics covered during your absence. I am considering engaging tutors to take over your education so you can continue to study. What do you think, would you like to continue your studies here?”

“I- Yes, very much,” I stammer. “That’s very kind of you. I really don’t know how I can repay you...”

He waves it off. “We Malfoys appreciate the value of a good education. My mother sat her NEWTs while she was pregnant with me. My father encouraged it. Speaking of my father, he also has sent a letter. I have it here...” He fishes the letter out of his pile to scrutinise, and continues in a tone deepening with displeasure: “I won’t tell you everything in it, but he writes that *these breaches of etiquette must find their end*. He wants us to go through with the

betrothal ceremony, that at least is clear. I am writing to tell him that I defer and that I will leave all the details of its planning in their worthy hands.”

“What’s a betrothal ceremony like?” I ask.

“It’s a gathering of the families in which we are officially betrothed. It will take place in your Lord Father’s house, and I’ll formally give you your ring in front of everyone there. Other families will be present.”

“It sounds very serious...”

“Yes, of course it is.” He frowns. “There will be no room for mistakes there, Hermione.”

“I’ll behave appropriately,” I promise guiltily. “I know what’s expected now...”

The house-elf comes back with my mug of hot chocolate, and I take it straight from its hands. I catch Draco looking at me with the same infuriated expression he was giving his father’s letter.

“What do you have against hot chocolate?” I ask curiously.

“It’s unhealthy.”

“I don’t have it every day. Only when I’m feeling out of sorts. It’s my comfort food.”

“Fair enough. I just don’t like the taste of chocolate if I’m being honest. I prefer fruit.” He forks a slice of green apple and takes a bite.

I nod. Now I know why he’s always having fruit and yoghurt. “Chocolate’s not great for the teeth either,” I admit. “My parents are dentists, so I almost never get to have any at home. They don’t like most fruit very much either. Full of sugar.”

“I’ll try and remember what you like,” Draco promises. “Sometimes I forget how different you are... Everyone else expects me to take control. They *want* me to tell them what to do... But not you. And that’s why I find you so... refreshing, in a way.” He smiles at me from across the table.

“But you’re always telling me what to do,” I say, blushing.

“You mean when we role-play?” he smirks.

“Yeah.” I feel my blush deepen. My face feels hot. “Erm, if we ever, erm, do that again...”

“Yes, pet?” prompts Draco. His eyes flicker with humour; he’s still wearing a smirk; it’s broadening.

“Well, could you not... you know... finish in me?” I ask. I’m blushing very heavily now. My face is so red that my skin is actually paining me. It’s painfully mortifying to be discussing this. But it has to be done. He won’t listen to me when he’s having sex with me.

"I don't think I like it," I push on. "It's not safe, and I'm sure you don't want to- to you know... have to deal with getting someone pregnant... I mean your father will probably have an embolism if that happened..."

"Sex between us now won't result in pregnancy," he says. "I also told you this before, but I don't suppose you remember that conversation either... We're not a bonded couple. Pregnancy is simply not possible at this stage."

I bite my fingers as I digest the information. "Really?" I say thoughtfully. "Is this true only for sex between an Alpha and an Omega that are not bonded? What if I had sex with someone not an Alpha, for instance? A muggle, for example. Could *they* get me pregnant?"

"This is a very indecent question, pet," says Draco, raising a polite brow. "I'm going to have to decline to answer."

"But you said you would teach me everything concerning Alphas and Omegas," I protest. I'm so intrigued by the topic that I'm no longer embarrassed by it. "No one else will talk about this!"

"Because it's not something any decent young woman should want to know."

I'm disappointed. "Oh, fine," I grumble under my breath. "I suppose I'll have to find out myself... Like with everything else..."

Draco's playful smirk disappears. He taps his fingers on the table before suddenly getting up and coming around to where I'm sitting. He drags the nearest chair close and plants himself square on it.

I look at him.

He smiles. "Do you want to say that again, pet?"

There's an icy tone to his voice. I've angered him.

"I was just curious," I say defensively.

"It's not something you should ever be curious about."

"But-"

His eyes flash. "But?"

"...nothing."

"Mhm." His eyes flick to my plate. "You've hardly touched your breakfast. Hot chocolate isn't breakfast. Have more fruit."

"Draco, you're doing it again," I whine. "No more roleplaying. Please. We're not in your room."

“No, we’re not. Why *aren’t* we in my room? What do you think I meant when I told you to stay in bed? You’re an intelligent girl. I’d like to hear your answer. Do you think I meant the opposite of what I said?”

I shake my head. My mouth is dry.

He puts his forefinger on my cheek. I catch a whiff of his cologne again. It’s arresting, attractive, and somewhat calming. But he’s angry, and I can’t feel calm when he’s angry.

“Do you think you did a satisfactory job of roleplaying a good, loving, *obedient* Omega?” he asks.

I can’t answer.

He clicks his tongue and shakes his head in disappointment. “I think we owe ourselves a few minutes of roleplay here,” he murmurs, stroking my cheek. “To make up for earlier… What do you think, pet?”

I still don’t answer. I feel my breaths start to come in quicker. My skin prickles.

His finger moves down my cheek and traces the seam of my mouth. “Suck,” he says softly.

I move back. “Draco,” I protest. It’s a weak protest; I sound weak. “No.”

His finger follows me. “Suck.”

I open my mouth slightly. I suck on the tip of his finger. My lips quaver. I feel my eyes begin to moisten.

“I don’t want to see any tears,” he sternly says.

I suppress the instinct to cry and suck reluctantly on his finger until he pulls it out of my mouth with a pop. “Good girl,” he smiles. “Lift your skirt.”

“*Draco…*”

“Still not being obedient?”

I curl timidly in on myself. “What if I eat the fruit instead?” I offer.

He tilts his head at my plate.

“I’ll be good and eat my breakfast,” I quickly say. “This is a dining room, right? Dining rooms are for eating in.”

“All right. And from now on, dining rooms are also for roleplaying Alpha and Omega in…”

I swallow. “I don’t know…”

He shrugs his shoulders. “If you don’t want to play here, we’ll go back to the bedroom and continue there.”

I shake my head emphatically. I'm not getting within a hundred steps of his bedroom again. "Okay, I'm fine with roleplaying in the dining rooms. But no sex, okay? No sex outside the bedroom, can we agree on that? Please?"

"Mm." He beckons to me, a slight smile returned to his face. "I will feed you. Come and sit on my lap, pet."

I don't want to, but I flatten my skirt with my hands, get up, and go to perch on his knees. It's awkward. He shifts me closer to his body and reaches around to spoon confiture into the yoghurt. "Good girl. I'm doing this for your own good, you know," he says pleasantly. He stirs with the spoon to mix the confiture and yoghurt and brings a spoonful up to my mouth. "Open up."

I close my mouth over the spoon. Berries burst against my tongue.

He makes a sound of content as if he's the one enjoying the food, and moves a plate of halved passionfruit nearer to us. "I love tart fruit," he hums. He picks up another little spoon and scoops up the fruit's gloopy yellow and black innards. "Have some of this."

It's sour. I have to make a face.

He laughs good-naturedly. "Too tart? I'll mix it into the yoghurt for you. And maybe some apricot too... I love apricot..."

He talks as he spoons different types of confiture into my yoghurt. "I'm just trying to help you adjust, sweetling. We can't have you saying or doing these outrageous and indecent things during our betrothal ceremony. You wouldn't want to embarrass me in front of everyone, would you? You know I'm on your side. I spent all yesterday making sure everything was in place for your parents' arrival in their new home. And today I have to sort out your schooling situation. It's taking up all my time. Open up."

I guiltily accept more fruit-streaked yoghurt.

"Some more."

I eat.

He kisses the side of my neck. "What a good Omega you're being," he coos. "Really, I'm so impressed. You're making me so happy."

The praise sends tingles throughout my body. I preen in response and relax into him. It's easier to feel relaxed now that he's not angry.

"That's it," he says approvingly. "That's better, isn't it? I'm going to feed you some more. You like me to feed you, pet?"

My small-voiced response of "yes, Draco," generates more effusive praise from him, and he helps settle me into a more comfortable position where I can nuzzle into the crook of his neck in between taking bites of fruit.

He praises me as I eat, and encouragingly massages my neck each time I rub my face against his. I'm growing dizzy. I think maybe I like sitting in his lap and smelling him and eating what he brings to my mouth? Maybe roleplaying at mealtimes isn't such a bad idea?

He goes slower with the feeding as we distract ourselves with scenting one another. I really like how he smells. He smells *so* good. His cologne and his touches and his praises are turning on switches in my brain. Switches for sex. My body is lighting up.

He turns his head and kisses me. I can feel his erection, rigid under my lap. He's ready to go. But he's so considerate, he doesn't try anything. We only kiss.

We kiss for a long time, until he huskily suggests, "Let's take this to the bedroom."

I'm not sure I can say no now. I'm not sure I want to say no.

We resume kissing as he picks me up and carries me out of the room, all the way to his bedroom and into its rich, perfumed dark.

"You're so very good," he purrs appreciatively. He kicks the door shut behind us. "So sweet and loving to me. You like to do everything I tell you, don't you?"

I nod, and he deposits me onto the bed. "This time," he says, his voice deepening into a satin tenor, "you're not to leave my bed without permission."

Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

11 25

“You’re very sure it’ll be safe there?” I ask as Draco, looking sharp in dark-grey robes, offers me his arm for side-along apparition.

We’re about to attend the betrothal ceremony, located, as tradition apparently dictates, at the Gaunt ancestral home. I am in a state of anxiety; I’m about to leave the safety of Draco’s home and come face to face with the people that ruined my life.

Even though I’ve already asked the same question many times before, Draco graciously takes the time to reassure me. “You’ll be very safe,” he reiterates. “I’ll be there. I’ll make sure everything goes to plan.”

I nod. “Thank you.”

“I know how difficult it has been for you,” he says, “Attacked by the Gaunts, your life turned upside down by them, and now, having to go to their home and pretend that everything’s just great, pretend to be part of the family, to be a dutiful daughter...”

I nod, more fervidly.

“But I hope you understand how important it is to *our* plan that you play the part perfectly today and not try and derail the event,” he continues. He fixes me with grave grey eyes. “Do you understand how important it is?”

“Yes.”

“Why is it important?”

“Because otherwise people will find out that this is a sham.”

“And what will happen if they find out?”

“Your father will be furious,” I answer promptly. “As probably will be everyone else. You’ll be put in an awkward and embarrassing situation, and I’ll be sold by the Gaunts to someone.”

“Exactly.” He looks satisfied. “I knew you were intelligent. And within a week of that, you’ll be married and bonded, which you know there’s no going back from. So, it is very, *very* important that you play the part perfectly. You should know how to by now. I’ve tried to

guide you and show you what being an Omega should look like and feel like. You're getting better at it. Already you're almost fooling me."

I sigh. I know it's important to pretend well, but sometimes it feels scarily real and normal. Especially recently, and if I'm fooling him, it's only because I'm also fooling myself. I don't like it. I don't like losing myself.

I look at the ring on my hand. "And then what?"

"And then we'll have all the time we need to figure out a way to resolve your problems once and for all. Undisturbed."

"Really?"

"Yes! Of course." He takes my hand and gives it a comforting squeeze. "You know I'm on your side."

"Yes," I smile, trying to dredge up some optimism. "And we'll finally also be able to stop pretending and roleplaying, right?"

He laughs. "We'll certainly re-evaluate the need for that." Taking my hand, he lightly touches the ring. "I'll have to take back my ring now," he says. "Just for a few hours. Can I count on you to do your best for a few hours?"

"Yes, Draco."

"Good girl." He eases the ring off my finger and slips it into its box that his house-elf is holding open, then gives me his arm. "Shall we?"

-

The Gaunts' house is unassuming from the outside.

The interior, however, is another story. Its bare walls are covered in ancient runes, and its floors are covered in live snakes.

Snakes all around. Snakes curled up in piles in the corners, snakes wound around the thick rune-etched banisters of a staircase, snakes basking in the light or lounging in the shade...

"Welcome home, Mistress," squeaks a house-elf at me as I take in the bizarre surroundings with a half open mouth.

Draco, displaying similar interest, is also looking around. Merope, the witch with the off-centre nose I saw before at Hogwarts, appears none too pleased by the gawking attention her home is receiving. "I'm supposed to take Hermione up," she says, trying to get Draco's notice. "The house-elf will show you to the ceremonial hall. Everyone's arrived."

Draco swivels. “Go with her first, sweetling,” he says. “They will get you ready. I’ll see you in a few minutes.”

“Follow me,” enjoins Merope.

We tread our way through the labyrinth of snakes, up the stairs, into a corridor, and arrive at a room with another house-elf waiting in it.

“Change,” says Merope, pointing at the long lustrous robes hanging in the middle of the room. They’re snake-skin robes.

I wait for her to leave the room, but she remains by the door with her arms folded, so I awkwardly undress, and the house-elves bring the robes over to me.

They drape the stiff leather over me while I stand there raising and lowering my arms as needed and Merope watches from by the door.

“You’ll be the first Parselmouth to marry a non-Speaker,” she tells me.

I look over at her.

“Well?” she says. “Anything to say to that?”

“What do you want me to say?”

She scoffs. “Typical Omega.” She moves to scratch her cheek. “You weren’t like this when I saw you at Hogwarts. I guess our blood’s really as cleansing as Morfin claims it is...”

“No. Your family just hadn’t burned our house down yet.”

Her arms cross again. “What do you mean by that?”

“You know what I mean,” I say quietly.

“I don’t. *House* could be symbolic or literal. It’s often symbolic with us. When I gave birth to Avery out of wedlock, my father threw a fit and said I had burned our house down. But Avery is a Parselmouth, so I haven’t.”

“I was talking about our literal house,” I grit out. “My parents were hurt and threatened and then our literal house was literally destroyed in a magical fire.”

“And Morfin did that you say?”

“Avery, too,” I reply pointedly. I’m not going to let her delude herself into thinking her son is innocent. He’s worse than his uncle.

“All done, Mistresses,” chorus the house-elves.

“Change her hair,” directs Merope. “Bun it at the neck.” She leans against the wall and sighs. “My father wouldn’t let me and Morfin marry.”

I raise a brow. “Because you’re siblings?”

“Because there were no Parselmouths for us to marry. Ours is the last house of Speakers. Now what do you have to say to that?”

“Can you un-graft me?”

“You should not marry Draco.”

“Okay. I won’t if you un-graft me.”

“You should wait to marry Avery. Avery will become an Alpha. I know he will. Just like I knew he would be a Parselmouth when he was still in my-”

The door bangs open, startling her.

It’s Avery the Parselmouth. And his uncle, the Lord Gaunt.

I scowl at them.

Lord Gaunt wastes no time scowling back at me. “So, the prodigal daughter’s seen fit to return,” he growls. “Stupid girl. If I had caught you, I’d have locked you up in the cellar for a year. I told you to go back to Hogwarts and await our instructions. I don’t know why you had to go off sobbing and simpering in the direction of the first Alpha you smelled. Typical Omega. I’m only surprised you haven’t come back pale and pasty and up the duff. That Draco must have the self-control of a monk. Holing up with an Alpha... At least you had the good sense to go to the wealthiest one. If you had got yourself attached to a penniless man, or worse, a foreigner, I’d-”

“Uncle!” cuts in Avery. “What matters is that no harm has been done, and that we’re doing things properly now, right?”

“That’s right, we’re doing things properly now,” says his uncle, sticking his face menacingly in mine. “You are a daughter of House Gaunt, and if you don’t act like it, I’ll throw you in the cellar with the bad snakes!”

I cast my eyes down; I’m furious and upset and I have to fight to hide it.

“Put some jewellery on her,” says Merope softly.

A large tray stacked with a mound of glittering jewellery is carried over to her by the house-elves.

“Which ones, Mistress?”

“Any. It’s not important.”

They start pulling strings of precious stones out of the pile to hold critically against my skin.

Lord Gaunt turns to his nephew. “Speaking of important, you’ve prepared the betrothal gifts?”

“Yes, it’s all downstairs.”

“Good. Where did you get the robes and jewellery from?”

“The robes are new, the jewellery I got from the vault. Don’t worry, I made sure not to include anything special. No snakes...”

“Alright. You started cataloguing?”

“No. It’s still a mess in there, and I haven’t really had the time to sort it out...”

“Well, get on it. Is she ready?”

“Yes, Master,” squeak the house-elves.

“Good. Let’s go.”

They leave the room. Merope motions to me to follow them, and we process down the corridor, down the stairs, through another door, and into an airy room furnished with vast floral arches, standing candelabras, and two long tables that face each other across a stretch of empty, snake-free space.

Draco, his parents, and a few other witches and wizards are there, speaking quietly between themselves. They greet us as we enter, and Draco makes eye contact with me. I smile, pleased when his parents appear to notice. I hope I look like I’m in love.

The betrothal ceremony is simpler than I anticipated. The Malfoys and the Gaunts heap gold and all sorts of other gifts on us. Lady Malfoy seems to have been unable to resist throwing in pink gemstones; there are a lot of them. Pastel clothes and linen and furniture too.

A few of the guests are actually bankers, present in a professional capacity; they’re tallying the wealth of gold and items and taking notes on each one.

I wonder what the uproar will be when the engagement is eventually broken. I hope I don’t get Draco into too much trouble.

After all the gifts have been looked over, they are taken away, and Lord Gaunt says a few scripted words about how joyful and honoured he is that their prestigious houses will soon be connected by marriage, which triggers a suite of short and similarly impersonal lines that are delivered by Lord Malfoy and by Draco.

If all pureblood engagements are as hard-boiled as this, no wonder Draco wants to avoid marriage too.

We meet in the cleared space.

“Almost done,” he whispers as he takes my hand. He has the dreaded dragon ring. It’s got its teeth in his skin.

I avoid watching the dragon take my blood, but I can’t prevent myself from feeling its sting, its metal coldness, and the way it tightens around my finger. It’s giving me claustrophobia.

At least Draco seems aware of the effect it has on me; he presses my hand to distract me. I smile up at him, appreciative of the gesture.

Scattered clapping echoes in the room. Congratulations go all around.

“Do we have time for champagne?” Lord Gaunt, in a celebratory mood, enquires. “Just between us?”

“I always have time for champagne,” laughs Lady Malfoy.

A large bottle is brought out, popped, and its pale fizzing liquid poured into glasses. I accept one.

“Are you staying for the party, Caractacus?” Lord Gaunt says to one bespectacled wizard who shakes his head.

“I wouldn’t miss it,” he replies, “but I can’t stay very long. Someone’s got to get all this to Gringotts and settle the paperwork. You want everything in escrow until the wedding, correct?”

“No, no,” says Draco’s father generously. “Let her have the jewellery now, let her enjoy it.”

Lord Gaunt drains his glass and calls over a house-elf. “Have most of the guests arrived? I’ve lost count. The wards won’t stop pealing in my ear...”

“Yes, Master, many already be in the garden.”

“Should we join them then?”

Lord Malfoy agrees.

Draco puts his champagne down on a salver and takes my hand. “Come on, sweetling.”

We follow the Gaunts out through the house, Draco and I lagging behind a little.

“I hope the Gaunts weren’t too horrible to you,” he murmurs as we walk.

“They’re horrible people,” I shudder. “He threatened to lock me up in their cellar with the bad snakes...”

Draco tutts and shakes his head. “Poor pet, that must’ve been frightening. But he can’t do that now, not if I have anything to say about it.” He squeezes my hand reassuringly. “As my betrothed, you’re equally under Malfoy guardianship, and we’ll make sure the Gaunts don’t

lock you up anywhere. You won't even need to stay here with them until the wedding. I negotiated for you to continue living with me."

I bite my lip. "What are they going to do when they all find out we've been pulling the wool over their eyes?"

"We'll worry about that later," he says in a low voice. "Let's just make it to the end of this party first, all right?"

"Yeah," I exhale.

He sneaks me a kiss, just on my hair, then we go out into the garden where it seems like half of wizarding society has been gathered.

"Ah, Godfrey," Draco says to someone who's come up to talk to him. "Nice seeing you again... Glad you could make it on such short notice..."

While he's accepting congratulations from the wizard named Godfrey, I look around at a few people I recognise. I see Cetus and Neville, and Rohesia with her parents. I want to go over and talk to them, but I can't just pull away from Draco; it's probably not something loving Omegas do. Or regular loving fiancées, I suppose.

A server reaches us through the throng of well-wishers.

Draco takes a glass of red wine from him before turning to me. "What about you, sweetling, what would you like?" he asks.

"I'll have the same as you," I say. *That*, I've dearly learned, is definitely the Omega thing to say.

The server hands me a glass, but just as he's turning to go, is stopped by Draco who is frowning in a troubled way. "Wait," he commands. "Can you make a hot chocolate?"

"Allow me to check, Sir."

"Do," says Draco. "I would really appreciate it."

I break into a happy grin at this, and when the hot chocolate comes, I exchange my wine glass for it and sip contentedly, until another guest, a bald wizard with a goatee, comes to talk to Draco.

"Lord Burke," greets Draco, nodding at him. "So good of you to grace our celebration. Have you been introduced to my fiancée, Miss Gaunt?"

Lord Burke's eyes drift between Draco and me. "We met briefly," he replies in his gravelly voice. "I still remember your messenger patronus. It was an impressive bit of magic. Although, I hear you've acquired something more impressive. Will you speak to me a little in Parseltongue, Ms. Gaunt?"

Avery, within hearing distance, whips round. “Tell him he’s a shrivelling cunt to his face,” he calls out with a mean laugh. “I do that all the time. You’re a bald old cheapskate cunt, and if you die tomorrow, I’ll piss on your grave. See?”

“I can’t say any of that,” I hiss, shocked.

“Say it,” he eggs me on. “Say it now! Quickly!”

“What if it comes out in English?” Really, I can’t believe I’m even entertaining this.

He rolls his eyes disdainfully. “Are you dim? Picture a snake while you’re talking or something.”

“Er...” I turn nervously back to Lord Burke. I really can’t believe I’m about to do this, even if I’m kind of relishing the opportunity. “Er...” I stutter. “You’re a bald old cunt...”

“Magnificent,” Lord Burke declares serenely.

I giggle guilty and exchange looks with Avery who is barely attempting to suppress laughter. His mother looks upset. She takes his arm and whispers in his ear. They walk away.

“What are we talking about?” buts in a tall dark wizard. I know who he is. I’ve seen his face in the papers. Shacklebolt. He’s a former auror turned politician. I wrote him a letter about SLOW a couple of months ago and never got a response back.

“I was just about to say that I don’t know which half of the happy couple to congratulate on this match,” Lord Burke replies, indicating Draco and me with a gesture. “On the one hand, Ms. Gaunt is our only Parselmouth Omega, and a hard-won one, if I understand Morfin correctly...”

“Have there been any Parselmouths in the Malfoy line?” enquires Shacklebolt.

“No,” replies Draco.

“Ah, then well done, Draco. My congratulations must go to you,” says Shacklebolt.

Draco takes a small, casual sip of wine. “I am honoured to be bringing the dark gift into my bloodline,” he says, smirking.

“Draco, you’re too modest,” objects Lord Burke. “No one can accuse your family of disadvantaging the Gaunts in this arrangement. Kingsley, I insist you withhold your congratulations until you have looked at the details of this eye-watering dowry that-”

“Hermione is priceless,” interrupts Draco, putting a hand on my hip and looking fondly down at me. “Her dowry only represents the life I intend to provide us with. She’s priceless to me.”

“Well put,” says Lord Burke, tipping his glass and smiling at Draco. “My congratulations also go to you then. Although I was a little surprised to see that none of Ms. Gaunt’s ancestral artefacts will accompany her into her marriage. I do have a few things in my vault

that are more than suitable if you are looking to acquire something for your future children... I've never displayed them, but perhaps, for you..."

"That's very kind of you," says Draco. "I will keep that in mind. I do have an arrangement with Lord Gaunt to privately acquire some things from their collection of Slytherin's personal affects should Hermione produce any Parselmouths..."

I choke on my hot chocolate.

The men pick up on my discomfort.

"Perhaps not a topic to be pursued in front of your bride to be," says Lord Burke delicately.

"No, indeed. Let's change the subject," agrees Shacklebolt. "Has Albus shown you his mirror of desire?"

"Yes, and teased me with it too. I offered him twenty thousand galleons for it, but he said he would only barter in socks... And what is that supposed to mean, I ask you? Socks..."

"If you'll excuse us, gentlemen," drawls Draco. "I believe I've just seen my cousin, and I need a quick word with her..."

He steers me away. "I apologise that you had to listen to all of that," he murmurs, frowning. "What did Avery say to you?"

"Oh. Just now? He, er, was advising me on how to speak Parseltongue to someone who doesn't speak it," I say, trying not to look guilty. "He said to picture snakes..."

"How fascinating. And how are you holding up?"

"I'm fine," I say. "Oh, by the way, do you think it may be better not to make up things about the marriage? Like, er, all that stuff about Parselmouth children? Because the more lies we tell, the harder it is to remember them, right? I mean it's just a suggestion," I hurriedly add. "I'm sure you know what you're doing-"

"I do know what I'm doing," he cuts me off with a calm smile. "So play along with me and don't break character, all right, pet?"

"Okay. I won't break character, I promise."

"You're doing brilliantly. Keep it up and we'll be able to leave soon."

I nod. "Thanks. By the way, your other cousin isn't here, is he?"

"Which one?"

"Sebastian Lestrange?"

"Seb's in Monaco." He makes a signal to someone behind me. "My cousin Carina's here, and I do actually have to speak with her. I want to borrow her private island in the Maldives for a

few months, I think you'll like it there... You don't mind if I leave you on your own for a bit do you, Hermione?"

"Oh, not at all!" I assure, gesturing for him to go ahead. Now that I can be sure I'll be safe from rabid unbonded Alphas, specifically his cousin, Seb, I'd love to be alone for a bit.

"I'll come find you later," he promises. "Why don't you get yourself a bite to eat. You must be hungry by now. Eat whatever you like. If you don't see anything that suits you, just order what you want. You know how to order? Good. And if you see Mother, tell her that Aunt Andromeda was looking for her." He hesitates. "Are you sure you don't mind? I do feel guilty leaving you alone... You *are* supposed to be my fiancée..."

I giggle.

"What's so funny?" he asks.

"Oh, nothing, I just... I suppose I'm just glad I'm not alone in feeling like a fish out of water," I confess. "I suppose real fiancés must automatically know how to behave with each other, and since we're not, we're overthinking everything. It's funny. But I'm glad we're both in on it together. I don't even know what I would do if I had to go it alone. So... thank you."

He laughs, pulls me close, and brushes another kiss over my hair. "What do you think?" he murmurs. "Is this how real fiancés would behave?"

I blush. "I guess so." I know we've now done far more outrageous things than just kiss, but when he pushes my chin up and does that, I blush even more.

His fingers move to my neck.

"Please, Draco," I find myself breaking the kiss to say. "You smell so nice, I..."

"Shh, not that kind of roleplay here," he murmurs, voice simmering with amusement. "That belongs in the bedroom, remember?" He winks at me before walking right off while I stare, dazed, at the back of him.

Almost as soon as he's gone, I'm beset by my schoolmates, Rohesia and Lavender.

"Ooh, that was so hot- I *saw* that! You are *so* lucky," gushes Lavender. "Everyone's talking about how lucky you are."

"Er." I'm red with embarrassment, and still dwelling on how good Draco smells and how badly I want to follow him and his phenomenal cologne. I feel the comical need to shake my head to clear it. "They, er, they are?"

"Of course they are! You're marrying a Malfoy! *Draco* Malfoy! And you don't have to go to school anymore or have to get a job!" She fixes me with an envious, admiring look.

"*Soo* lucky. Did you come up with that SLOW rubbish just to get close to him?"

"SLOW is a serious project!" I protest.

"It was so fucking clever." She's radiating admiration. "I bet Daphne wishes she'd thought of it. You know he rejected her without even meeting her just because his parents said she wasn't good enough? Because, you know, of her blood-curse. She told me. Cetus said he heard they didn't like you either- Oops, sorry, but it's all right now, isn't it, because it all worked out for you? Everyone says he's simply head over heels in love with you. Tell us how he proposed. Don't leave out any details! Can I see your ring?"

I show it to her. She squeals excitedly. "I can't believe you're getting married next month! Where are you having the wedding? Have you been to their villa in Lake Como?" she rolls on without drawing breath. "I hope you have it there. I saw pictures of it on Witch Weekly from when he was dating Arabella Findlay. Can you believe she tried to kill herself? You must be over the moon. I'd be so flattered if my boyfriend's ex tried to kill herself because he was marrying me instead. When are you sending out official invitations? I already told Ron that he has to go and that he has to bring me as his date. If he takes someone else, I'm gonna threaten to kill myself, what do you think?"

"Er. I'm really not sure..." I'm not sure about anything of what she's said, *especially* the part about my getting married next month, but I'm worried I'll give the game away if I deny it directly, so I just tell her that I'm not sure anything's been decided. Then, I quickly turn to Rohesia to ask how things are going with her.

Rohesia's ogling me. She's been ogling me since she saw me. "Er, good," she manages to say. "Good, good. Sorry my cousins couldn't come."

"Yeah, they don't get on with Draco's family, do they?" I muse. "I didn't think they were even invited."

A server with a tray of canapés stops by, and we scarf up several.

"Certain pureblood families always get invited to certain important events," says Rohesia in between bites. "It's like an unspoken right. But yeah." She laughs. "They can't stand each other. They never show up at each other's events. Ron wanted to come and support you, actually, but he was scared to ask Aunt Molly for permission. She's in a bad mood because of Ginny. Don't know if you know, but they found out she was an Omega a couple of weeks ago. And it turned out that *Professor Snape* was helping her hide it! There was a big row. So much drama."

I gasp. "Oh, no! Poor Ginny!"

"You missed *so* much," enthuses Lavender. "So much. Her mum sent a howler." She pitches her voice high in imitation of Ginny's mum: "-ABSOLUTELY DISGUSTED! HOW DARE YOU TRY TO HIDE THIS. I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU STOPPED TO THINK ABOUT YOUR FAMILY-"

"This is partially my aunt and uncle's fault, honestly," said Rohesia. "They raised her like one of the boys, don't know what else they expected. But they're blaming you too, they think you were a bad influence with your SLOW thing."

"SLOW is a good thing," I protest.

"If Ginny gets married to someone else, do you think Harry will try and kill himself?" asks Lavender. "OH!" She shrieks excitedly and seizes my wrists as if she's just been hit with a life-changing thought. "You reckon Krum will want to kill himself after you get married???"

I sigh. "Can you stop talking about people killing themselves? It's not as romantic as you think it is. I have to find Draco's mum."

"She was by the entrance," says Rohesia. "No, not where you came in by. The other one, where the reception is- Oh, come on, I'll just show you."

We follow her through the garden. Lavender is talking all the while. "Lady Malfoy's so intimidating, isn't she?" she breathes excitedly. "I don't think I dare to talk to her at all. It would be almost like talking to Lord Malfoy and I would never even dare to look at him. I think I'll just go look for Greg or Nev after you find her. I'm too scared to talk to any Malfoy. Draco Malfoy's intimidating too, isn't he? I mean obviously he isn't to *you*, Hermione, but- Remember the Career Fair? He was so..." She shivers, looking thrilled. "Scary. I couldn't even speak around him."

"Er, shit, I think I'm lost," mutters Rohesia. "Never mind, we can turn left ahead, should be the same thing... You don't know your way around here, Hermione?"

"No, I've never been here before..."

Lavender hasn't stopped chatting; I don't think she's stopped for breath. "The way he was talking down to everyone," she continues, "Merlin, it was so hot. Alphas are so hot. And Sebastien Lestrange! *He* was so scary, even more scary than Draco- Oh, speak of the Devil. Ooh, he looks even more scary than I remember..."

"I don't think Draco looks scary," I say, trying to manage both conversations at once. "Shall we just ask one of those house-elves for help?"

"Yeah, that's why I said he's scarier than Draco," Lavender exasperatedly explains.

"I- Who? Not-"

"Sebastien Lestrange!"

"What? Where? Fuck!" I hiss, looking frantically about and feeling a surge of panic when I see that Sebastien Lestrange is indeed here in the garden.

And he appears to be headed our way.

Forgetting about my errand, I dive for cover, using my schoolmates as shields to block me from view.

Rohesia, understandably not appreciating being pulled by the robes into the nearest bush, swears an oath and glares at me. "What's the matter with you?"

"It's Sebastien!" I hiss. "What is he *doing* here?"

"He was... invited?" suggests Rohesia. She peers bemusedly at me and then out of the shrubbery to where Sebastien must be positioned.

"What if he attacks me?" I fret.

She turns back to screw her face at me. "Why would Sebastian Lestrange attack you?"

"Because I'm in..." I lower my voice. "...*Heat*... And he's an unbonded Alpha..."

Lavender giggles as if I've just said an indecent word. Rohesia's face screws up further. "Er..." she says. "I don't think-"

Right then, Sebastien Lestrange walks by our bush. He's clearly visible, as are we, the bush being a lousy hiding place; but due to the angle of the path and the direction he's moving, he hasn't caught sight of us. "Draco gets everything I want," he's complaining in an ugly voice to another dark-haired young man who replies with: "You mean you want everything Draco gets."

I flatten myself automatically into the bush, grateful for my stiff snakeskin robes protecting me from its poking branches.

Unfortunately, there are also real snakes in the bush.

"Hello," they hiss.

Rohesia and Lavender squeal.

We are discovered.

The two passing men turn around.

Sebastien spots me and grins, his eyes lighting up. "Hello, Omega."

I don't reply. I straighten and narrow my eyes at him.

"I thought I smelled something sweet," he says, undaunted by the less-than-friendly reception. "What were you doing with your little friends in that bush, sweet Omega?"

"None of your business. What are *you* doing here? This isn't Monaco."

He smiles. His friend looks taken aback. "She *is* a... er, unique sort of... er, girl," he comments. "Why are you all so attracted to her again?"

"You wouldn't understand, Matt," Sebastian replies. He pauses. "Actually, you've answered it. *Unique*..."

His friend- Matt, rolls his eyes. "I don't think you understand either."

"I understand my instincts," oozes Sebastien, smiling wolfishly and taking a step closer to me.

Lavender seems to have forgotten how to do anything but giggle, which makes Sebastien look at her. “Go away,” he orders, shooing her off with a gesture.

She flees, still giggling dementedly. Rohesia makes an attempt to follow her, but I’ve got her by the robes.

I press myself further into the bush. “Don’t think you can attack me just because I’m in heat,” I warn.

Sebastien’s mouth opens as if he’s surprised. His brow goes up.

“Why do you keep saying you’re in heat?” Rohesia mutters to me at the same time as Sebastien leans in and sniffs the air around me.

“You’re not in heat,” he pronounces, his disappointment unconcealed. “Even a blood-ring couldn’t hide *that* heavenly smell.” He glares down at my right hand, at the blood-ring, presumably. “But you’ve just come out of heat, haven’t you, you little tease? I can tell...”

“Don’t be gross, just leave her be, Seb,” says Matt. “This is her betrothal party. To your cousin, Draco. Where *is* Draco?”

“Stop talking about Draco,” snaps Sebastien. “Draco this, Draco that. Fucking prick. He’s got less colour than a glass of water.”

A nervous chuckle escapes me.

He grins. “I wish you were in heat,” he says darkly. “I’d run off with you right away. You’d look better in Lestrange colours... I can just picture... You, naked, on your back, your long black hair, down to your back, of course, or wrapped around my-”

I shoot him a disgusted look.

“Pah,” he says. “Don’t give me that look. Like you’re traditional or you’re pure or whatever. I heard the ceremony was only for show, and you’ve been wearing that ring for weeks now. Going at it for weeks too, I can tell. It’s okay. I can wipe that pretty-boy smell off you in fifteen minutes. With my tongue.”

I feel Rohesia shudder. “We’ve got to go,” she mutters bravely. “Lady Malfoy asked us to do something for her...”

“Seb,” his friend says warily before the other can give a response.

“I’m just talking to her,” says Sebastien. “Merlin, you’re such a nag. I can talk to anyone I want, can’t I?” He eyes me up beadily. “If Draco wants to let his precious Omega wander off alone, that’s his mistake. If you ever want to throw off Draco, send me an owl,” he says. “You’ve got a month to do it, haven’t you? I’ll give you anything you want if you come to me, I mean it.”

“No, thanks,” I mutter, hurrying past him.

Then, I remember that I'm supposed to be a loving fiancée. I turn. "I'm very much in love with Draco, actually, so... Sorry. Bye."

Lavender's waiting for us on a stone bench. "What happened after I left?" she excitedly enquires. "I feel like I've been sat here for ages, so something must've happened. Did he try and carry you off? Is he going to duel his cousin for you? But the Ministry's going to step in, aren't they? The Minister's here, I saw him just now. Ooh, I'm so glad I came. That was so scary. Ooh, I'm so glad I'm not an O like you. He looked ready to *pounce*—"

"Lavender, shut up," a frazzled Rohesia snaps. "If you can't keep it in, you've got to leave." She throws me a side-eye. "That *was* kind of scary though," she mutters.

I agree wholeheartedly. "I think I should find Draco and tell him what happened..." *And maybe stay close to him for the rest of the party too...*

"If he told you to find his mum, maybe we better do that first," Rohesia suggests. "Don't want to piss off any more Alphas. Anyway, I'm not lost anymore. I recognise that bronze sculpture. Why is everything here snake related? Don't they get bored of it?"

We scurry round the boring snake sculpture and quickly reach the other entrance, which is the proper entrance to the event space, it seems. There are floral arches and a booth manned by two witches with clipboards who are putting away presents. Near the booth, in a place of proud prominence, floats a long, oversized parchment covered in elegant golden script.

Draco's parents are both there, busy in conversation with a couple that's just come in. The Greengrasses. Daphne is with them.

She detaches from her family and comes over to us. "Hey Hermione. I really like your robes," she politely says. "The style really suits you."

"Thanks," I say. I like them too, although for different reasons. They're very good for hiding in bushes in.

"Your robes are also nice, Daphne," Lavender inserts.

Daphne's scanning the floating parchment. "Wow." Her eyes widen. "Congratulations, Hermione. This is... impressive. He must really love you."

Curiosity turns me to scan the parchment with her.

It's a recording of the details of the betrothal of one Hermione Leptodeira Asterope Morfin Gaunt to Draco Abraxas Orion Lucius Malfoy.

The sums and items listed *are* impressive, going far beyond what was displayed at the ceremony just now. But although this Hermione Gaunt with her hefty bride price reads to me, the *real* Hermione, Hermione Granger, like a fictional character, the fanfare and fuss surrounding her engagement are all too real; it's clear that the longer this situation drags on, the hairier it's only going to get, and neither Draco's family nor the Gaunts seem like they would react well to finding out that they've been mugged off.

“I suppose you won’t be taking your NEWTs either,” Daphne laughs.

“Hm?” I realise I’ve been deep in worry just staring into space. “No,” I say, “I’m taking the NEWTs.”

“Oh, okay. I guess there’s no rule that says you can’t sit the NEWTs after you’re married. Thank Merlin the Rowles don’t care about that. It’s the one thing I’m looking forward to. Not having to go to school anymore.”

“I love school,” I enthuse. “I can’t wait to go back now that my heat is over.”

Lavender giggles.

“Could you please stop springing that word on us,” mutters Rohesia.

“Are you going back after the wedding?” Daphne asks me.

“Oh, lord, no, I’m going back ASAP,” I laugh. If I have to wait until after a made-up wedding to go back to school, I’ll never get to go back. “I’m going back on Monday.”

“But why not just wait a month, at least until after your wedding?” she asks. “You might even change your mind after that, right?”

“I don’t- Why does everyone seem so sure I’m getting married next month?” I vent frustratedly. “Where are you getting this information?”

“Er, from your betrothal contract?” ventures Rohesia. “Right here?” She points at the parchment. “Right here in front of you?”

My eyes follow her finger down to the line she’s drawing attention to. It’s unobtrusive, tucked into a paragraph almost at the bottom of the lengthy parchment, and I have to read it several times before I can begin to parse it:

The wedding has been set for a month from today.

“Well, this can’t be- This can’t be right,” I stammer.

“It is a very short engagement,” Daphne observes. “I suppose it’s romantic.”

“Very,” sighs Lavender.

“But- but-” I stammer. I look wildly around. “This isn’t correct,” I insist. “No, this isn’t correct.”

Despite my attempts to keep my voice at a minimum, Draco’s parents are drawn over. And Daphne’s.

“What’s going on here, girls?” asks Daphne’s mother, Lady Greengrass.

“I think Hermione’s having a panic attack,” Daphne says. “She didn’t realise the wedding was going to be so soon.”

“That kind of realisation doesn’t warrant a panic attack,” says Draco’s father disapprovingly.

“I don’t think Hermione likes having only one month to prepare for anything,” Rohesia suggests.

“Yeah,” Lavender sniggers. “She started mugging for OWLs during *second* year.”

“Ah. A wedding isn’t anything like an exam. There’s nothing for you to prepare for, dear,” Lady Malfoy tries to console me. “Our staff will organise everything. You don’t have to do anything at all. You’d only be getting in everybody’s way. And Draco-”

“Has Draco seen- Does Draco *know* about this?” I gasp, finding my voice. I have to find Draco. I have to tell him. He has to know-

“Know about this?” says Draco’s father, raising a brow. “You mean the wedding date? Of course, he knows about it. He selected the date.”

Chapter 22

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I look back at the date written out on the parchment. “He selected this date?” I echo faintly.

“Yes,” says Lady Malfoy. She turns to Lady Greengrass, shaking her head. “And we’re having to move heaven and earth to get everything ready in time.” She sighs. “If there’s one minor fault Draco has- he’s otherwise perfect, it’s his unwillingness to find mutual ground. I told him we needed at least three months if we want to ensure we have the best vendors, have the invitations done and delivered in time, have everything properly organised, including the new country house he said he wanted, by the way… You can imagine the work involved… But he always has to have things exactly his way…”

“I feel for you,” says Lady Greengrass sympathetically. “I can’t even get my house de-doxied on short notice, never mind plan a wedding of the scale you’re talking about…”

“You okay?” Rohesia whispers. I’ve got my hand on my forehead.

Lord Malfoy looks down at me. “Are you feeling quite all right, Ms. Gaunt?” he asks coldly.

“Oh, yes,” I quickly reply. “Yes, er… I forgot, actually, that I have a message from Draco to pass along. He says that his Aunt Andromeda wants the both of you to go to her.”

“The both of us?” he repeats, sounding, to my nervous ears, highly suspicious.

“It sounded urgent,” I hastily say. “He said to pass the message. I’m sorry I got side-tracked.”

He harrumphs. “When my son- your future husband, tells you to do something, I advise you do it right away. Even if it’s not urgent.” Turning, he calls to his wife. They move away.

Daphne and her family also drift off on their own without my having to facilitate their removal, thank goodness. Now only Lavender and Rohesia are still with me. I wonder how I can get rid of them. I can’t do anything with them around as witnesses. Not that I’ve got an inkling of what to do exactly. I need time to think. And space.

“Lord Malfoy is *scary*,” breathes Lavender excitedly. “Isn’t he? If Draco Malfoy’s scary as that, and *I* were marrying him, I think I’d cry every time he spoke to me. I’d have to make myself think of all the gowns and galleons coming to me just to make it down the aisle. Do you ever- Ooh, speak of the Devil. He’s dead fit, though, isn’t he?”

It’s Draco.

"There you are, sweetling," he says, striding up with another cup of hot chocolate and handing it to me as Lavender and Rohesia melt into the shadows of the nearest bush. He barely spares them a passing glance. "Did you also tell Father that Aunt Andromeda wanted him? I passed him when I came to look for you. He's a bit cross."

"Is- Is he?"

Draco looks at the entrance I had been semi-hoping to make into an exit and then frowns at me. "Are you waiting for somebody, sweetling?"

"No..."

He raises his brow. "Do you want to leave?"

My eyes leap up to his. "Do I want to...?"

"We can leave now," he says. "We can go home anytime. We just have to say goodbye to a few people, and then I'll take you home."

"Oh, ah. Actually, there's something I need to talk to you about..."

"Right now?"

"Yes," I say, lowering my voice to an urgent whisper. "I really need to talk to you about the wedding date."

I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation for why he chose that wedding date. The alternative is too horrible for me to contemplate. I want to believe Draco. I *want* to believe him.

"We can talk about it as soon as we get home," he says, sweeping his gaze around us in a pointed manner.

"No, I'd prefer if we- Can we just talk here-" I lead him into a clandestine clump of bushes. "It really needs to be corrected now-"

"I'm not following a word you're saying, pet," he interjects, looking amused. "What about our wedding date do you want to talk about?"

"Oh, er..." I twist hesitant fingers together, afraid to sound too accusing. "Your father said you selected the date..."

"Yes..?"

"And... Did you?"

"I did, yes."

I stare at him in disbelief. "But... Why?" I'm struggling to hold on to my composure. "Why? One month from now? I don't understand! Why didn't you pick a date *five* years from

now?"

"Five years?" He gives me a baffled frown. "Why should I have done that? That's mad. The plan is to have this wedding as soon as possible, isn't it?"

"*What?* No! The plan is to *not* have a wedding!"

He shakes his head. "That's not what I understand. We were supposed to have a wedding so that everyone would stop bothering us. We can't just remain engaged and unmarried forever. That's simply not done."

"But I don't *want* to get married!" I am nearly crying with frustration. "Draco, I thought I made myself clear! I said—"

His demeanour instantly shifts. He wraps his hand abruptly around my throat, thumb exerting pressure on my pulse. "Watch how you speak to me, pet." His cool eyes look me down. "I'm not going to keep explaining things to you just because you can't remember our conversations or think rationally." He lets go. "Stop trying to avoid marriage. It's done. I'm marrying you. We're having the wedding. It will solve all our problems."

I fix my eyes on him. I feel paralysed. "And... then?"

He cocks his head. "And then what?"

"After the wedding," I say desperately. "What happens then?"

He shrugs, noncommittal. "We'll see."

"Not *we'll see*," I say pleadingly. "Draco- You know I'm trying to get out of this blood adoption, right? You know I'm—" My mouth is trembling. My voice is shaky. "You know I'm trying to get my life back, right?"

"Yes," he says. "And I'm helping you. We're helping each other."

"Okay." *Okay.* That's a start. "Okay, so, just to make sure we're on the same page... *You* don't really want to get married, right?"

"I didn't want to before, that's correct," he agrees, inclining his head. "I wasn't ready. There wasn't anyone I wanted. But, as I was being pressured to take a bride, our arrangement suits us both."

"Okay, great," I say, desperate to find and hold on to any grain of sanity in this conversation-in this *situation*. "So, again, just to be clear, you *don't* want to marry me. *I* don't want to marry anyone. We are *both* looking for a way out, yes?"

He sighs again. "Sweetling, the only way out of this engagement is through a wedding and into marriage. You knew that coming in."

"But we agreed on a *fake* engagement." I'm on the verge of tears. "I know we agreed to pretend..."

He looks irritated. “I’ve never once said that our betrothal was pretend. I’ve never even alluded to it as that. I don’t know why you’d think it would be. You’ve surely got some sense of how seriously our world operates by now.” He sneers with apparent disdain. “You can’t possibly think that I, Draco Lucius Malfoy, would agree to an open-ended betrothal with someone who’s got nothing to offer me in exchange for my participation in such an embarrassingly silly charade? I thought you were supposed to be intelligent, Hermione.”

His sharp-tongued criticism exsiccates whatever tears have been threatening to gather in my eyes. I feel myself paling instead. I think he may be right; I can’t remember him ever explicitly talking about our engagement being fake?

I take a shuddering breath and try to re-orient my thinking. I’ve miscategorised Draco, that much I’ve realised: He’s not helping me because he’s nice, he’s helping me because there’s something in it for him.

Fine. That’s fine. I just have to- I just have to get on his level.

“Okay,” I say. “So, we’re getting married… And when I find a way to reverse the blood adoption or when you meet someone you actually want to marry, we’ll get a divorce, right?”

“Sure.”

“Okay.” I can work with that. A fake marriage isn’t much different from a fake engagement, and he’s right that people will probably leave us alone after that. But I’m going to have to clarify a few more things so neither of us gets a nasty surprise later. “There will be no more roleplay anywhere,” I assert as firmly as I can. “I don’t want any- anymore of that. I already know how to act like a proper Omega in public. I won’t embarrass you.”

“What do you think you’re doing right now if not embarrassing me?” he coldly counters. “I can’t think of another woman, Omega or otherwise, who would presume to speak to me as you have been since the moment we met. Drink your hot chocolate.”

I look down at the cup I’m clutching.

“Oh, thanks.” I take a reluctant sip.

He watches me, his face stamped with displeasure. “It wouldn’t surprise me if Lord Gaunt’s slithering spies are at this moment reporting to him our entire exchange,” he says acerbically. “Drink the whole thing.”

I shake my head, adamant. “I’m sorry, but I thought maybe the date was incorrect, and I wanted it amended before we left. And I still think it should be changed.” I plug on despite Draco’s darkening expression. “We can push it back by a few more months at least and give ourselves more time. Your family wouldn’t mind that either, I’m sure. I heard your mum say that the planning was-”

“Hello,” hisses another voice suddenly, close by my ear; I almost jump.

It’s a snake, talking directly to me:

“Your father wants words with you, dear.”

“What is it?” asks Draco, his displeased stare transferred to the snake.

I bite my lip. “It’s saying that Lord Gaunt- I think? wants to talk to me.”

Draco’s jaw clenches. He doesn’t reprimand me with *I told you so*, which would have been deserved, I suppose, but looks grimly round. “Let’s find him then.”

A house-elf points us the way to where Lord Gaunt is exchanging words with Sebastien’s mother, Lady Lestrange. Merope and Avery are also there, each wearing a face blacker than Draco’s.

“There you are,” Lord Gaunt breaks off his conversation with Lady Lestrange to bark at me. He glares. “What do you think you’re doing with Sebastien?”

I am at sea. “What?”

“Don’t *what* me. Teasing Lestrange like that, no wonder this poor man’s having to follow you about.” He inclines an indicative head at Draco before delivering me another incensed glare. “Already a betrothed woman and I’m still fielding your suitors. I suppose I’ll have them at my door until your wedding day. Is this the way to behave? Don’t slouch.”

“I haven’t been teasing him,” I say indignantly.

“Oh, mouthing off, are we? Say one more stupid thing, and I’ll lock you in the dungeons with the very bad snakes, go on.”

“I do apologise if I’m interrupting,” interrupts Draco, “but do remember to speak in English, please. Have we anything important to discuss before I bring Hermione home?”

Lord Gaunt turns to him, a mercenary glint in his eye. “Yes, Draco, as a matter of fact, we do,” he starts in a sickly sweet tone. “To come straight to it, we Parselmouths, as you know, observe very strict customs and traditions that supersede even those of the strictest families...”

“I am aware of that,” says Draco in careful tones.

“Good, good... And as you also very well know, we’re breaking with tradition in order to make this marriage happen...”

Merope takes the opportunity to bluntly say: “Speakers should only marry Speakers. This is how it’s always been. Hermione should not be marrying Draco.”

Lord Gaunt turns on her. “I didn’t ask for your irrelevant opinion.”

“I’m not sure what you’re getting at,” says Draco in a low, puzzled voice. “Merope, if you will oblige, speak in English for all of us, please.”

"We like to keep Parseltongue in the family, she says," explains Lord Gaunt. "We like to do things properly, the right way..."

Draco frowns. "Is there a point to this?"

Another snaky smile from Lord Gaunt. Another mercenary glint catches in his eyes. "The point," he says, "that I am getting to, is that I realised that we never discussed the future of the product of your union with my daughter..."

Draco seems to understand. "I won't restrict my heir to an arranged marriage before he is even born," he says testily. "If this is so important, why wasn't it brought up in negotiations?"

"Too blinded by gold," tsks Merope under her breath.

Lord Gaunt ignores her. "Ah, yes, it did drop from my mind," he slimly concedes, "But it was immediately placed back there by another er, er, lovestruck young man who came to me pledging all his future children to a Gaunt if I dissolved my daughter's betrothal to you in favour of him..."

Draco's silvery eyes flick to his aunt who, perhaps sensing her presence neither wanted nor warranted, touches Lord Gaunt on the arm. "We'll speak later, Morfin. Draco, if I don't see you before you leave..." She gives Draco a kiss on the cheek and departs.

Draco exhales. "Dissolve our betrothal? Well, that can't happen. It's done."

"It can," suggests Lord Gaunt. "It won't be a good look, but it can. But!" He puts up his hands. "That's not what I'm suggesting doing. I wouldn't dream of humiliating you or your family like this. What I am suggesting is that we do things the proper way, the right way--"

"If you really want to do things the right way, you'll marry her to Avery," says Merope.

"I don't want to hear another word from you," Lord Gaunt barks.

"I wish to remind everyone that it's the Malfoy way for men to select their own brides," says Draco coldly. "I totally oppose the pledging of any of my offspring. And I do not appreciate the timing or manner in which you have chosen to spring this on me. The negotiations are over, and even if they were not, we should have an arbiter kinsman present. This is tasteless."

Lord Gaunt puffs up his chest. "Then I need hardly remind *you* that the Gaunt way is to marry Parselmouth to Parselmouth," he sneers. "If we're breaking our traditions in order to make this marriage happen, you can break yours. And speaking of tasteless, how about keeping my daughter in your house without seeking my permission first?"

Merope says, triumphantly, "You see? These Malfoys are too impudent. They think there's nothing they can't own, now that we've let them purchase Parseltongue for their line. If Avery produces no Parselmouths, and *he* does, then they will own Parseltongue completely. A family whose line hasn't produced one single Speaker--"

"Mother, stop," hisses Avery.

“-a family like that, owning our ancient magic and our ancient heritage. You may as well open up our vaults to them now then. You may as well give him all of Slytherin’s things now.”

“*Mother!*”

“Break away from tradition once, and there will be nothing left to return to,” she continues doggedly.

“What do you want me to do?” bursts out Lord Gaunt. “If I marry her to Avery and he doesn’t present-”

“English, please!” demands an exasperated Draco.

“Avery will become an Alpha,” says Merope solemnly.

“I don’t want her!” says Avery loudly. “If Draco won’t accept the terms, just sell her to Sebby!”

“It’s a lot of gold you’re asking us to give up on a gamble,” grousing Lord Gaunt to his sister.

“Uncle, you can’t seriously be considering this!” protests Avery in alarm.

I’m alarmed too. I can’t believe what’s happening! I thought it was all over. Why isn’t Draco just accepting their conditions? It’s not like any of it will matter!

“Do you realise how much richer we’re about to be!” Avery is almost crying.

“Gold can always be made,” Lord Gaunt says curtly. “Our tradition dictates that a Speaker may only marry a Speaker. If the Malfoys can stick to their wands, so must we, or else we’ll look like fools. We will keep our traditions.”

“Bollocks to that,” responds Avery rudely. “I’m not marrying her. She’s not worth giving up the gold for. She’s not worth a tenth of it. Not even a tenth of a tenth. I don’t care that she speaks our language. It was a freak occurrence, and she’s a freak. I’ll marry whom I want when I want like the Malfoys do.”

“You see?” says Merope with triumphant relish. “See? I told you what would happen if we broke with tradition even once. I told you-”

She’s drowned out by her brother who has turned the brunt of his anger onto his sulking nephew. “Know your place! You may be the heir of this house, but I am head of it!” he rails. “It’s time you start showing me respect! You will do what I tell you to do! You will marry whom I tell you to marry! We are the last existing house of Speakers, and we have a duty to-”

“Bollocks to duty!”

“I think I’ll just go,” I edge in as his uncle starts on him again. “I’m just going to go now...”

Avery rounds abruptly on me, snarling. “You’re going with Draco, and if you ruin this for me, I’ll burn your filthy muggle house down- with the filthy muggles in it!”

“Stop calling her a muggle, she’s your cousin and your bride-to-be,” growls his uncle.

“Over her dead body!”

“Leave my family alone!” I cry.

“Over their dead bodies!”

“If I may interrupt again,” interrupts Draco, who’d obviously been having a long think while the Gaunts - and I - raged in front of him. His is the only chest not heaving with passion. He flicks me a look before directly addressing Lord Gaunt. “On reflection, I have had a change of heart. Perhaps we can find common ground here...”

The Gaunts, plainly having forgot about him, are taken aback. They stop their squabbling, appearing ready to listen- and ready to resume squabbling if needed.

Draco smiles thinly. “I acknowledge my actions with regards to the betrothal haven’t been helpful, and I recognise how difficult it must be for such a proud and ancient family to divert from tradition...”

Lord Gaunt is proudly nodding.

“With that in mind,” continues Draco, drumming his fingers on his own crossed arm, “I am willing to pledge any Parselmouth resulting from our union to a Gaunt, on condition that there be a Parselmouth Gaunt of marriageable age and condition, of course.” He holds up his hand before anyone can interrupt him, which all of the Gaunts seem eager to do. “And I do insist on excluding my firstborn son from this arrangement, whether or not he turns out to be a Parselmouth. Although, if there happens to be an eligible Gaunt at the time he comes of age, we may explore the possibility of fostering... an affectionate relationship between the two.”

“That’s good enough for me,” Avery hastily declares. “Uncle?”

Lord Gaunt, torn, by all evidence, between avarice and pride, appears to waver.

“I don’t want to marry anyone!” I insist. I’m fed up to the back teeth with all this. “No one can make me marry anybody!”

Lord Gaunt revives and rounds on me. “Yes, we can, and we will, if the Minister has to march you down the aisle himself!” he growls. “You will marry into the Malfoys. It’s better for the family. And if you try spouting any more of that drivel about wanting to become a spinster or a muggle or what have you, I’ll have one of those Peruvian warlocks come and knock that airy-fairy nonsense out of your head.”

“But-”

"I said you're marrying Draco Malfoy. End of story. And don't give me that face. Gaunts never mope. And I thought I also said no slouching." He eyes me up with displeasure. "You'd better get yourself married and bonded quickly. You're too controversial for your own good." Swivelling back to speak to Draco, he plasters a smile back on his face. "Well, young Draco. Your worthy rival will have his heart broken, but such is life, eh?"

A smirk crosses Draco's face. "We must all go through love's trials," he answers delicately. "I take it that you are happy with my proposal?"

"Yes. Your love can rest in confidence now," oozes Lord Gaunt. "And I've instructed your young bride-to-be to make sure to do her duty and give you many Parselmouth heirs."

"We'll certainly do our best to satisfy," drawls Draco. His arm goes around my waist; his hand is full on my hip. "But one must be realistic. It's stronger through the male line, isn't it? And Hermione is only a female..."

"You can always keep trying until you succeed," suggests Lord Gaunt.

Draco nods. "Yes, there's always that." He looks around, appearing distracted. "If you'll excuse us..."

We are magnanimously motioned off. Draco steers me straight through the garden and out of the Gaunt residence. "So?" he says grimly. "Still think it's a good idea to push back the wedding date?"

I shake my head and take his arm, and we return to his home.

Chapter 23

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After I've been changed out of the weird ceremonial robes and into a normal dress by one of Draco's house-elves, I go to look for him. He's in the room with the indoor pool and the imposing waterfall feature, having a cocktail.

I sit on a sofa opposite him. "Draco," I say quietly.

He looks up. His mouth is in a line; he's still angry.

I chew at the inside of my lower lip and steel myself. "Could I talk to you about something?"

"About what?" he asks. His response is so cold that if it weren't for his exorbitantly attractive smell, I think I would be deathly afraid of him. As it is, I feel overwhelmed with the need to go and rub my face in his neck.

I fret my lip more nervously than ever. "About what you and the Gaunts discussed? It's just that you told me that your world operates seriously..."

"Yes?"

"Well, just now, what you said about- about Parselmouth heirs, about *me* having Parselmouth heirs..." My voice grows fainter as I speak, the effort it takes to articulate the words taxing me; I feel out of breath. "You don't seriously expect me to... to..."

"I said what I had to say to get us out of there," cuts in Draco curtly. "None of it is legally binding. Morfin knows that too, and he's going to chase me to put it in writing." His lip curls in a sneer. "But I'll just drag it out by proposing changes and making requests that will pull him into negotiations. I only have to last out one month. After the wedding, he'll lose his negotiating power, and I'll have the agreement so watered down that it won't matter."

"Okay, right, but... I mean... about *me* having kids... I'm not... Our agreement obviously doesn't extend that far?"

A faint smile ghosts the corners of his mouth. "What agreement do *we* have, sweetling?"

"Sorry." I shake my head. It's so, *so* hard to think clearly when he's smelling so good and making me so nervous. And that's on top of the distractingly aggressive sound of the waterfall. I don't know how he can feel relaxed in such an environment. "I meant to say

arrangement," I correct myself. "Our marriage. We never finished discussing the- our arranged marriage. I mean our marriage arrangement-"

His smile solidifies. "What else is there to discuss, pet?" he drawls.

"Well, I- that I-" I take a deep breath and say the rest in a rush. "I'm going back to Hogwarts on Monday, if that's okay?"

"You know you can't go back."

"But my h- my- that thing, it's over. Sebastien said."

The humour drops from his face; cold fury grips his features. "*Sebastien?*"

"And other people also!" I squeak, panicked. "Other people were there too, they said the same thing!"

He studies me suspiciously. "Even though you're not in heat, it's still too risky," he says. "And Seb probably only told you that to goad you into leaving my house before our wedding. He just wants the opportunity to catching you outside alone." He stands up so quickly that I flinch. "The bastard," he swears. He flicks his fingers. "Dobby, tell my cousin Seb that I want to see him. Now."

The house-elf bows and disappears.

Draco looks disapprovingly down on me. "It doesn't even matter whether you're in heat or not. I've already arranged for private tutors to come here as discussed. And just say *heat* normally, you sound like a kid otherwise."

"What about after the wedding?" I ask. My voice is so quiet and trembly that it would be a wonder if he does hear me. "Can I go to school after?"

He does hear me; his look of disapproval is deepening. "A married woman doesn't go to school, pet."

"Then..." My eyes well up with tears. "But..."

"Don't ask about this anymore," he says firmly. "We can revisit the issue after the wedding if you're still keen on it then, hm?"

I consider arguing. I decide against it; I give him a nod.

Looking pleased, he mirrors the tiny motion, then motions for a new drink. "What are you going to do the rest of the day?" he enquires. "Morley's sent over a catalogue of rare encyclopaedias that they've newly acquired. Would you like to browse it and see if there's anything you want?"

"Sure, I'll take a look if you don't mind," I say. I doubt there's anything in it I'll be able to afford, and I won't accept anything else from Draco- I don't know what sort of strings come attached to his gifts, but I'd love to look at the catalogue.

Dobby rematerialises. “Master Draco’s cousin Sebastien invites him to come to him in his parents’ house in Buckinghamshire where they be now.”

“Hiding with his parents?” comments Draco with an idle, amused shake of the head. “Tell him to expect me immediately. I’ll be more than happy to rebuke and shame him in front of anybody he likes.” He takes the catalogue from another house-elf. “Here you go, sweetling,” he says, passing it on to me. “If you see anything that takes your fancy, make a note, and our people will purchase them for you. I’m sure your tutors will be happy to explore your picks.”

“Thank you,” I say politely, following him as he stands.

“Walk me to the door, pet,” he says, running a light hand over his hair and pressing a smile down on me.

I nod, take his arm, and we walk through his house to the door that his half-troll guard is standing by.

“I’m not sure how long I’ll be,” he tells me as he hands off his glass to the attending house-elf. “I may stay there for dinner if my aunt and uncle invite me to.” He checks his watch. “If I’m not back by eight, the staff will make your dinner. You don’t mind eating by yourself?”

“I’ll be fine,” I smile, holding up the catalogue. “Plenty of entertainment.”

“You women and your shopping,” he laughs. “Don’t get so engrossed by it that you forget to eat, all right?”

“Yeah, okay.”

He leaves, and I bring the catalogue to the library that adjoins the living room with the waterfall. I like it here because it’s cosy, and, thanks to a privacy charm, quiet; I can’t hear the waterfall. I also really like that it has a crackling fire that’s always going no matter the time of the day. I sit on a plush wing chair in front of the fire, cross my legs, and flip open the cover of the catalogue.

The catalogue is interesting but short, the descriptions of the encyclopaedias brief, describing their origin and condition more so than their contents. I finish it very quickly, put it down, and gaze around the bookshelves, looking for something else to read.

Most of Draco’s books are on business and investing, so I pick one about the history of goblin metals trading.

As I’m settling back down on the chair, one of the little decorative art pieces nestled in among the books catches my eye.

It’s a ceramic salt and pepper set, abstractly daubed with colour.

Something drives me to go and pick them up. They’re heavy. I peer through the teeny holes on the top of one, then turn it over and shake it out onto my palm.

Glittering green powder trickles out of the holes, forming a small mound. It’s Floo powder.

I frown at it and wonder why I'm surprised to see Floo powder in Draco's home. He doesn't seem the type to travel or communicate by it- and probably doesn't, as evidenced by the unused weight of the ceramic shakers. I suppose guests might want them?

Guests like me.

I go to the fireplace and liberally pepper powder into it.

The fireplace is tall enough and wide enough to fit my whole body and more, and when the fire turns green, I step right in and say the only destination I can think of:

"Hogwarts!"

-

I get routed to the staff room which is empty except for Professor Sinistra who's reading a magazine.

I don't try to step out of the fire; I know that both Hogwarts and Draco's home are apparition-proof, and I know that that covers apparition by Floo. This is going to be a Floo-call only.

Professor Sinistra looks up from her magazine. "Ms. Granger!" she exclaims after a moment of appearing to search her memory in order to place my face. "Good afternoon! Or-" She glances at a grandfather clock. "-should I say good evening. Do you have an appointment with someone?"

I shake my head. "No, but do you know if Professor McGonagall's in her office now? I'd really like a word with her."

"Professor McGonagall's in a class. Can I take a message?"

"Oh, yes, please. I'd just like to ask if-"

A door opens. Professor Sinistra turns to look.

"Aurora, sorry to interrupt your meeting, but do you mind if I borrow your flying gyroscope for a few days?" asks the person who's opened the door. I can't see their face, but it sounds like Professor Dumbledore, the Headmaster.

Even better.

"Professor Dumbledore!" I call loudly.

He comes into view. "Ah, our star pupil," he twinkles at me over his half-moon glasses. "Congratulations on your betrothal. I'm sorry I missed it. I was speaking at a centaur conference. The centaurs of Great Britain hold an annual conference on oneiromancy

patterns, and I'm always invited to be guest speaker even though I tell them I never remember any of my dreams. But enough about me. How has life been treating the brightest young witch of her generation?"

"Fine," I reply quickly. "Professor, I have a question to ask you."

"My ears are all yours."

"Is there a way that I could come back to Hogwarts to stay?" I ask. "I know I'm an Omega, but Daphne and Cho are, too, and it seems safe for them..."

"Hogwarts is equipped to accommodate all sorts of students," answers Dumbledore serenely. "We do our utmost to ensure the safety of our students and our staff."

"With you around, there's nowhere safer to be than here," chips in Professor Sinistra.

I'm relieved. I'm so relieved. "This is good to hear," I laugh.

Professor Dumbledore nods sagely. "Are you thinking of sitting the NEWTs?"

"Oh, definitely."

He beams at me. "Excellent. You can re-enrol anytime you're ready to return."

"Re-enrol?" I frown. "Have I been *unenrolled*?"

"Your fiancé, Mr. Malfoy, sent us a letter requesting we take you off the student registry. However, the re-enrolment process is relatively- What's the matter?"

My face must have gone white.

And it grows even whiter as I hear someone click their tongue in my ear. And then I'm feeling a decisive hand press on the small of my back. I'm smelling the scent of Draco, intense and expensive and near at hand.

"I- I- I-" I stumble. "I think I have to go-"

"No, by all means, finish your conversation, sweetling," cuts in a cool voice. It's Draco, here. In the Floo call. With me.

I stare at him, at his blonde hair and silvery eyes, crisp and cold and coldly handsome through the pale green fire.

I stare at him and then at the two Professors. I open my mouth.

No sound comes out. I'm tongue-tied; unnerved.

"Ms. Granger needs to re-enrol," says Professor Sinistra helpfully. "She's accidentally been unenrolled."

“Ms. *Gaunt*,” corrects Draco, with only the slightest emphasis on the name, “will not be re-enrolling, as her un-enrolment was not an accident.” He’s making circles with his hand across my back as he speaks. “It’s my preference that she continue her studies at home and sit the NEWTs as a private candidate.”

“Draco,” says Professor Dumbledore gaily. “How are you, my lad?”

“Very well, and yourself, Headmaster? We missed you at the party,” replies Draco. “And Professor...? I don’t think we’ve met.”

“I’m Aurora,” says Professor Sinistra with a little wave. “Professor Sinistra to the students. I teach Astronomy fourth year to seventh year.”

“A pleasure,” says Draco. “I hope my fiancée has not been taking up too much of your valuable time. She can be quite inquisitive and...” His hand sweeps up to grasp my shivering shoulder. His lips brush my trembling temple. He laughs a cool laugh. “...independent minded...”

“Your young fiancée expressed her concerns about safety at the school,” says Dumbledore. “If these concerns come from you, Draco, my lad-”

“I assure you the concerns don’t come from me,” replies Draco. “I have the highest regard for you and for Hogwarts.”

“There’s no place safer than Hogwarts as long as Professor Dumbledore’s around,” pronounces Professor Sinistra, laughing for some reason.

“I was imprudent enough to make that boast once,” explains Dumbledore placidly, “and now my staff have made it their mission to put it to the test whenever they get the opportunity. I remember a few years ago- I think it was during your time, Professor Quirrel hired a troll to steal my toilet seat...”

A chuckle issues from the man beside me. “I remember that. We thought it was a joke for Halloween. Incidentally, it might amuse you to know, Professor, that that’s what inspired me to hire a half-troll as head of my personal security team. If a troll can steal Professor Dumbledore’s toilet seat, there’s not much it can’t do...”

“I got it back,” protests the Headmaster amid Professor Sinistra’s jolly laughter.

That they’re all amusing themselves with old stories and inside jokes while I have to watch my future be stolen from under my nose lights a fire under me.

“I want to return to Hogwarts,” I find enough of a voice to shakily and angrily say. “I want to return now! *Tonight!*” I burst out.

The laughter abruptly ends.

But before I can raise another hue and cry, Draco, his hand tightening around my shoulder, his voice lowering sternly, says, “*Quiet*, sweetling. No more talking.”

I shut my mouth, feeling suddenly tongue-tied again. And nervy, so terribly nervy. But I fix Professor Dumbledore with desperate, pleading eyes, hoping he'll do something to help me. *Please, help me. Please!*

"I apologise for my fiancée's behaviour," Draco says evenly; I feel his ire in the bite of his grip. "I hope you'll overlook it. It's been a very difficult time for her. She's still coming to terms with her new situation in life."

"If I may offer my humble opinion, it's likely that the sudden change in environment adds a great deal of stress," says Professor Dumbledore, transferring his gaze from me to Draco and speaking with mild concern. "Are you sure you wouldn't like her to stay at Hogwarts until the wedding, Draco?"

Draco appears to hesitate. "It's not a bad idea, but I'm afraid I've already engaged Professors Merrythought and Slughorn to tutor her, and it was very difficult convincing them to come out of retirement."

"Excellent choices," says the Headmaster approvingly. "Then, if you'll accept an old man's advice, give her some room to be herself. You'll both be better off if she's allowed to come to terms with the circumstances herself."

"I already indulge her caprices wherever I can," says Draco politely, "but I'll take your advice further to heart. Excuse us, Professors." And without a further word, he pulls me back out of the fireplace.

Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

11 25

Draco is regarding me.

He's regarding me glaring at him with black, silent anger.

"I know you can be very headstrong, Hermione," he says at last, "and it's an admirable trait, truly. Most see it as a flaw in a woman, but it's always been a quality prized by the Blacks and the Malfoys. And the Gaunts- I suppose it's why you took very well to their blood. Nevertheless," he gently admonishes, "you can't be allowed to run around embarrassing everyone associated with you with your outspoken, outlandish views. You can't think only about yourself anymore. That sort of selfish attitude has no place in my house."

I open my mouth to snap at him. I feel ill.

Half his mouth curves up. "You can talk now," he says, as if he's giving me permission to talk.

His amusement, his arrogance- his entire posture is angering me, and anger frees my tongue. "You told me I couldn't go back because I was in Heat," I snap heatedly. "That was a- That was an outright lie! Professor Dumbledore said I'm perfectly safe there. And other Omegas stay in school. Some of them are staying for the NEWTs!"

"I didn't lie, and I resent that accusation," replies Draco, his voice losing some of its cordiality. "None of those girls would have been allowed to continue attending classes if they were in Heat. They would have been sent home. You're welcome to clarify that point with Professor Dumbledore." He tilts his head at me, eyes narrowed. "I think you're projecting... *You're* the one lying... I know the Headmaster, he would not have given you the false hope that you could have stayed within school premises during a Heat. Why are you lying to me, Hermione?"

Put on the back foot, utterly taken aback by his counterattack, I falter for a bit. I bite into my lip. "He said that Hogwarts is safe for all students," I maintain.

"Yes- for students *at* school. Students in Heat do not stay at school."

I jut out my chin. "Then I should be able to return. I'm not in Heat! And other Omegas are there! And it- it doesn't matter anyway!" I flare up, in a sudden flash aware that I've been this whole time arguing from losing ground. I've been arguing with him as if I've already agreed that he's in charge and only needs to be convinced, as if I've conceded already

completely to him something, some elemental power. And if I have, if, somehow, through all those inchoate sessions of role play and sex play, a slow seepage of personal power, a relinquishment of my independence to him was effected, then *now's the time to take it back*. I have to take it back! "The decision to go back or not should be mine!" I exhort. "I will make all my decisions from now on!"

"Those Omegas are nothing like you," he replies with malignant calm. "They don't go against their families' and their fiancés' wishes. Well, hmm, no, there is that other one. The one poisoned by your propaganda. Ginevra Weasley. She's been withdrawn from school by her family. Just like you." He gives me a smile that would look pitying if it didn't also look patronising. "Problematic Omegas don't get to go to school, pet. They don't even get to leave the house. They get married off right away. It's the only way to cure them..."

I shake my head. I feel sick and sickened. "I don't want to be engaged to you anymore," I say, trying to sound as rational and collected as him, trying not to let my heart be heard in my voice. "I'm not comfortable with this arrangement anymore. I'll just deal with the Gaunts myself. I'm sorry- I'm sorry if I've led you on. I'm sorry if I've given you the impression that I- that I can be- that I can take on this role. I'll pay back- whatever you've spent- I'll be the fall guy, I'll tell everyone it's my fault-"

He's shaking his head, slowly, smiling and patronising.

I break off and stare at him. "But you don't want to marry me," I remind him pleadingly. "Remember? You said there was no one you wanted to marry..."

He breaks into laughter. "If I didn't want to marry you, I would not be doing any of this, Hermione. I very, very much want to marry you."

"But... I thought you were on my side," I whisper. My fingers tremble. "I thought you sympathised. I thought I could trust you- You know I don't want any of this. I thought- I thought you understood..."

"No, I don't understand," he confesses. "I like being an Alpha, and you should like being an Omega. You'll like being mine."

I tense up. "What do you mean by that? That I'll like being y-yours." My voice is shrill. My knees are trembling. I'm stress-sweating. "What do you mean by that?"

And of course, I know the answer, I can *see* the answer in the way he looks at me; but I need to hear it also, I need to have it confirmed.

"You tell me," he says. His smile is cold and ironic and mocking. "Are we still role playing, pet?"

"I..." I shake my head, consternated. "*What?* I don't understand..."

"Role playing is for good, sweet girls learning how to be good, sweet wives. Wayward Omegas get trained differently..." His smile is unwavering. "So... Are we role-playing?"

“No!” I jump hotly to my feet. “This is real, Draco! This isn’t a game, this is real, this is my *life*, Draco!”

Draco clicks his tongue. “There we go with that selfish attitude again.” He stands, straightens the lapels of his jacket, and reaches to take me with a decisive hand.

“Don’t touch me!” I snarl, flinching away. “*Don’t!*” I hope to seem as cold and aloof as he does, but my voice only sounds hurt and hot. “I’m done with this!”

But he seizes hold of my wrist, then summons two of his house-elves. “Dobby, convey to my aunt and uncle my regrets that Hermione and I will not be joining them for dinner after all. Kippy, let my parents know that I will need to borrow their dungeons for a few weeks.” He looks at me, one reproving eyebrow rising- as if he thinks I shouldn’t be surprised by what’s happening, should even have seen it coming. “Professor Dumbledore suggested I give you room to come to terms with the circumstances by yourself,” he supplies.

Then, he’s leaving the room; he’s tugging me along. “Stop!” I shriek, trying to resist him. We cross the threshold of the little library. The quiet crackle of the fire is replaced by the rushing sound of water.

“Draco, wait, wait!” I cry, stumbling along as he pulls me on. He’s pulling me through the living room. I know where he’s taking me. He’s taking me to his bedroom.

We don’t quite make it past the waterfall. “Wait!” I shriek, pulling away so abruptly, so forcefully, that I hear the ligaments in my wrist tear. A sharp pain shoots up my nerves, up my arm. I scream.

Draco releases me as if he’s been struck by lightning. “What have you done?” he asks sharply. “Let me have a look. Sit down.” He herds me towards one of the sofas by the pool’s edge. I sit, cradling my hand by the wrist. I begin to cry. Draco surveys my wrist, his face a grimace of sympathy. “It’s only a normal injury, I can heal it,” he says. “Hold out your wrist, keep it steady.”

He waves his wand over my wrist; I feel the torn muscles moving under my skin like worms.

“Tomorrow, I will send for our healer to take a look at it,” he promises. “And to re-do it if needed. I’m not a professional, I don’t know… But I think it’s all right. It was only a physical thing. It’s all right, pet.” He strokes my hair, as if I’m indeed a suffering pet. “Do you want a calming potion?”

I shake my head and twist my hands in my lap. The pain is gone but my tears are falling fast. Fast drops of salty tears.

He sighs, deeply, and flicks his fingers, causing another house-elf to appear. “Bring my fiancée a relaxant. In case you need it,” he explains. He puts his wand on one of the little oval nesting tables beside the sofa and sits down next to me. “Poor pet,” he says, reaching out for me. “Poor frightened pet. Look at you, you’re so frightened. Poor little sweetling. Calm down now. I need you to calm down.”

He's speaking lowly, touching my hair, petting my hair. He takes a curl of it, twists it in his fingers. Cool-scented fingers. I track his fingers with my nose, and he smiles while he consoles me. "Calm down. Hush now. Calm down." He repeats the phrase lowly until my crying eases, and my breathing eases, and I find myself leaning back into the pillow wall of the sofa.

"Poor stubborn girl," murmurs Draco, a tone of pleasure in his voice. He's closer to me than before; his face is inches from mine, his hands hovering over me, stroking my hair. "What a stubborn girl you are. See what happens when you don't listen to me?"

I'm not even really listening to him now. I have my nose in his wrist, in his distracting drug-like scent. Why does he smell so nice? And especially *why* does he seem to smell so very, very nice whenever I'm scared? My God, if I could only bottle it up...

A thought comes to me then; the memory of a conversation, with Sebastien, in the apothecary. He was buying a bottle of Omega scent...

My mind works to work through the sedative haze of Draco's scent. Draco's scent... I wrench my nose from his wrist and draw back. "Why do you smell so nice?" I ask uneasily, again, feeling as if I already know the answer. "It can't just be because you're an Alpha. Sebastien doesn't smell like this. Why do you?"

"I smell nice to you because you're attracted to me, pet," he explains. "It's only natural." His voice is the kind of voice one uses when explaining something that should be common knowledge. But that undercurrent of pleasure still runs through it.

My lips quiver. "No. It's not natural. You did something," I say adamantly. I twist my hands some more. Stare at the engagement ring. "It's this ring, isn't it?" I say. I'm breaking down again, breaking into swelling sobs. "Or the potions... You... You did something... to me... You made me... able... to smell... only you... You've been... tricking me... lying to me..."

"I was helping you," he says calmly. "This is how Alphas help Omegas. If you didn't want my help, why did you come to me?"

"I didn't come to you to be your Omega!" I cry. I'm aghast, dismayed. "I thought... You were interested in SLOW... You seemed... You agreed with me..."

He shakes his head, expositing. "I told you it was never going to work. Alphas and Omegas procreate together. Your campaign as good as asked us to participate in our own extinction. No one was going to take you seriously. No one was going to help you achieve that. The only kind of help a lost, immature Omega needs is help accepting her place."

"Oh, God," I gasp, putting my hands on my head and staring blankly ahead of me. "How could I have been so stupid? How could I ever have believed you wanted to help me?"

"I do want to help you," persists Draco gently; his gentleness like a twisting blade. "This is the only real way to help you."

A quiet crack breaks through the uniform sound of water. It's Dobby, bowing as soon as he makes his appearance. "Master Draco's parents be asking when and what for Master Draco be needing the dungeons as they be using it for keeping pet demiguise and be needing time to transfer demiguise to another place."

"Pet demiguise?" mutters Draco, raising a brow. "When did they get them?" He shakes his head as if he finds the idea of his parents keeping demiguise in their dungeons silly and amusing. "I really wanted their dungeons by tomorrow," he muses. "Do you think you could stay with my parents' pets, pet?"

"Are you serious?" I stammer.

"I have to be," he says sadly. "As you don't want to role play anymore- I'm not convinced it was really helping you anyway... There's no harm in following the Headmaster's suggestion. You do seem to respect his authority, so..." He shrugs. "We can try this route. Don't worry about the demiguise. Demiguise keep to themselves, and there's plenty of room..."

"No, I- Draco-" My voice strains and catches in my throat. My tongue is thick. "I- I want to role play..."

His brow rises in question. He runs me down with his eye, fingers sliding thoughtfully across his chin. "I don't know... You keep saying you'll be a good Omega, but you never are. I don't like having to repeat this, you know. It's not good for either of us. I think I haven't done us both any favours, letting your stubborn streak to fester..."

"I'll be good now, I'll be good!" I stammer wildly and timidly at his impassive face before bursting into tears. "Please don't put me in the dungeons!"

He sighs. "All right. If you insist. We can try again. But this will be our last try, so don't cry later when you slip back to your old ways and I have to take the kid gloves off, hmm, pet?"

I nod, roughly rubbing the tears off my eyes with the back of my wrists.

Dismissing his house-elf, he gestures at me. "Carry on then. Role play away."

I nod again. Steel myself. Oh, God. Okay. You can do this.

I move towards him and give him a kiss, on the mouth. "I'm sorry I asked to go back to Hogwarts," I tremor at him. "I'm especially sorry I did it behind your back and embarrassed everybody associated with me. That was selfish of me. It won't happen again."

"Mm." His manner eases a little; he leans his arm against the arm of the sofa and looks sideways at me. "I accept your apology, sweetling. I know you're still learning."

I sit back on my heels, my legs folded underneath me. "What should I do now?" I temporise, holding to nervous anticipation. "What do you want me to do?"

"Whatever it is you think good Omegas do..."

I suppress a shiver, lean in again, and kiss him. The air around him still feels frigid and kissing him while he has his side turned to me is awkward, but I ply his stern mouth with kisses- as if he's my wronged and abused lover that I'm trying to coax back into affection. I kiss him until his head turns to me, his lips soften and part, and he returns my kisses.

I can't suppress the next shiver that runs through my body. A sob is welling up through me; I hold my breath and endure as much open-mouthed kissing as I can before drawing back, my hands in my lap.

"You're still on edge, sweetling," murmurs Draco, his hand worming under the satiny fabric of my dress in a confident, overfamiliar manner. He strokes the top of my thighs. Kneads it. "I can feel how tense you are. Take the relaxant."

I tense up even more. My muscles quiver under Draco's hand; his brow goes up. "Don't want the potion?" he surmises, voice resonating with sympathy. "Poor suspicious pet. You don't have to take the potion if you don't want to. You always have the option of taking in my scent. I know you were retaining your breath when you were kissing me, I could feel it. Silly, stubborn girl. I'm so close to changing my mind about letting you have a chance with this role playing... It's a waste of time."

"No, I... I didn't know what I was doing, I- I'm so nervous," I cry, wringing my hands. "I'm intimidated by you. You're so intimidating!"

"That's because you're overthinking it," he chides. "Stop thinking. You just have to follow your instincts. Your body knows what it wants and needs. You shouldn't fight it. You'll only hurt and confuse yourself. Come, sit on my lap."

I clamber awkwardly on him, the position forcing me to straddle him. I'm sitting with my knees hugging his hips.

I'm sitting on his erection.

Swallowing another bubble of fear, I rest my head against his shoulder, pressed into place by his guiding touch. My face is in his neck. I breathe.

"That's it," he hums as his scent envelops me. His pulse beats slowly under my lips, under my wandering nose. "Take in my scent. I want you relaxed."

I tense again. Breathe. Relax again.

My God, he smells so mind-meltingly good, and I think I must say that out loud, because he chuckles with dark pleasure.

It's not a harsh or mean laugh, but immediately I feel self-conscious and horrified. I begin to curl back, cringing.

"No," he growls, thrusting his hips subtly up, reminding me of his rampant desire. "I'm not laughing at you, sweet girl..." he rumbles into my ear, "I'm happy you like me so much..."

He nuzzles my hair, my neck, rubbing his scent onto my skin, and I can feel my pussy drooling. It's really embarrassing how much and how easily he can turn me on.

"Do I still intimidate you, pet?" he murmurs the question. His fingers sink into the flesh of my thighs, dig into my hips. He's encouraging me to grind myself against him, against his rock-hard erection. "Or are you happy I like you too?"

"I'm happy you like me," I whisper reluctantly.

His mouth broadens in a smirk. "Show me."

I smile at him and kiss him again, but he shakes his head and lies back into the soft back of the sofa. "No."

I try to hide my apprehension. But I'm in dread. "How do you want me to show you then, Draco?" I ask.

His smile- and voice is firm. "Lean back, hike up that skirt, and show me that pretty pussy."

I think I might faint in the process, but I lean slowly away from him and gather up bunches of my dress in my hands. Bunches of thin liquid-y silk. I gather and gather, as if I must have them all in my hands before I can proceed further.

Draco runs out of patience for my procrastinating. He slips his thumbs under the hem of the dress and begins to drag it up himself. At the top of my thighs, at my underwear, he stops. "Show me your pussy, pet. Now."

I hold my dress with one hand. With the other I pull my wet, sticky knickers to the side to show him my pussy. There's no question it's wet and oozing. My face is burning.

He lets out a deep groan and skims his fingers gently, almost reverently across my pussy before sliding them through my wet folds. "Spread your legs wider, pet," he moans. "Show me how much you want me."

Feeling as if I've no more dignity to part with, I do as bid. Another groan of pleasure from him. He worms one, two fingers into my channel. "There," he whispers. His breathing has changed; it's heavy with lust. He pumps two- now three fingers in and out of my pussy. The sounds come slick and heavy as our mixed breathing.

He pulls his fingers out of me; I gasp.

"There," whispers Draco again. He plays with my clit with his middle finger, pressing it and moving it like it's an evasive pearl in an oyster. To my shame, my pussy rewards him with more liquid. "I like to see my wife's pretty pussy nice and wet and ready for me," he sighs.

I am wet- I'm so wet, his fingers are dripping with my liquid arousal. I even feel the viscosity of it on my inner thighs.

He looks up at me, at my face, as he plays with my clit and my juices, his fingers slipping wetly around. "What a mess you're making down here, pet," he chuckles. He's gliding his

fingers around my clit, moving around it in slow swirls, making me sigh and shiver and flush with embarrassment. More arousal fluids coat his fingers; I can smell my own sweet musk. “Look down. Look at my trousers, look what you’ve done to them.”

I don’t want to look, but I do.

“You see all the mess you created, don’t you?”

I nod. Tiny, shame-filled nod.

“I can’t keep wearing these then, can I?” He flexes upwards to ground his soaked, covered erection into my spread slit, rubbing the material roughly against my sensitive clit. “Remove them for me, pet.”

My fingers shake as I undo his belt, work the flat round button on the flap of his trousers through its narrow buttonhole, and unzip the fly.

I’m so familiar with his prick by now that the sight of it rising like a pole from between his thighs almost relieves me.

There’s no surprises here.

Draco grips his tool, sliding his hand up the shaft to the dome head. A bead of clear fluid appears out of the little slit.

“Taste it.”

I hesitate only a moment, then ask, “How do you want me to taste it, Draco?”

He lifts me off him, his hands under my arms. “On your knees.”

With great relief, I let my dress slip back down over my hips and swing my legs over his. I get down on the floor, kneeling between his spread knees.

“Lick it.”

I lean forward, open my mouth, and swipe the fluid with the tip of my tongue.

“Do you like it?”

“Yes, Draco,” I whisper miserably.

“You’re not about to cry again, are you?” he asks, amused.

I shake my head no.

“Good. Take it in your hand.”

I grip him softly, feeling the warm rigid flesh twitch slightly in my hand.

“Now take it in your mouth.”

Reluctantly I rise up and bend over his prick. I put my mouth around the soft, fleshy dome, my tongue automatically working to wet it.

Draco groans. "Look at me."

His eyes are simmering with arousal. The half-light strikes chinks of argent off his eyes. I want to hate how handsome he is, but my pussy is as wet as ever, and throbbing.

"This is how you will apologise to me from now on when you disappoint me," he states.
"Nod to show that you understand."

I nod with the head of his prick still filling my mouth.

A self-satisfied smile unfurls across his face. He laces one hand in my hair and thrusts several inches of his shaft firmly into my mouth, responding to my startled whine with a husky groan. "Ohh, pet..."

He fucks slowly into my mouth, feeding me inch after another inch until I have at least half his cock in my mouth and the plump tip of it is smearing the back of my throat with his arousal fluids.

"Do you like being an Omega yet, pet?" he asks.

I nod.

He chuckles. "You don't have to lie."

I don't know how to respond. All my focus is on breathing through my nose. Breathing his incredible scent. My mouth is full of his cock. I nod again, best as I can.

"Don't lie this time, pet," he says, voice dropping deliciously in tone. "Nod for yes, shake your head for no. Do you like being an Omega yet?"

I shake my head.

His mouth curves to one side. With both his hands holding my head firm, he thrusts his cock down my throat, groaning as I gag and constrict around it.

He thrusts in again, then pulls out, until only the head of his cock, slimy with my spit, rests in my mouth. "But you're going to learn to like it, aren't you?" he says. His voice is a velvety purr. "Keep sucking my cock. Show me how much you want to be my very good Omega."

I suckle on the warm, flared crown of his prick then slide my lips slowly up and down his hard shaft.

"You're such a quick study, pet," he gasps. "I knew you were perfect for me. Take it deep now. Take it—"

I let my head sink down on his pole.

He grunts. His fingers rake my hair. “I’m going to come,” he hisses, thrusting hard and fast into my numbing mouth. “Do you want me to come in your mouth, pet? Answer me.”

My answer is muffled by his cock in my throat.

Draco throws his head back, his face tensing, his eyes gleaming down at me. His grip on my head is almost painful. He pumps his prick fast and furiously, hips flexing, until, with a loud, tortured groan, he begins to spurt thick, salty come in my mouth.

I gag and try to pull off him, but he holds me tight. His cock throbs and twitches for a minute, filling my mouth up with come. Breathing hard through my nose, I can only whine to let him know my discomfort.

A little sigh leaves him. He relaxes by degrees then slides his cock gently in and out of my mouth a few times. “Just keep it there,” he murmurs, falling back and shutting his eyes.

I think about spitting everything out. I think about how I could be alone in his parents’ house right now, without his cock and come marinating in my mouth. And I think about the wand I have in the guestroom here, on the bedside table.

I want my wand.

I kneel there, trying not to dwell on the come in my mouth, and the taste and texture of it. Oh, God. I need to spit it out.

After some minutes, Draco rouses. He pets my hair fondly and gazes down at me, at his dick half-buried in my mouth.

It’s still very hard.

I make a distressed, pleading sound.

“You still have my come in there?” he asks, a thread of laughter in his voice. He slides his dick out of my mouth with a pop. “Open your mouth. Show it to me.”

I hinge open my mouth.

“Oh, pet. You have to swallow all that.”

I move my head in distress. I can’t. I don’t think I can physically bring myself to swallow it.

His thumb skims my cheek. His voice is velvet coating steel. “Swallow it now, sweetling.”

Choking back a sob, I press my lips tight, gagging and shuddering a few times as I attempt to swallow what’s in my mouth.

Finally, I manage it.

“Let me see,” drawls Draco. “Open your mouth.”

I suppress one final impulse to gag and open my mouth.

“What a good girl,” he sighs. His eyes are hooded. His cock, in front of my face, is at full mast. “I like it when you’re good. Did you like it? Did you like eating my come?”

“Yes, Draco...”

“Open your mouth. Tongue out.”

He brings his cock to my mouth. A mixture of salty-sweet come and new arousal is rubbed onto my tongue.

“Don’t cry, sweetling,” he says as I gaze at him through tear-blurred eyes. “Be happy. I love you very much, and I’m going to take good care of you.” He gestures for me to rise. “Come. Sit back on my lap.”

I climb on him, wiping my eyes.

“Was sucking my cock a little too overwhelming for you?” he asks, gently tucking my hair behind my ear. “Does my little sweetling want a minute to recover?”

I give him a trembling nod.

“I thought so,” he says empathetically. “Would you like the calming potion now?”

I hesitate. I want it- if only to change the taste in my mouth, but I can’t risk it. “I’ll be all right, thanks,” I mumble.

“I know you will,” he hums, gazing satedly at me. His mood seems tranquil now, and if not for his hard dick sticking out like a red flag in between our bodies, I might feel lulled into a false sense of safety. “Why are you sitting like that?” he suddenly demands with a low, full chuckle. “Come closer. Closer.”

Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

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

I scoot forwards on his lap until I feel the tension of his dick pressing against my stomach through the light fabric of my dress.

“It makes me happy when you listen to me, Hermione,” he says as he runs his hand unhurriedly up my arm. He reaches the top of my shoulder. Fingers the thin strap of my dress. “And it will make me even happier if you *want* to listen to me. But we can continue to work on that...”

He pushes the strap off my shoulder with one finger. The other strap is next to fall. The top part of my dress slips fluidly down to my waist. He caresses my bared breasts, feeling them with his whole hands. “Are you still wet for me, pet?”

“Yes,” I mumble.

“Oh, good,” he sighs. He teases my nipples with the pad of his finger, one by one. “I’m still hard for you also.”

I try to suppress my reactions as he touches me, try to suppress feeling, but I can’t, and when he pinches one nipple, I jerk and roll my hips forward.

The coital motion- unintended though it is, is giving Draco ideas.

He grabs handfuls of my dress and pulls it impatiently up and off my body; he’s impatient to feel my bare pussy on his dick.

There’s still my underwear to contend with.

“Let me see that pussy again, sweetling,” breathes Draco.

I tilt my hips away and shift the lacy material to one side.

“Oh,” he moans, his voice ragged; eaten by lust. He brings the heel of his palm right to my pussy, right to my sensitive little pearl, and presses.

He's grinding his hand into my clit in undulating movements. Each little press, each rotation sends irresistible pleasure to sweep away my defiance. I'm moaning for him and I can't stop it. It feels so good. I'm pressing into the pressure, pressing into the pleasure-

His hand leaves my pussy and goes to my hip, pulling me forward. With glazed eyes, I look down and watch the gap between us, between our genitals, close.

My pussy touches the shaft of his dick.

He keeps pressing me forward- until my exposed clit rubs firmly up against the hard column of his dick and my pussy lips are parted around it. I quiver- with revulsion as much as with lust.

“Do you like that, pet?” asks Draco, licking his lips. His hands are firm on my bottom, guiding me into the smooth coital motion. The whole of my sex slides up and then down his shaft, my clit dragging over his smooth, rigid length. Another whimpering moan escapes me.

Draco echoes my moan. His fingers go back to caressing my nipples. “Does that feel good? Does my cock make you feel good?”

“Yes, Draco...” I whisper, defeated.

“Oh, pet,” he sighs. “I love you so much. Do you love me?”

I can barely get out another ‘yes, *Draco*’.

“Show me how much you love me.”

My stomach flutters nervously. “How do you want me to show you, Draco?”

He looks down to where our genitals are wetly kissing, chin jerking indicatively. He smirks.

I look.

My pussy is hugging the underside of his cock, spread around it. I’m still rolling my hips continuously, and I know I’d be lying to myself if I say I’m only doing it to satisfy him. His cock glistens with my arousal. It’s a lewd sight.

A lewder sight still is that of my fingers holding my knickers to the side while I hump him as if I’m some wonton sex-hungry whore that couldn’t even wait to undress properly.

Draco’s smile is wide and languid and lust-filled. “I want you to come on my cock while you tell me you love me.”

“You mean... How?” I ask. I look down again. Rub my clit against his hard cock. “Like this, you mean?” I gasp. I think I could come from this. Yeah, I could definitely come from this.

“That’s up to you, sweetling,” says Draco sweetly. “You have my permission to come like that if you want. As long as you’re telling me that you love me.”

I’m not too far gone to work out that I can’t avoid having sex with him and that, on top of humiliating me, humping his dick to orgasm will only delay the inevitable. So, under his smug grey gaze, I begin to lift myself up all the way, my hands going to my underwear.

“No, keep them on,” says Draco as I fumble with the lacy material.

“Oh, okay,” I say and lower myself again, this time positioning my sex right over his standing dick.

I peer down, trying to gauge where I am as I keep lowering my hips.

The head of his dick touches my pussy.

I take a deep breath. Push down.

His cockhead jams up against my body. It's not quite at the right place.

Frowning, I tilt my hips slightly forward. I think my entrance is just-

“Ohh...” Draco groans as a few inches of his dick slides smoothly in.

I gasp with surprise and try to spring upwards, alarmed by the sudden pain and pressure; but Draco, perhaps anticipating that I would chicken out and try to get away, grabs me by the waist and slams me straight down onto his hot hard length.

I cry out and fall forward, putting my hands flat on his pectorals for support.

His dick is buried between my legs.

“Ahh...” I moan and shudder as I come to terms with the feeling of being stuffed full. I can feel his dick all the way up against the back of my pussy.

“That’s it,” smiles Draco, lazy, like the cat that’s got the cream.

“Ahh...” I am moaning weakly, unresisting as Draco moves his hips, fucking into me. “Ahh, oh God, ah, it’s too... it’s too much...”

Draco pumps out a few more strokes, his hands gripping my hips.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I force myself to keep still as he gets himself well acquainted with my cervix. I can’t come from this- it’s too uncomfortable; but i know he can; he’s done it before.

Draco presses his prick all the way in me, rotating his pelvis as if he’s actually screwing his tool into my tender flesh, then holds himself right there, holding himself tense while I have my breath held in anticipation. Is he actually going to-?

“Come on my dick, sweetling,” he purrs. His eyes gleam liquid silver. He mashes his cock against my womb- as if that might help. “Show me how much you love me. Come on my cock and tell me how much you love me.”

Grimacing, I push myself up and rise on my knees, rising a few inches off his dick.

The pressure in my belly eases- until I have to sit back down on him.

Our pelvises touch, and even though I have his dick in me, somehow that feeling- his warm skin brushing against my inner thighs, is more repulsive. I hate it.

I continue to ride him, trying not to sit all the way down so that I touch as little of him as possible.

I won't be able to come anymore.

But I pump my hips complaisantly up and down his shaft.

Draco's hands wander leisurely across my body. It doesn't look like he's going to orgasm anytime soon either. Not that I want him to except so I can get this over with, but it has me wondering how I can fake one. I think I'll just moan a lot and tell him I love him?

I shudder inwardly and rebel at the thought of having to say that I love him.

And suddenly, I'm hearing my impulsive self say, "Draco..."

"Mm?" he responds, sounding distracted; he's busy playing with my breasts.

"You want a loving wife, right?" I ask as I sink down on his cock again. "Your... Your ex-girlfriend, Arabella... She really loves you..."

I know there's almost zero chance he'll be interested, but I'll try all avenues. "She... She... I guess she's not an Omega, but there are those perfumes she can wear..."

He laughs as he twirls one finger around my heaving bellybutton. "You've got my cock deep in your guts and you're talking to me about my ex?"

"She really loves you," I say pleadingly. "She tried to kill herself after she heard you were getting married..."

"That's not my problem."

"Aren't you- Oh, ah, concerned about her?" I continue trying, grunting and gasping through my words as he grasps my hips and takes control of the pace, his hands moving me up and down. "I mean, even if someone I- Ah, God- Oh God- Ahh..."

It feels like he's fucking my brains out of me; I can barely breathe properly, let alone think properly.

"What was it you were saying, sweetling?" asks Draco, slowing his furious pumping of his dick into my pussy to smile smugly at me.

"I- Unghh-" I try to catch my breath. "I-" What *was* I saying? Oh- His ex. "Even if someone I dated only for a little while, like- like Viktor," I say, "like if I found out he had tried to kill himself because of me-"

Anger rips through his face. "Viktor? Still thinking of another man?"

"What?" I flinch. "No, I'm just trying to give an example-"

His hand shoots out, going to my throat, his fingers firmly on my pulse. "Quiet."

I fall quiet.

“Did I say to stop moving?”

My lips trembling, I resume sliding my pussy up and down his cock.

“Stubborn, selfish girl...” mutters Draco. “You’d really go kicking and screaming down the aisle if I don’t prevent it, hm?”

Suddenly, he heaves me off him. He pulls off his jacket, and steps out of his trousers as he pushes me back down into the sofa, lying me along its wide length. He puts a knee on the sofa, then another, making space for himself between my thighs by knocking my knees apart.

He takes his dick in hand. Touches it to my pussy. “Look at me while you tell me you love me.”

I part my lips and have to swallow before I can speak. “I love you...”

His eyes run up my body to lock onto mine. His gaze is stern and cold. “You love who? Say my name.”

“I love you, Draco.”

“Correct,” he says. His cock presses into my entrance. “You love me.”

I flinch and inhale a sharp breath as he makes a smooth slide into my body, his entry aided by my wetness.

He locks eyes with me again. “Did I tell you to stop saying it?”

I shake my head. “I love you, Draco.”

“Mhm.” He pulls the scant material of my underwear further to one side as if that’s getting in the way of his stuffing his prick into my compliant pussy.

“I love you, Draco, I love you, Draco,” I bleat at him while he fits every inch of his cock he can get in me.

His pelvis meets mine. My splayed legs are in the air.

His thumb goes to circle my clit. Tight little circles.

“This feels good, doesn’t it? Am I making you feel good?” he asks coaxingly. He’s twirling his thumb attentively around my clit and thrusting faintly into my depths as I whimper and moan for him. “You’re really wet, pet. I think you like this.”

“Ohh,” I groan, tensing my lower body. “I- ungh- love you, Draco.”

“Mm, I’m sure you do. You’re so wet. I think you want to come on my cock already. Does my little sweetling want me to let her come?”

I reply with another groan and undulate my hips, seeking that shameful release. He really knows how to... press my button.

"You know how this works," says Draco mercilessly. "You'll have to tell me what you want if you want me to give it to you."

"Please," I whisper, swallowing shame and resentment- and lungfuls of his seductive scent. "Please, can I- can you let me come, Draco, please?"

His head cocks to one side. "Is that the only thing you want? Does my sweet, loving wife only think about her own pleasure all the time? I don't think so. If you want to come, you have to come with me." He manipulates my clit with his fingers, his hips sending his dick into me in gentle thrusts. "I want us to come together."

I feel a rush of anxiety. What if he also lied about not being able to get me pregnant right now?

His smile is suggestive, as if he knows exactly what sort of worries are running through my head. "Ask me to come in you, pet," he purrs.

My clit throbs under his attentive fingers. I buck my hips. "Ungh- God- Please-"

"Ask me."

I shake my head. "Please come in me."

"What else."

"I love you, Draco," I whimper, choking on sudden tears. I'm crying, and I don't want to be crying. I don't want him to come in me. I don't think I want to come at all. I don't want to come with him. "Please come in me. I love you, Draco."

He bends over me, bringing his lips to my mouth and his scent directly to my nose. His dick is full-hilted; his pelvis grounds into my clit.

"Keep saying it until I come, all right, pet?" He instructs huskily. "Don't cry anymore. Good girl."

He begins to really fuck me. Long, hard and deliberate strokes. I lurch at each thrust and suck in air, swallowing his incredible scent.

It's narcotic and so, so sexy, that even though I know it's messing with my head, I can't resist it. I'm nuzzling my nose under his jaw, then kissing him back, running my hands up and down his back. "I love you Draco," I gasp. Our hips meet with another smack. "Ah! Please come in me."

"There's a good girl," he groans. "I like it much better when you're good like this. You have to be good in bed. You can be as stubborn as you want anywhere else, about anything else, but not in bed with me. You always have to be good in bed, understand?"

I bite my lip and nod. “I love you, Draco. Please come in me.”

His pace picks up speed, alternating in deep and shallow strokes. “I’m going to fill you up,” he rasps, in between hard kisses. “Give you all my come. Get my pretty little wife pregnant.”

I squirm. Fear uncoils alongside the pleasure in my belly. But I can’t seem to stop telling him to come in me. “Please come in me!” I beg. “Please- ungh- come in me!”

Oh, God! Why can’t I seem to stop saying it! What is wrong with me?

My chest heaves with a panic that not even his powerfully calming scent can fully extinguish. There is something wrong with me!

Draco doesn’t seem to register my state of mind even as I squeeze his shoulders in desperate alarm. He plunges his tongue into my mouth with a groan. His pace is frenzied.

A sensation I recognise begins to build in my lower abdomen. It’s an impending orgasm.

I tense my body, abandoning all imperative but the primal one. I need to come. I’m going to come.

“I love you,” I gasp as he slams into me one last time and it hits me. I’m coming around his thick twitching cock, coming with him as he spills his ejaculate deep in me.

The orgasm pulls the tension- and the resistance out of me. I writhe, gasping, until the shockwaves of bliss subside, and I feel boneless and drained.

Draco gives me a kiss on the lips, and on the temple, and begins to pull out of my body.

I wince at the sensation and stare dully at his red, swollen prick. A milky drop of semen clings to the tip of it.

He bends for another kiss. “That was nice, wasn’t it?”

I pull myself together and smile at him. “Yes, Draco...”

“Do you think you like being my Omega now, sweetling?”

“Yes, Draco...”

“Good.” He pulls my underwear over my sex, taking gentle care to position it nicely so the elastic is not twisted. “That’s what I like to hear.”

I move my head to the side. My skin feels damp with perspiration. The velvet of the sofa is sticking to my back.

“It’s been a long day,” notes Draco, dressing. “For the both of us...” His gaze sweeps across my body again, his lips curling up. “I’m hungry. What shall we have for dinner? What would you like, pet?”

“Anything you like...”

“Japanese, then, I think.” He picks my dress up from the floor. “Do you need help dressing, sweetling?”

I shake my head and get shakily up, squeezing my internal muscles tight to prevent any of his ejaculate from spilling out and potentially getting me in trouble.

Draco watches me get dressed and get carefully to my feet. “Your dress is crumpled. Here, let me help,” he says, reaching for his wand. He begins to smooth the material, then stops.
“Hmm, it’s stained... I think we may as well take this as a sign to wash up and change for dinner...”

He walks me to the guestroom. “Let’s eat on the balcony tonight, all right? I’ll meet you there in half an hour.”

I nod, kiss him, and go into the room, making with wildly thumping heart for the nightstand on the far side of the bed as soon as the door is closed.

The nightstand that’s got my wand on it.

I’m prepared to find that it’s missing, prepared to feel the entire range of fear and anger when I discover it missing, but it’s there, in between the lamp and a big jar of chocolate truffles.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

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The relief is a rush of blood through the head. Slowing my steps, feeling quite dizzy with disbelief, I go to pick it up.

To my annoyance, almost as soon as I touch it, I'm intruded on by two house-elves.

"Can Pipsy helps Miss Gaunt?" chirps one of them as I nervously drop the wand on the floor.

"Can Mipsy helps Miss Gaunt?" the other pipes in.

"No, thank you," I tell them. I need them to go away.

But they don't go away. "Master Draco says to help you," they squeak.

I grit my teeth in frustration and squeeze my thighs together as I feel Draco's ejaculate begin to run out of me and my underwear become thick and soggy. "Could you run the shower then, please," I say.

One of them scurries off to the bathroom while the other waits for me to follow. I nudge the wand under the nightstand with my toes before I go.

-

I'm still thinking about my wand as I watch Draco prepare to leave for work the next morning.

He's leafing through a thick folder of documents. "What will you do today, pet?" he enquires as he rifles through the parchment.

"I'm not sure. Probably read something," I say.

The folder of documents passes his inspection. He hands it to his house-elf to insert into his briefcase, then walks to the mirror to make one final check of his appearance. "What will you read?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe a biography or a-"

"No," he says, his grey eyes flicking to mine, heart-stopping even through the medium of the mirror.

I look at him doubtfully. "O-kay?"

"I don't think you should spend any more time on books," he says pleasantly. "Reading takes you out of reality, I've noticed that. It's not a healthy pastime for you, sweetling. It's escapism. It wouldn't surprise me if that's the reason why you're so inward-looking and so difficult to bring to reason sometimes. You think you're living in a different world than you really are."

"Okay..."

"Don't be sad, pet. It won't be forever. I'll let you continue reading and studying after the wedding- after we're bonded. But until then, let's err on the side of caution, all right? Speaking of caution, I've sent for our healer. He should be here in a few minutes. I think your wrist is fine, but there's no harm getting it looked at again."

"Okay. Thank you..."

He smiles at me through the mirror, then turns and takes my hand to kiss my fingers. "I want you to feel well taken care of."

I can't think of what to say to this, so it's lucky that the healer chooses that moment to make his arrival.

He exchanges greetings with Draco, puts his big healer's bag down, then promptly comes to look at my wrist. "No magic involved?" he asks, his question directed at Draco.

"None," replies Draco. "She overexerted herself. Do you mind if I make a move? I've got a nine a.m. meeting. I'll see you for dinner, all right, pet?"

I nod.

He gives me a quick peck on the cheek. "Let the house-elves know if you need anything. Rowan will stay here and make sure you're kept safe." He makes a quick sign to the guard. "Enjoy your day, sweetling."

"Thank you. You too," I reply, anxious for him to be gone. "Have a nice day."

He leaves and I let the healer continue to press around my hand and arm and cast diagnostics.

"It's perfectly fine," he concludes. "Draco applied the correct spell. Nothing else needs to be done."

I'm unsurprised by the diagnosis. "Oh? Good," I say. "Great. That's good to know. Oh! Actually, while you're here..." I move Draco's ring around and scratch at my skin. "I think my ring makes my finger itch..."

"Hmm... This is a blood ring, so it shouldn't cause any kind of reaction." He looks at the fingers I'm zealously scratching. "Are you using a new type of soap? Certain soap ingredients can cause sensitivity for Omegas... Scylla's tooth, for instance..."

"No. No new soap. It *must* be the ring. The itching started a few hours after I put it on, and it really is so itchy," I plead. "Would you mind—" I flash the door a nervous look and lower my voice. "-removing it just for a few minutes? So I can let the skin breathe?"

He looks at me. "I can't remove it. You'll have to ask Draco. Have you told him about the discomfort?"

"No. I don't want to- to offend him. It's an heirloom, and he chose it himself, so it's- it's a very delicate matter. Is he the only one that can take it off me?"

The healer frowns. "I'm not familiar with the ring, so I can't say. But I'll mention the itching and discomfort to him." He takes out a writing pad and begins to make a note on it.

I quickly stop him. "Actually, if there's nothing to be done about the ring, then please don't mention anything to him. I'll just live with it. No need to bother Draco about it."

He lifts his quill. "If you're sure..."

"Yes. It's just itchy, and I was just a little concerned... For example, what if there's an emergency and I need to get it off, and Draco isn't here?"

"You can discuss that with him, but I think that shouldn't be an issue," says the healer, waving his hand dismissively. "Your staff will be able to contact Draco or one of us."

"So... you *can* remove it..."

"We'd try," he says wryly. "My advice is stop worrying about it. I'll give you an anti-itch potion you can take if it continues to bother you."

"Thanks very much."

"Of course, of course." He makes another note on his parchment and summons a vial from his bag. "One teaspoon as and when necessary. I'd better write the instructions on the label," he mutters, picking up a quill. "Just to be thorough..." He finishes writing it and places the vial on the table, then looks inquiringly up at me. "Are you still nesting?"

"No?"

"You might want to continue nesting," he suggests. He's packing up his bag. "No harm in that."

"Uh-huh," I nod, walking to the door and willing him to hurry up and leave. I'll vomit if he keeps talking about nesting.

After he's gone, I walk back to the table, sneaking a furtive look around as I do. Draco's guard is also sneaking around furtive looks; I catch him sneak me one.

"I'm just going to take this to my room," I say, casually picking up my potion vial. I don't know why I feel like I have to tell him anything at all, but I'm very anxious; I'm afraid he'll try and detain me.

But he only shifts in place a little, before suddenly responding with: "Healer Crossley is going to tell Mr. Malfoy that you asked him to help you remove the ring."

That doesn't help with my anxiety. "It makes me itch," I explain, trying to sound innocent and not deeply worried.

"I'm just telling you," he replies impassively. "So you know what to expect from him later."

My heart sinks to my feet. I mutter a thanks and start making my way hastily through the long apartment to the guest room, the vial clutched to my chest. Draco said he'll see me at dinner, but who knows if he'll decide to come back early. If the healer runs to him to tell him tall tales, he will.

"It's just uncomfortable," I repeat defiantly and out loud. "I was not asking to remove it, not *permanently*."

I *will* be removing it, though, permanently. As soon as I can get to my wand.

I reach the guest room, close the door quietly shut behind me, and fairly leap across the room to the opposite nightstand. Getting down on my hands and knees, I look under it. My wand is still there, lying in the darkness, and I almost cannot believe that it's really there, that he hasn't thought to confiscate it.

His mistake.

Grinning to myself, I reach out, grab my wand, and get triumphantly to my feet.

There's a house-elf in the bedroom.

-

"Can Pipsy helps Miss Gaunt?" it enquires with a polite bow, as I clutch my wand tight on instinct.

"Oh, no," I stammer, feeling like a child just caught in the middle of mischief. "Actually, I need some privacy, if you don't mind..."

It gives my wand a pointed look. "Miss Gaunt was needing something done?"

"Er, no. Not at all, thanks."

But it keeps smiling servilely at me. It dawns on me that it must want me to put it to work.

“Draco said I’m not to read, so could you please find me something else to do?” I ask.
“Anything at all you think might be interesting. Just leave whatever you find on the table in the library. I’ll be out later.” I put my wand down on the nightstand and pick up the potion vial to exhibit. “I need to take some medicine that the healer gave me first, and then I’ll probably have a nap, so don’t disturb me, please.”

“Yes, Miss.”

It disappears and I toss the vial onto the bed.

Now. On to business.

I look hatefully at the ring on my hand. I don’t know what exactly its powers are, but I am certain that it absolutely must come off if I’m going to have any chance of getting away for good.

I’ll get it off me, even if I have to do something drastic like cut my entire finger off with it—which I know I won’t have to. The healer pretty much gave away that there’s a way to get it off without involving Draco, didn’t he? And if there’s a way, there’s a will.

I run all the disenchanting spells I know in my head, then, deciding on the method by which to trial and error them, grab my wand to perform the first one.

There is a crack behind me.

I jump. “*Jesus*. Aren’t you supposed to be outside helping me find stuff to do?” I snap, feeling my nerves give way to frustration.

“Pipsy be doing that already, Miss,” it squeaks.

I’m so frazzled that it takes me several seconds to register that this is a different house-elf.

“Oh,” I say. I grind my teeth together. “Can you go and help her then?”

“Yes, Miss,” it obediently replies. “Is there be anything else, Miss?”

“No. Please go now.”

“Miss Gaunt be needing help with something else.”

“I really don’t. Thank you, though.”

“Miss Gaunt needs something,” it insists, staring at my wand-hand.

I glance down at the wand it’s blatantly eyeballing, an ugly suspicion forming in my head: I don’t think the house-elves are here to help me with anything at all.

My worst fears are confirmed when it adds:

“Master Draco does not like his Miss Gaunt to lift a wand. We do everything for you.”

Giving it a hard stare, I firmly say, "I don't mind doing magic by myself. In fact, I prefer it."

"Miss Gaunt doesn't do magic by herselfs," states the house-elf. "Miss Gaunt be calling us if she be needing anything."

"Exactly right, Miss," chirps a disembodied voice on my right. The owner of the voice- a house-elf, appears. It bows. "Please call us if you be needing magic. We be everywhere, not seen, ready for anything."

At this, I have to concede defeat. Swallowing a lump in my throat, I place the wand down on the nightstand. "Oh, yes, of course, how kind," I say through gritted teeth.

The house-elves bow some more and disappear.

I stare down at my wand. My chest feels stuffed with something unbreathable. I think I could cry.

I don't cry; the house-elves are probably watching, and I'm not an exhibitionist.

I give the fantasy of my picking up my wand and fighting them a moment's thought before throwing my latest hope one last mournful look and exiting the room empty-handed. I walk listlessly up and down the apartment, then wander back out to where the half-troll guard is.

"Do you ever sleep?" I ask.

"There's always a guard here," is his reply. "If not me, one of my men."

"I- That's not the question," I sigh. Even if it ultimately was. "I suppose you won't let me out?"

"I don't have instructions to take you anywhere."

"Well, I'm not going anywhere," I say. I scratch at the wood top of the table, thinking of what to say next. What to do next? I think I'm stuck. If I can't use my wand to escape- and I can't, not without getting tackled by a demonic host of invisible house-elves loyal to Draco, then I think I would rather stay in his parents' dungeons. Maybe their security is lax.

"Did you want to go and see Mr. Malfoy?" asks the guard.

I look up, a reply in the negative on my lips, when I'm stopped by the strange look in his eyes.

I may be wrong, but he's looking at me rather intently, even rather guardedly, the way only a person worried he's being listened-in on by a house-elf can look.

“Mr. Malfoy seemed happy when one of his previous girlfriends wore Omega perfume and requested a meeting with him at his office,” he says. “I reckon he’d be happier to see you...”

I suppress the desire to gag at what Draco’s ‘happiness’ entails and sit at the table to think. With the omnipresent house-elves potentially eavesdropping, I must be careful not to say anything that will invite suspicion.

“Yeah?” I say.

“Yeah.”

Hmm. So, I should say I want to see Draco in order to be allowed to leave the house and therefore get an opportunity to escape? Is that what he’s telling me? Sounds knotty, considering I’ll still be beringed, and wandless to boot, but if it’s the only avenue I have...

I suppose I’ll have to try it. Although... if I say I want to leave the house to see him now, Draco won’t believe me. I’ll have to make it believable. I’ll have to make him believe me.

Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

24 jul 24

By the time Draco returns home, I'm ready with my plan.

If he wants a good, loving Omega, he's going to get a good, loving Omega.

To that end, I'm wearing an uncomfortably tight sheath dress that one of his house-elves helped pick out, and I'm seated at a table with a heap of flowers in front of me, doing flower arranging.

But in the hours since his departure, I've about forgotten how intimidating he can be, and how extremely his smell affects me, and as soon as he appears in the doorway, it all hits me at once; I almost can't bring myself to move a muscle in his presence.

But I am determined to carry my plans through.

"Hi!" I push on, smiling at him, and ignoring that my smile feels tense and that my voice wavers a little. I pick up a vase of flowers near me to show to him. "Do you like it? I made it."

One of his brows goes up; whatever he expected to come home to, I can tell it's not this. "You made that yourself? Without magic?" he asks.

"No magic. Your elves are weird about magic."

Amusement steals across his face. "It's beautiful, sweetling," he says. He crosses the room as I stand to give him the kiss he expects. "Is this what you've been doing today?" he asks.

"Mhm." I hold my arrangement further aloft. "Do you really like it though? I'm kind of rubbish at it, and normally if I'm rubbish at something, I grab a book and follow directions, but you said no books, so I've just done whatever I thought looked nice. Your house-elves helped. It's been quite fun, actually. This is my third try."

He looks searchingly round. "Where are the rest?"

"They, er, they were hideous, so they took them away to redo."

He laughs. "I'm sure they're all very nice. What are you wearing?" He crooks his fingers commandingly. "Stand up, let me see."

I stand.

His eyes run down my body, slow and appreciating. “I like it. Are you wearing it for me, pet?”

“Yes,” I say, turning pink. “You really like it?”

He takes me in again, his lips curling into a slow and seductive smirk. “Yes...”

Oh, God.

Anxious to delay the inevitable, I fiddle with the stem of a flower. “How was your day?”

“Good. How did the rest of Healer Crossley’s visit go?”

“Good. He said my wrist is fine.”

“That’s all?”

“Well... I got an anti-itch.”

“Why do you need anti-itch, pet?”

“Oh, it’s nothing really,” I reply, making efforts to keep my voice light. I’d debated telling him about the anti-itch, but given the healer probably already blabbed to him about everything anyway, partial honesty is the best policy here. “It’s... My hand itches sometimes,” I say. “The potion’s supposed to help...”

“I see... I want to change out of these clothes. Come with me, pet.”

Apprehension returning to me ten-fold, I follow him meekly out of the room.

“What else did you do today?” he asks as we walk.

“Nothing interesting... I wanted to practise charms or transfiguration, but your house-elves stopped me...”

“I heard,” he says. His voice has a slight echo; we’re walking through the hallway. “But practising charms and transfiguration falls under the same category as reading and studying, doesn’t it?”

“If you say so, Draco,” I say. “If you don’t like me to practise any spells, I won’t.”

He stops walking and turns sideways to look at me with suspicious, scrutinising eyes. He’s scanning my face for any trace of sarcasm. “Say that again.”

“I... won’t practice any spells if you don’t want me to?”

Suddenly, he’s kissing me, one hand wrapping around the back of my neck. “What a good, sweet girl you’re being,” he murmurs, pressing me with his body back into the wall. “It makes me want to fuck you right here.” His hand goes to my hair and pulls. “Is that what my

Omega wants? Does my impatient little Omega want me to fuck her right here? Is that why you wanted me to come home early?"

My skin crawls. "I want you to fuck me anytime and anywhere *you* want, Draco," I whisper.

His breath hitches; for several seconds he seems beyond speech. He looks simply astounded, as if one of his biggest dreams is coming true and he can't quite believe it's actually happening. Like me with my wand this morning, I think bitterly.

Draco's eyes are dilated. He shifts to press his growing dick against me. "You're finally taking the roleplay seriously, I see..." he murmurs.

With what little movement I can manage, I shake my head.

He raises one brow. "No?" he says coolly.

"No," I croak. "I don't want to roleplay anymore, Draco-"

His hand pulls my hair down harder. I can feel his shaft thickening against my belly, and I wonder what turns him on more, my obedience or my disobedience. I wonder if he knows.

"Really?" he whispers.

"I just want to be a good Omega," I say quickly and meekly. "Without the roleplay. Without the pretending, I mean. I just want to be good, all the time."

He licks his lips; for one instant it looks as if it's really his teeth he's licking. He looks barely in control of himself.

But he only cocks his head, his voice cool and calm as he says: "This is a suspiciously sudden change of heart, pet. When did it happen? Let me guess... after you tried and failed to take off my ring?"

I meet his eyes. "You said I could be as stubborn as I want outside of bed."

He's speechless again.

Then, he's pushing my dress up my thighs. He drags my underwear off, unbuckles his belt, frees his dick, and drives it unceremoniously into me.

I'm wet for him, but I wince at the sudden entry, my body jumping with the pain that no amount of lubrication can really take away; he's too big. But I'm stuck between him and the wall.

"I like coming home to this," he sighs. He's jamming his prick forcefully up into my pussy. I rise on my tiptoes, trying to afford some space, but he follows me with another upwards thrust. "Ohh, sweetling... Why don't I hear you telling me you love me?"

"Ohh, I..." I grunt, lurching. "I love you, Draco..."

“You will...” he promises, kissing me. His mouth is soft and wet. “Don’t come. You’re not allowed to come yet...” He moves his lips down over my throat, his tongue making a wet trail. “You don’t know how good you smell... Do I smell good to you too, pet?”

“Uh-huh...”

“Good.” He thrusts up, sending his dick stabbing at my cervix. “That’s it, you’ve got it,” he whispers, swallowing my pained whimper with an insistent kiss. “Ohh. You’re so good, so good. I’m going to come in you, give you a present...” He pulls down on my twitching hips. “Don’t run.”

I try to keep myself still as he buries his face in my throat and ruts feverishly into me. Thank God he finishes quickly; a series of hard, sharp thrusts, and then with a guttural groan, he reaches climax. He drives his dick in hard. I’m pinned to the wall like an insect. “Fuck,” he groans. “Fuck.” He pulls out, his come rushing in a torrent out of me to splatter on the floor.

Draco gazes down at the mess for a second, his eyes glazed over as if his orgasm has drained him. Then, he steps back and runs his hands across his hair with an exhale. His gaze sweeps me. I’m how he’s left me, against the wall with my underwear around my knees. He smirks. “I’m not done with you. Come.”

I pull up my knickers and follow him.

“Did you do what Healer Crossley advised you to do, pet? Did you work on your nest building?”

“Not yet...”

“Why don’t you start now while I do some work.”

We enter my bedroom. There are a few new additions to it: there is a pile of long pillows and round pillows, and on the bed, a big oval pillow with a hollow in the middle.

Seeing all these emphatically *Omega* things is triggering some kind of fight or flight instinct in me. I don’t know why I loathe them so much, but I do.

I fight down the feeling. “How do you want it to look like?” I query. It’s a genuine question. I have no idea what a nest for an Omega should look like, or what it’s even meant for. I don’t lay eggs, so... *What is a nest for?*

“Do what your instinct tells you to do, pet,” says Draco. “I’ll come back in an hour, and then you can invite me into it.”

I look round at him as he leaves the room, then go to pick up a pillow. For some reason, I want to put it to my nose.

I do.

Smells like Draco.

Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

24 jul 24

Everything smells like Draco. Even me, and I kind of like it.

“That’s a lovely nest, sweetling,” Draco’s voice comes floating to me.

I lift my head to look for him, then sit up. “Thank you,” I politely and automatically reply. “It smells very good. Do you want to smell it?”

“Does it smell like me?”

“Yes...”

“Does it smell only like me?” he asks silkily. “It won’t smell like other Alphas?”

“It won’t,” I whimper, rubbing my thighs together. “No one else came near it all day... You can check.”

“I’ll be happy to,” he purrs, coming closer and pulling his shirt off his lean, muscular body. I take it automatically from him and watch him check my nest. It’s all a charade of course. It won’t smell like anyone else and he knows it.

“What have you been up to today, pet?” he enquires, unbuckling his belt as he speaks.

I shake my head. My mouth is watering. “Not much. I had a swim, and then I practised nesting like you said, and... and...”

“You lost track of time?”

“Yes...” I’ve *completely* lost track of time. This is my third day building this damned nest, and it still manages to scatter me.

“It’s overwhelming, hmm?” he says sympathetically. His trousers are off. Pants off. His dick waves in my face. “Suck, pet.”

I don’t need to be told twice. I scramble to my knees, take his dick in hand, and work on it with my tongue and mouth. I need this. My lust needs this. My plan needs this too, I tell myself, even if I’ve almost forgotten what my plan is. His smell is overpowering.

Draco lets out a groan of appreciation. “You’re getting so good at this. Who taught you how to pleasure your Alpha, pet?”

I pull off his dick with a slurp. “You,” I answer.

“That’s right, I did,” he states. He rubs his cockhead around my lips, watching me chase it. “You’re such a hot little thing. You’ve got me so hard. Did you touch yourself today?”

I nod.

“Did you come?”

“No...” He knows I didn’t. He knows I can’t, the bastard.

“Poor pet. Were you waiting for me to come home and take care of you?”

“Yes, Draco,” I mewl at him. I give his cock another lick and suck, keeping eye contact.

“Lie down,” he commands. His eyes, looking down at me, are swimming with lust.

Immediately I get on my back, tentatively spreading my thighs as he climbs into the nest of pillows. Hopefully he’ll finally let me come. I need it, really need it, and he’s been denying me for days.

He positions himself at my opening, rubbing his cock around a little, teasing my clit. “Look how wet and needy you are. You’re wet for me all the time. Do you want me to fuck you until I come in this pretty little pussy, pet?”

“Yes, Draco...”

“Don’t lie now,” he says, his voice smooth and low and silky. He taps my pussy with his cock. “Do you really want my come in there?”

I hesitate. “I don’t... No,” I gasp. “No. Oh, God.” *Why did I have to go and tell the truth for?* “Please don’t punish me,” I plead.

“Shh... Don’t cry,” he hushes me. “Don’t cry. I know you’re still learning to be the perfect wife for me...” He’s pressing his cock firmly into my body as he speaks, forcing the spongy head of it past my slick folds and opening the way for the rest of him.

He groans as I arch my back with the feeling. His hands go to palm my breasts and caress my nipples. “You feel perfect, pet. Perfect everywhere...”

My heart races and my thighs quiver as he fucks his cock experimentally in and out of my pussy, his eyes glued to the sight as if it’s the first time he’s seeing it.

He’s sighing in appreciation. Then, pulling out, swiftly shifting, his body comes to hover almost parallel over mine. His arms are framing my face.

“Put me in you,” he murmurs.

Breathing hard, I reach down between us and gingerly take hold of his cock. It's sticky and I hate touching it after it's already been in me, but I guide it obediently to my entrance.

I stop and wait for him to take over, but he only blinks slowly at me with eyes like melting silver. "Put me in you, pet," he rumbles.

"Oh." Despite everything I've been through, I'm still easily embarrassed. Blushing, I lift my hips up to his, feeding his cock into my pussy and gasping with the feeling of his thick length filling me. "Ohh. I love... I love you, Draco..."

I don't love him, but I might love having sex with him. It feels so good. If only he'll let me come, but I don't think I'll get to today either; I'll be myself again after my head is clear, and he knows it. He'll keep me mindless and frustrated for as long as he can.

My bitter thoughts are swept away as Draco goes in for another kiss, his body pressing me down, pressing me gently into the nest of pillows. He rotates his hips, churning his cock in my pussy and grinding his pelvis into my hungry clit.

I cry out in passion and return the movement, my hands running over his back.

Draco loves this. "Fuck," he mutters. "I'm going to come soon."

"Can I come with you, Draco?" I plead. "Please?"

"No, not yet. Stay nice and hot for me, pet."

-

"Please, Draco," I'm begging. It's the fourth day, another day of unadulterated pleasure for Draco and unassuaged lust for me. "Please, I love you, Draco. Let me come with you, please."

Draco kisses me for answer and reaches down between us to play with my swollen clit. He's already fucked me once so he's in no rush now. Now he's fucking me in leisure, savouring the experience.

I writhe and shiver as he works me with a practised hand. I'm beyond aroused, soaking with my juices and his seed, and I need to come. I need to come at any cost. "Please," I beg. "Please, please..."

"Please what? Please put a baby in you?" asks Draco, soft and teasing, his thumb rubbing unceasingly at my clit.

"Yes, yes, please, oh my God..."

He chuckles. "Really?"

“Yes, please,” I pant, pushing against his thumb. “Oh God, Draco... Please put a baby in me and let me come, please.”

The next chuckle to come out of him is a soft and cruel sound. “They were right, Omegas can just be fucked into submission. I should have done this from the beginning...”

His unkind tone clears some of the haze of arousal from my brain. I shrink with shame and anger.

My change in demeanour does not go unnoticed. Draco’s mouth twitches. “Do you want to come today, pet?” he hums. “Ask me again for permission, and I’ll let you.”

“Yes,” I beg without hesitation; I’m still too aroused, and for the moment ruled by my base desires. “Please let me come with you, Draco.”

“All right, sweetling.” His voice is shot through with amusement. “You can come with me. But you’ll have to work for it. I’ve already come once.” He rolls over onto his back, bringing me with him. I’m sitting on him, his whole length sheathed inside my wet, clinging walls.

I lift myself slowly off him, feeling the slide of his dick snaking out of me. It’s not my favourite sensation, not my favourite position, but I’ll do anything to scratch the itch.

Draco’s expression as he watches me ride him is smug and sedate. His eyes still smoulder with lust, although not the hungry, frustrated lust that burns through me. He’s entirely satisfied. His fingers play idly with my ring. “If your ring bothers you so much, you can stop wearing it after our wedding, pet,” he says.

“Really?” I breathe, hardly daring to believe my ears.

“Yes...” He touches the ring then looks up at me. “You can wear any ring you like. Or no ring at all, if that’s what you prefer.”

“I- Thank you...”

“Mhm.” Draco pulls me down for a kiss, tongue slipping into my mouth as he thrusts his dick as far up in me as it can get.

I grunt.

He laughs. “Aren’t you going to ask me why, pet?”

“Why, Draco?” I ask, my heart dropping, what little hope I’m feeling draining away. *Where is he going with this? What is he going to tell me?*

“Because the ring will become redundant,” he explains, smiling. “Don’t stop moving. Keep up that rhythm.” His hips rise to drive his long dick encouragingly into my wet, rocking flesh. His hands massage my nipples, making me squirm and moan and lose my train of thought. “Ask me why it will be redundant, pet.”

“Ohh, uhh... Why will it be redundant, Draco?”

“Because I will bond you to me on our wedding night.” His eyes are gleaming like wet silver paint. He’s waiting for the next question.

I’m almost afraid to ask it, but I do. “What is bonding, Draco? What does it do?”

“It’s when we become magically joined. Permanently,” he says. “You’ll like it. You’ll start to see things from my point of view, which means we’ll have less disagreements, and you’ll stop fighting me on things. Well, most things- I know my parents don’t see eye to eye on everything. But you won’t be so troublesome anymore. And...” His finger circles my clit. He smiles a faintly gloating smile that looks right at home on his face. “And then you’ll *really* love being my wife.”

I try to hide the horror I feel, but I know I’m giving myself away. Draco does not seem upset to see it displayed plainly on my face, however. His level of lust matches my fear. “You won’t be able to stop it or to fight it,” he gloats. He’s taken full control of the rhythm, fucking me how he wants, moving me for his convenience. “Tell me you can’t wait for all of that to happen, pet.”

“I can’t wait for all of that, Draco,” I whimper; I’m disoriented, distracted and confused by the amazing sensations he’s building in my body.

“Say you want me to make it happen,” he growls, moving me faster. He’s so worked up, so close to orgasm, that his breathing is like that of an animal’s. The tip of his cock smashes against my cervix, then slide away as my hips are lifted off his. He does it again. And again. “Say you want to be bonded to me.”

“I want you to make it happen, Draco,” I gasp. “I want to be bonded to you.”

With a deep groan, he slams me down on his cock and thrusts up hard in the same moment-and comes, his eyes nearly rolling back with pleasure, his fingers pinching, his eyelashes flickering. His cock twitches violently, shooting sperm far into my pussy.

At the same time, my body explodes with the built-up tension. I cry with relief and ecstasy as I ride the cresting wave, wave after unending wave, each spasm wracking me bodily.

“Draco,” I cry hoarsely, kissing his soft lips as our shared orgasm courses through us. “Draco, oh God!”

He runs his hands up and down my body as we recover, as I lie on his chest and breathe in his heady and comforting scent. My God, he smells good. He feels good too.

Draco rolls us over, making me lie on my side. His dick slips out a few inches as he adjusts his position. It’s still rock hard. Vaguely, I wonder if he took a potion to make it stay like that. Or maybe it’s this nest that keeps us both so aroused while we’re in it? The nest smells like sex. Smells like Draco. I don’t think I’ll ever think about sex without thinking about his scent ever again.

“Did you understand what I was explaining to you, sweetling?” murmurs Draco, stroking my cheek.

I look at him. “About the bonding? Yes.” I hesitate. “It’s true? We’ll... be joined? Permanently? How does it work?”

“You don’t need to know all the details, sweetling,” he smirks, tracing circles on my skin. “All you need to know is that it will happen, and that you want it, as all good, loving wives-to-be do.” He stops stroking me. His voice drops to a whisper that makes me feel cold inside. “Don’t you, Hermione?”

I nod quickly, avoiding eye contact. “Yes. I do.”

“Good. Now... As much as I’d like to continue this, I’m afraid we have an engagement tonight. Dinner with my family,” he says, in response to my puzzled look. “We’re meeting my parents and my aunt and uncle in an hour. Some of my cousins might join, too.”

He stares me down with a penetrating grey gaze. “Are you going to be perfectly behaved tonight? Because I warn you, pet, I am done with your tantrums.”

I tense. Nod. “Of course.”

“Good,” he coos. “I know you’ll be my very good girl.”

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