

Secrets of Malfoy Manor

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Lucius Malfoy has died, and Draco has inherited the Malfoy estate. For the next six months it is under Ministry review.

Draco Malfoy's problems now include: (i) a vast network of assets he cannot name, let alone manage properly; (ii) a one-night stand who won't go away; (iii) a different one-night stand he's wanted to find for years; and (iv) his mother's insistence that he start courting, preferably before Pansy Parkinson does.

Meanwhile, Hermione heads out on a field assignment where she makes an unexpected friend. Upon her return she's given a new assignment from the Ministry that should be a curse-breaker's dream: find Lucius Malfoy's dark objects and decommission them.

If only the Manor would be more cooperative.

Featuring a broody, pining, and possessive Draco Malfoy and a competent and empathetic Hermione Granger. There is plenty of banter and some humor, with your favorite Slytherin gang included.

Lots of Dom/Sub in later chapters, once they finally get there. Most of the fic is light-hearted, but there are some difficult themes in several chapters. Please note the tags.

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Project Chimera

Chapter 1: Project Chimera

Hermione

There was something seriously wrong with this situation, Hermione was absolutely certain of it. As she stared at her boss on the other side of the desk, Hermione was lost in thought as she considered the possibilities.

First, she could be looking at an imposter. True, Hestia Jones wouldn't be the easiest person to polyjuice, but then again, neither was Alastor Moody. A Death Eater had once pulled off that ruse for nearly ten months. Hermione discretely checked her watch. She would be able to eliminate this possibility in approximately forty minutes, unless she could think of a security question to ask her before then.

"... will provide a final report once the project is complete..."

Second, Hestia could be imperiused, but Hermione didn't think it was likely. Most of the former Order of the Phoenix could throw the imperius curse, even those who had been underage at the time. Dumbledore had insisted upon it. Tonks had practiced with Hermione and Ginny until they could both do it the summer before fifth year. It seemed nearly impossible to believe that Hestia couldn't do it as well. But perhaps she was out of practice? Maybe the caster was particularly powerful? Hermione squinted as she looked at Hestia's face to see if she could identify any of the telltale signs that she was fighting it – any nervous ticks or odd movement of the eyes. Nothing.

"... shall be on site for the duration of the project..."

Third, this could be some sort of potion. Maybe he had a house elf who had slipped into the Ministry and spiked Hestia's drink.

Hermione quickly thought about what it could be: a befuddlement draught? Confusing concoction? Amortentia? No, definitely not amortentia, thank God. She didn't seem to have the slightest romantic interest in him, and it was a rather large age gap after all. Her other ideas had merit though. Hestia was certainly confused. Except she also seemed entirely lucid, and now *Hermione* was the one who was confused.

"... will take a direct portkey as soon as our meeting is over...."

The only other possibilities Hermione could think of were *confundus* and *obliviate*. Both of those spells affected the mental acuity of the recipient in astonishing ways, but Hestia wasn't displaying symptoms of either one. She wasn't vague or dazed. She wasn't tripping over her words or rambling off topic. No, she was clear, concise, and very Hestia. Nobody had messed with her mind, that much was obvious.

So what was it then? What on earth could explain the entirely odd predicament Hermione was in?

Hermione suddenly had a brainwave. She must be dreaming. She pinched herself.

Damn, that hurt.

Back to square one then. Was this some sort of alternative dimension? Was this a time turner gone wrong? What could it *possibly* be?

"...any questions?"

"No ma'am," said a deep voice to her left.

"Hermione?" asked Hestia.

I have so many questions I don't even know where to begin.

"Erm, no. Not right now."

“Very well then, please go grab your things and head to the portkey office. They’re expecting you.”

Hestia rose so Hermione and her companion rose as well, and they made their way silently toward the reception area just outside of her office, where they had left their trunks, along with a familiar-looking tent that made Hermione grimace. Harry had told her he would loan her one, and he must have dropped it off while she was in her meeting with Hestia. She didn’t realize he meant *this* one. She wasn’t even aware he had recovered it from the woods all those years ago.

“That bad, huh?” her companion asked, as he watched her scowl at the tent. She just shot him a look, but said nothing as she shrunk her luggage and the tent and put them both in her pocket. Then she shrank an enormous box of books that she was bringing as her portable library. She noticed the ghost of a smile cross her companion’s face at this, and she scowled again.

Hermione was lost in thought as she walked toward the portkey office. She still couldn’t believe it, and what made it even more extraordinary were the circumstances surrounding it. She recalled what Hestia had told her, just before her companion arrived.

“He agreed to serve as the representative from the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures as long as you were assigned to the project. It was his one condition. He said he wouldn’t do it with anybody else. Of course I had already decided to ask you even though it means you’ll be in the field and away from the Ministry for quite a while. You were the best choice instead of bringing in somebody else to help with this. Still, I thought it was rather encouraging that he was so insistent upon it. Please give him a chance, Hermione.”

No, none of this made *any* sense.

“Ah, there you are,” said another familiar voice. Hermione grimaced as she recognized Cormac McLaggen. “Heading off on some

adventure then, are you?"

"It's for work," she said curtly.

"Right..." said Cormac, eyeing them both suspiciously. "And when you will be back?"

"Shouldn't be more than a month."

He wrinkled his nose and opened his mouth to say something else – no doubt to ask her out yet *again* – but Hermione cut him off. "We're due to head out directly. Is the portkey ready?"

He grumbled a bit, but finally produced a ballpoint pen that he held out for them. "It should go off in about a minute."

They both nodded and each grasped one end of the pen, and a minute later, Hermione felt herself hurtling through space. She did her best to ignore the young man on the other end of the pen with her.

They landed with a jolt, and Hermione took a moment to look around the moors. It was beautiful, but deserted. Hence the tent.

"That's it then?" asked the young man, nodding toward a crumbling stone structure on the edge of what looked like a bog.

"I suppose," she said cautiously. "We can get set up and then take a look."

Hermione pulled out her wand and tapped the tent, which immediately erected itself with a flourish. Almost unconsciously she started casting the wards she had used all those years ago when she, Harry, and Ron were on the run.

"What are you doing?" he asked in confusion.

"Making sure nobody can find us," she said curtly.

“You think somebody is going to find us out here?” he asked skeptically, looking around the very empty landscape.

“I’m... nevermind,” she muttered. She finished the ward she was on and then left it at that. The war had been over for six years, but old habits died hard.

She waved her wand once more, and the flap to the tent opened for them. She went through her mental checklist as she followed him inside. She had shown up to the office very casually today, ready to do field work. She was wearing trainers, and her jeans had some stretch in them. She could run if she needed to. Her wand was holstered on her forearm like always. The holster was one of the few things she had splurged on during that brief period of time between her parents’ obliviation and when conditions with the war seriously deteriorated. The holster was expensive, but it was almost as important to her as her actual wand. It was lightweight and made of demiguise hair so it blended into whatever she was wearing. It molded to her body perfectly, and she could barely feel it. It was sensitive enough that she could call her wand to her at any moment with barely a thought and return it to the holster in the same way.

Very few witches and wizards used holsters at all, let alone ones this sensitive. She had spent a large portion of her savings acquiring three of them before she, Harry, and Ron had gone on the run. She knew Harry still used his as an auror, and she used hers as a cursebreaker. Ron, however, hardly ever carried a wand anymore. He managed the jokeshop with George and preferred floo over apparition.

He might have one too, she thought, as she eyed her companion. He and his friends might have gotten one... back then.

Yes, Hermione was prepared to fight or run if she needed to. She was trained and knew some really good curses now. And she didn’t trust him, not even a little bit.

Hermione turned to look at him, and they eyed each other warily. Hermione couldn't even remember the last time she had seen him up close – usually her glimpses of him were from a distance in the Ministry atrium. At some point he had grown up and filled out. He was much larger than her, though still not as tall as Ron. He was about the same size as Harry now, though perhaps a bit broader in the shoulders. His eyes flashed with intelligence. He had always been smart, she knew that. He had been at the top of the class in Hogwarts, along with her.

“You can chill out, I don't bite,” he said with an eye-roll. “We need to pick a name for the project. What do you suggest?”

“How about ‘Project Insanity?’ Or ‘Project Delusion?’ Or ‘Project Hestia has Lost her Damn Mind?’”

Now he gave her a smirk.

Why the hell do all Slytherins smirk? It's like some sort of prerequisite. Do you have pure blood, questionable ethics, and a ready smirk? Then welcome to Slytherin House.

“I insist on something more... unifying,” he said. “How about, ‘Project Chimera?’”

“That's....” Hermione trailed off.

OK, that actually wasn't a terrible idea. It was possible that's what they were facing, after all, though they weren't certain. That's why he was here in the first place. Regardless, chimeras were monstrous. It seemed rather apt for her current situation.

“We're missing the goat,” she said suddenly. “Obviously I'm the lion, and you're the snake, but chimeras are part goat too.”

Now he actually chuckled. “True. But that would require a third party, and I don't see a ménage à trois in our future, do you?” He gestured around the barren landscape.

Hermione's jaw dropped, and he laughed.

"Project Chimera then, it's settled," he said firmly, with another smirk as he whipped out some parchment and wrote down the name of the project at the very top.

"Bloody hell," she muttered. She was so thrown off she didn't know how to react.

"Now the next thing," he said, "is house rules. I know this is only supposed to last a month, but we'll be in close quarters. We don't want to kill each other."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at this. That also wasn't a bad idea. And having once lived with two boys in this very tent for months, she had some rather strong opinions about this.

"Alright, here are my rules," she said. "I get to shower first because I prefer to air dry my hair, and it takes ages. I don't sleep much, but I'll be quiet between ten and six, unless I see that you're awake too. I expect the same from you. Silencing charms around the bed for nightmares or wanking. I don't want to hear it. And your nasty socks and other dirty clothes stay in *your* room and do not spread to the common area."

He studied her for a moment, his head tilted to the side. "You do a lot of wanking then?"

She gave him an annoyed look. "I will *not* answer that."

He just raised an eyebrow. "And your nightmares?"

"They're not that frequent now, but I'll probably have one or two bad ones while we're here," she admitted.

"We could just wake each other up," he said reasonably. "That's the easiest way to snap out of them."

“Look, you don’t want to do that, I promise,” she said. “Besides, I told you I don’t sleep much.”

He gave her a long look and finally said, “Alright, fine. Silencing charms for now. And I have a few rules of my own to add to yours.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes as she waited for the axe to fall.

“First, we divide the work as evenly as we can. I know you’re the curse-breaking expert and all that tosh, but I’m no slouch either. You can lead that part of it, obviously, but let me help you if I can. I don’t much fancy sitting around and twiddling my thumbs for a month while I wait for whatever beast is inside that thing to finally be let out. I’ll go mad.”

Hermione’s eyes widened at this, but she nodded slowly. “Fine. If you’re willing to let me lead it, I’ll let you help.”

He nodded. “Next, we try to stay civil. I’m not saying this will be easy, but it doesn’t have to be intolerable either. I plan to treat you the way I would treat any of my other, professional acquaintances. I expect you to do the same. We obviously aren’t close, but we can be cordial until we figure things out. We have to work together a lot over the next few weeks.”

Hermione blinked rapidly, and she found herself nodding, wondering yet again if she had entered another dimension.

“Finally...” and here he hesitated. Hermione was suddenly on guard again. “We don’t insult each other’s friends.”

Hermione stilled as she stared at him. He allowed her to study him, as she thought about it. He looked determined, even a little desperate. She had to admit he was already very different than she was expecting when Hestia first told her the news. Maybe she should let him have this. Merlin knew it would be about a hundred times easier if they weren’t at each other’s throats.

"Fine, but then it's probably best we don't talk about them too much. I may slip if you start telling me how wonderful Pansy Parkinson is."

She rolled her eyes at this, but to her consternation he just smirked again.

"Pansy's not that bad."

"Of course she is," snapped Hermione.

"And why's that then?"

"Pansy is so... Pansy," said Hermione lamely.

"That has to be the least intelligent thing I've ever heard you say."

Hermione rolled her eyes at this. "You haven't heard me say *anything* since Hogwarts."

"Not true. You've been asked to speak at every bloody Ministry function for the last six years. Trust me, I've heard you say plenty."

Hermione blinked. "What's so wonderful about Pansy then?"

He shrugged. "She's a little temperamental, I'll grant you that, but she's not a bad sort. She actually reminds me of you."

"Oh you *cannot* be serious!" she said in horror.

He just laughed. "I'm very serious. You both have sharp tongues. You would have done well in Slytherin House."

"Yes, except for the whole mudblood thing," she retorted, rolling her eyes.

"Don't use that word," he said shortly. "I'll make a rule about it if I have to."

“That word was literally carved into my arm, as you very well know. The knife was cursed, and the scar is permanent. I’m pretty sure that trumps any rule you create about it.”

There was a long pause, and he was looking at her warily again. She could tell he was choosing his next words carefully. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry that happened to you. But I would still prefer we not use it.”

Hermione felt herself burning with something that she thought might be shame. He really had nothing to apologize for, and she had been unnecessarily sharp with him about it. But still, she couldn’t help but push him on it just a little more.

“I don’t glamor my arm,” she said. “It never worked very well anyway, and it’s not like it’s some dark secret.”

He just gave her an impassive look. “I wouldn’t ask you to do that. I just ask you not to say it.”

Hermione blinked again, but finally nodded shortly. “Fine.”

“Good,” he said. “And my last rule: we go by first names. No surnames.”

Hermione’s eyes widened in surprise. “Why?”

“Trust me, it’s just easier,” he said dismissively. “Besides...” and now he smirked again. “Imagine coming back to London at the end of this thing and telling our friends all about it. The looks on their faces will be utterly priceless if we are on a first-name basis by then. They’ll think we’re polyjuiced or something else ridiculous like that.”

Hermione laughed a bit uncomfortably, as she remembered that she had this very thought about Hestia.

Then again, he had a point. They were going to be working together so much for the next month that being on a first-name basis was

sensible. She thought of what else Hestia had told her earlier that day.

"I know that there are still a lot of latent feelings about the war, but I think that you two can cross sides, as it were, and build a rapport with each other. Maybe you can set an example for others in the Ministry."

"But why Hestia?"

"Because you may have fought for the light, but I also know you did some things that were rather dark as part of the war. As for him... well, he was raised to be dark, but he did what he could to stay in the light. I'm not saying it will be easy to work with him, but I think you two have a lot more in common than you may realize. Give him a chance and see if I'm right."

Hermione chewed on her lower lip as she thought about his request to be on a first-name basis with her. Despite the fact that it had been six years, she realized Hestia had a point: the lines that had been drawn during the war were still there, to some degree. There wasn't open hostility anymore, but Hermione rarely mixed with those who had stayed neutral or who had alliances with the other side.

In fact, she was a bit chagrined to realize that with the notable exception of Kingsley Shacklebolt, she had never been on a first-name basis with *anybody* from Slytherin House before, even though she was nearly twenty-five years old. She had simply done the easy thing and avoided former Slytherins when she could or remained hyper professional when she couldn't. If she had to pick the one Slytherin who would break her streak she would never in a million years have guessed that it would be him.

Then again, she was stuck with him for a month in a bloody tent. He was right that it would be a pain if they didn't find some sort of common ground.

"Fine, we can do that," she said.

He smiled with satisfaction. "Shake on our rules then?"

Hermione nodded and slowly raised her hand. He shook and then smirked. "Repeat after me: 'I, Hermione Granger, promise to follow all the rules.'"

He was still shaking her hand, and Hermione couldn't help it. She cracked a reluctant smile. "Fine. I, Hermione Granger, promise to follow all the rules."

"Excellent," he said, grinning broadly as he released her hand. "That was why I wanted you to be my partner on this project instead of one of the aurors or some random cursebreaker they borrowed from Gringotts, you know."

Hermione blinked, suddenly thrown off again. "What? Why?"

He looked at her seriously now. "Because when Hermione Granger makes a promise, she'll win a fucking war to keep it."

Hermione inhaled. He was right of course. Her word was her bond. It always had been. And in their first hour on this mad project together, he had elicited a promise from her to work with him and be civil to him. She knew she had no choice but to follow through with it, whereas others in her shoes probably would not.

How very Slytherin of him.

"Now," he said, "Care to give me a tour of your tent? Then perhaps you can give me a crash course in curse breaking. It always did sound like one of those hot, sexy, dangerous jobs you know. Right up your alley, I'd say."

Hermione cracked another smile, despite herself. "It's a lot less hot and sexy than you'd think. But sure, we can do that Theo."

The Morning After

Chapter 2: The Morning After

AN: We will get a small taste of what Hermione and Theo have been up to in the next chapter. But first, our brand new head of the Malfoy family must make his appearance.

Draco

Draco heard the giant *CRACK!* in his sleep, and he awoke with a start. He flailed for a moment, tangling himself up in the sheets as he promptly fell out of bed.

He glanced over at the bare arse of his companion from the night before and winced as flashes of it came back to him.

Fuck.

He hadn't meant to sleep with her. She'd been after him for *years*, and she finally caught him on a good night for it – or a *bad* night when considering it from Draco's perspective – and he caved to the easy sex she was offering him.

True, he had been emotional. Yes, he had been very, *very* drunk. No, he didn't really remember it. But he still shouldn't have done it. His father may have been an utter bastard, but he had only been in the family mausoleum for about eight hours before Draco dropped his pants and got naked with her.

Draco had to admit that shagging Ella Vanity after his father's funeral was probably not well done of him, no matter how much Draco resented Lucius.

Besides, for all of Lucius's misguided beliefs over the years, there had been one principle with which Draco still agreed wholeheartedly: never fuck a witch you know unless you're willing to make an honest woman out of her.

Draco had broken this rule only once before, and it was for Pansy Parkinson. Draco blamed a combination of teenage hormones, the Dark Lord, and Draco's mission to kill Albus Dumbledore for that one. Pansy had been there for him as one of his oldest friends, and they naturally sought comfort in each other. Still, the aftermath had been awkward when they separated near the end of sixth year, and it had taken a long time to get their friendship back on track. Draco was just grateful they finally worked it out with no hard or lingering feelings on either side.

The only other witch whom he actually knew and then fucked was his former fiancée, Astoria Greengrass. Draco *hadn't* broken Lucius's rule for her because he fully intended to make an honest woman out of her when he did it. But they had only slept together a few times before he realized he would never have any real spark with her in bed. He also found her agreeableness irritating after a time — she had a tendency to go along with whatever Draco wanted, and he found it surprisingly annoying. She never pushed him. She never fought back. She was raised to be a perfect, pureblood wife. It wasn't long before Draco realized that wasn't what he wanted.

When Astoria finally confessed to hiding a family blood curse from him in a fit of honesty just before wedding invitations were sent out, Draco decided he had to break it off. Draco knew he probably would have married her out of a sense of duty despite all of her flaws if she had just told him about it upfront. But after everything he had done during the war, he knew that he couldn't, *wouldn't* tie himself to somebody who hid something like that from him. He needed to be able to trust his wife implicitly, and she hid that secret for well over two years while Draco engaged in the arcane and predominantly chaste pureblood courting traditions shortly after his eighth year of Hogwarts. It was a relief to finally part ways from her, and it was

surprisingly amicable once Draco made it clear he wouldn't out her to the other pureblood wizards. The only person he had ever told was his mother, and that was only because he knew Narcissa would have dragged him down the aisle herself if Draco hadn't told her *why* he could no longer marry Astoria.

Other than Pansy and Astoria, Draco had never fucked somebody he knew, not once. His father made introductions for him at a high-end sex club on Draco's seventeenth birthday and told Draco that the club was where he should do all of his fucking until he found a wife. Draco had felt a bit uncomfortable about the implications this had for his parents' marriage, and he had largely stayed away from the club during the final year of the war out of necessity and while he was courting Astoria out of respect. But once she was out of his life he had to admit his father had a point.

Draco had engaged in casual, random sex exactly one time outside of his sex club. It was a couple weeks after Dumbledore died, and Draco had been wrecked that night. It took some work, but he eventually found a willing muggle girl in a bar whom he fucked in a nearby alleyway. She was the one and only muggle he had ever shagged, but he was truly desperate and gave himself a pass for it. That experience, however, taught him that the club was a much easier place to seek casual sex than muggle bars, and it was safer too because it was magical. He didn't risk a slip up that would expose the wizarding world. He could explore his sexuality and try any number of new things. There was no emotional entanglement. He could repeat partners until he grew tired of them. He even had a hard rule that either he was transfigured or his partners were blindfolded for the duration of their time with him, and the club had no problem matching him with witches who were willing to go along with it. The witches he bedded were oblivious to the fact that they were being fucked by the Malfoy heir.

Because that, of course, was the real reason casual sex was such a poor idea when it came to Draco Malfoy: up until his Father died a few days ago, Draco was the heir to a vast fortune. And now the

problem was even worse, because he wasn't the heir any longer. It was all his.

Draco had been managing his own share of the Malfoy fortune since he came of age, but his father still managed the bulk of it until the day he died. With nothing else to do but rot, Lucius kept up a brisk correspondence while in prison, and it enabled him to exercise control over the fortune despite the fact that he was incarcerated. The conditions in Azkaban certainly hastened Lucius's demise, but Draco privately thought the Malfoy fortune should be given credit for keeping Lucius alive for the last couple of years. Lucius had been sickly for ages, but he stuck around much longer than the healers expected purely out of spite and because he was unconvinced that Draco was ready to take up the Malfoy mantle.

But eventually even Lucius's business correspondence wasn't enough to keep him tied to this mortal plane, and he deteriorated rapidly over the previous month when dragonpox made its way through Azkaban. Despite Lucius's overall poor health it all came as a bit of a surprise to Draco. Lucius was the type who seemed like he would never get around to actually dying, and Draco's grandparents had succumbed to that exact disease more than twenty years earlier. In fact, Draco himself had caught it as a young child and was now immune. He always assumed his father had too, but Draco had little memory of it. Evidently Lucius had stayed away from the Manor during that bout of illness, and now he had paid for it with his life.

Draco thought it rather ironic that his father died from a disease named after dragons, just like Draco was.

Now that Lucius was gone, the Malfoy fortune was all Draco's. He strongly suspected that at least three-quarters of the witches below the age of fifty who showed up to Lucius's funeral were really there to make a move on him.

Ella Vanity was among that group, but she was more strategic than most. He vaguely remembered her cornering him in the Study after

making sure he was very drunk first. Then she began to strip and got on her knees in front of him.

What was Draco really supposed to do when faced with something like that? Say no?

Fuck. I should have said no.

Draco gingerly got to his feet, relieved that Ella hadn't been woken up by the judgmental little house elf who was now glaring at him.

"Honestly Florrie, it's not what it looks like!" he hissed.

Florrie just scowled at him. "Tis *precisely* what it looks like, Master," she insisted.

"Fine," he groaned. "But it was an accident alright? I didn't mean to."

Florrie just sniffed and wiggled her ears a bit. "Master is expected for breakfast in the Witches' Parlor," she huffed. "Mistress Cissy is requesting him in thirty minutes."

"Right," muttered Draco, biting his lip as he looked at Ella. "Look, can you just... I don't know, apparate her home or something? She can't be here. And then ward her out for me, will you?"

Florrie gave him a baleful look. "You is not asking her to court then?"

"For fuck's sake, *no* Florrie," said Draco, utterly appalled at the very notion.

Florrie pursed her lips but then nodded once. "Alright, I is helping Master. But next time Master is courting, yes?"

Draco rolled his eyes, but just nodded so she would get a move on. He was terribly fond of the little elf, but Salazar knew she could get shirty with him when she was in one of her moods. He really couldn't spare the time for it this morning, what with Ella's naked arse out in the open and all.

Draco glanced around. At least it wasn't *his* bedroom, thank Merlin. He must have dragged her into one of the many, nearly identical guest rooms in the Manor. They were so identical, in fact, that Draco couldn't immediately tell which room he was in. Draco just hoped it was close enough to the Study that nobody had seen them. He grabbed his clothes off the floor and quickly got dressed, before nodding at Florrie and letting himself out into the hallway. He winced when he realized how far away from the Study they were. He made a dash for it and reached his own bedroom without further incident, where he quickly showered, changed, and made himself presentable for his mother.

Draco had no idea how many guests had stayed the night, but he imagined a fair few did. Lucius's funeral had been an odd blend of a solemn reception and a classic, Narcissa Malfoy party. Nobody pretended to *miss* him exactly, and Narcissa always believed in hosting in a way that lent itself to excellent conversation, laughter, and even the occasional dance. But the fact was, Lucius's death was the reason they were all there. It had been strange, and it made Draco's mixed feelings about his father even worse than usual.

Draco exhaled as he squared his shoulders and prepared to face his mother and presumably several of her friends too.

He made his way through the hall, down a sweeping staircase and into the entry gallery, which had various public rooms of the Manor attached to it. He steeled himself as he opened a pair of glass doors and made his way into the Witches' Parlor, where his mother often hosted her female friends. To his great surprise, his mother was the only one there.

"Draco," she said curtly. Draco glanced around suspiciously.

"Where are the others?"

"Having brunch in the Dining Room. I wished to speak with you, and given the events that inspired this get together I believe I will get a pass for being a few minutes late this morning."

Draco looked at her warily. She had been quite stoic about Lucius's passing, but Draco had caught a few moments of sadness cross her face over the past few days when she didn't think anybody was looking. He knew his mother had been fond of his father in her own way, but their marriage was as much of an alliance of houses and blood as anything else. Whatever feelings they had for each other had grown over time, after the match had been made. Those feelings had then waned when Lucius joined the Death Eaters and pulled Draco into it too. Still, her husband was dead. Draco didn't know which version of Narcissa he would be getting today.

"Now tell me, Draco. Do I need to vet Ella Vanity? Because I'll admit she's a rather pretty girl, but she strikes me as a questionable choice, and after the Astoria disaster I *really* must be more involved from the beginning."

Bloody hell.

"There's no need," he said shortly.

Narcissa arched one penciled eyebrow and gave him *that* stare — the one that always made him confess his shortcomings to her. He wasn't sure how she did it, but Narcissa Malfoy could get anything out of anybody, and most particularly her only son.

"Then explain what you were doing with her in the Essex Suite last night?"

"Is that the name of it?"

"Draco," she scolded.

"What? I can't keep track of the bloody names of the rooms, especially when they all look alike."

"Draco Lucius Malfoy, you are deflecting, and you are doing a poor job of it. It's unbecoming. Now, then — tell me what you were doing with her last night."

“I’m sure you can guess.”

“Of course, but I would like to know *why* if you don’t intend to court her. For all of your flaws, public promiscuity has never been one of them until now.”

Again, she leveled *that* look at him.

“Fine!” he said, throwing up his hands. “She just threw herself at me, alright? I was drunk, she was desperate, and my defenses were down. I didn’t mean to do it, and I barely remember it.”

His mother pursed her lips at this. “Very well. If she’s so desperate that she would be willing to do *that* to draw your attention, we must strike her from the list.”

“What list?” asked Draco.

“The list, Draco. *My* list. I started it when you were in your last year at Hogwarts of course, and I resurrected it after it became clear your father was on his way out. I had such high hopes for Astoria, but of course that became impossible once the details about her little situation came to light, and you’ve been dallying about presenting anybody else since the two of you parted ways. As I said, I will need to be more involved this time. I interviewed any number of witches last night and —”

“You did *what*?” Draco asked in horror.

“I told you Draco, I must be involved this time. You clearly cannot be trusted to select a suitable witch.”

“Mother, this is ridiculous. I don’t want —”

“Nonsense,” she said. “Now that your father is gone it’s high time you were settled. You and I both know that the estate is far too large and the burdens too great to be managing things all on your own. Besides, you’re nearly on the shelf dear.”

“On the *shelf*? This isn’t the bloody seventeen hundreds! And even if it was, wizards are *never* on the shelf! It was always the witches who married very young!”

“Don’t be sexist, Draco,” said Narcissa sternly. “Wizards can expire just the same as witches. Now then, you had best be looking too if you wish to have any input on this. I’ve given you plenty of time to find somebody suitable, but at this point I fear I will be waiting forever if I don’t take you in hand.”

“You can’t,” he said shortly.

“I can, and I will,” she said firmly. “I’ve given you ample time to settle this yourself. I fear I grew soft with you after the war, and you became complacent after the Astoria situation. It’s overdue, Draco. And since I will be involved in the initial selection process this time, I’m certain it will be far more successful than your last attempt.”

Draco just gaped at her.

“Oh and another thing,” said Narcissa briskly. “I’ll need to renovate the Dower House now that I’m a widow. Of course I won’t be moving there until you are actually *married*, but these things take time. I will be requesting a disbursement of funds once I have estimates for the needed improvements in hand. I expect you will approve my request expeditiously, and there will be no delay in the matter.”

Fucking hell woman, is this what it was like being married to you?

But instead of saying this out loud, Draco just said, “Of course, Mother.”

“Good,” she said. “Now then, that reminds me. Have you completed the ritual for the Manor? The magic still feels different.”

“Erm, no...” he said, rubbing the back of his neck.

Draco had intended to do the ritual, he really had. That was the entire reason he had been in the Study the night before when Ella cornered him. After burying Lucius, Draco made his required appearance at the reception, realized he was becoming rather drunk after a time, and then remembered he hadn't completed the ritual yet. He went to the Study for another drink and a short period of brooding before doing it.

He meant to do it when he got there, but it had been an emotional day. He stared at the words from the small book for what felt like ages, and Ella had interrupted him before he finally wrapped his mind around the enormity of what he was about to do. He almost told his mother it was probably for the best he hadn't done it the night before. He was so drunk he might have bungled it. Then again, his failure to complete the ritual was inexcusable, alcohol or not.

"*Honestly*, Draco. That is urgent. The wards are woefully inadequate while the Manor is between Masters."

"Yes, yes, I know," he muttered grumpily.

"Then I expect you to eat quickly and go do that *now*. Salazar help me. You should have done it the moment your father's crypt was sealed. You know that's the point at which Lucius's magic broke."

"Fucking fine," he muttered.

"Language," she said sharply. "You may be the Master now, but you are still my son. I did not raise you to have such poor manners."

Draco scowled at his mother, but once again she gave him *that* look, and his face fell. "My apologies. I'll complete the ritual as soon as I have eaten."

"See that you do," she said.

He just nodded as she started to move toward the door. "Oh and Draco?"

Draco just raised an eyebrow in question.

“Try to keep it in your pants going forward, won’t you? I imagine Ella Vanity is going to prove to be quite a complication now that you have given her a taste of wifely privileges.”

Draco’s jaw dropped, as Narcissa gave him one final, disapproving look and swept from the room.

Draco stared at the doorway where his mother had just disappeared for another long moment before grabbing a pastry from one of the small tables in the room and munching on it. It tasted like sawdust and made his stomach roll from the night before. Only now did he realize he had never taken a hangover potion. That was probably an oversight, but some part of him didn’t want it. He deserved to be punished just a little for his horrendous judgment the night before. He needed to remember *why* he only allowed himself to drink to excess in a controlled environment, around people he trusted.

It was true he had just buried his father when he did it, but that was still no excuse. The loss of Narcissa might warrant such reckless behavior, but the loss of Lucius certainly did not. After all, he had truly lost his father the moment the Dark Lord rose again and Lucius became his instead of Draco’s.

Oh sure, there had been moments of softness over those years. Lucius had not relished seeing his only son and heir tortured. And when Lucius watched the tides turn in the middle of the final battle at Hogwarts — thanks in large part to Narcissa’s brilliant lie at the last possible moment — Lucius abandoned the fight to find Draco. But on the whole, Lucius had been too taken in by the illusion of power, too optimistic about the Dark Lord’s regime and the Malfoy family’s place in it to be loyal to Draco first.

Draco had had years to get used to his mixed feelings about Lucius. He didn’t *love* his father, exactly, but he felt a keen sense of duty toward him. After all, the word ‘duty’ had been a constant chant in his skull from the moment he was old enough to understand what it

meant. No, the reason he drank the night before wasn't because Lucius had died — not *really*. It was because the burdens of the estate were now Draco's, and he felt woefully underprepared for it.

Lucius's unwavering sense of purpose had always made him believe he would survive Azkaban. Even when Draco watched his health start to decline and begged Lucius to teach him how to manage the estate, Lucius had brushed Draco off, assuming he would just serve his fifteen years before emerging from prison just as strong as he was when he entered it.

It was only in the last couple of weeks, with the specter of death upon him, that Lucius accepted the inevitable. But by then, it was too little too late. The best Lucius had been able to do between his rapid decline and the very limited visiting hours in Azkaban was tell Draco the names of his law firm and financial firm, provide his best contact at Gringotts to re-secure the family vaults, and disclose the location of the small book that contained instructions to transition the Manor. These few pieces of critical information had been interspersed between half-lucid ravings about duty and family honor and blood purity.

So when Lucius died, Draco inherited a vast network of assets that he couldn't even name, let alone manage. *That* was the real reason he had gotten so drunk that he allowed his baser instincts to take over when a naked Ella Vanity dropped to her knees.

Fuck.

He decided to mitigate the hangover the muggle way: with a large glass of water, a cup of bitter coffee, and yet another pastry, though his stomach objected to all of it. He knew it would take a little time, but it would work eventually. And now that he was waking up and fully appreciating the error of his ways, he knew his mother was right: he needed to perform the ritual to transition the Manor as quickly as possible.

Draco forced one last bite of croissant down his throat and then strode toward the door, before coming to a complete halt at the sound of a hysterical female voice.

“But he *wants* me! I know he must!” wailed a voice that sounded very much like Ella. Draco felt as though he had been plunged into a bucket of cold water as he retreated back into the Witches’ Parlor and pressed himself against the wall, hoping beyond hope she would pass it without a second look.

“Florrie!” he hissed.

Florrie appeared with a *CRACK!* that made Draco wince.

“Yes Master?” she squeaked, far too loudly for Draco’s comfort.

“What the fuck is she doing here?” he whispered. “I told you to ward her out!”

Florrie looked at him like he was an idiot. “Florrie cannot control any wards while the Manor is in transition, Sir!”

Goddammit.

She was right, of course. The Manor was almost wardless at the moment and had been for more than eighteen hours at this point. The Manor continued to answer to Lucius in death, until his crypt was filled with the remains of his body. This was intended to provide a period of transition, in case the owner died while away from the estate, which had actually happened in Lucius’s case. But the moment Draco sealed the door on Lucius’s crypt, his body was returned to the Manor, and Lucius’s magic broke.

Draco or Florrie could always cast rudimentary wards of course, but the special ones – including the ones that allowed them to admit or deny specific people on a mere whim – were tied to blood and strengthened with each generation. Of course Florrie couldn’t deny Ella entry while the Manor was in transition. And she couldn’t very

well cast blanket wards either, because they would apply to all of Narcissa's guests who were still there.

Draco closed his eyes and prayed for a miracle.

"Drakey!" came Ella's voice as she approached the Witches' Parlor, and Draco looked at Florrie desperately.

"Look, Florrie, can you apparate me into the Study please?" he asked frantically.

Again, Florrie looked at him like he was an idiot. "Master can apparate himself. There. Is. No. Wards."

She enunciated the last few words very slowly, evidently concerned that Draco had drunk himself into such a stupor the night before that he was incapable of understanding normal speech.

"Right," he said. If the situation weren't so dire he would have grimaced. As it was, he didn't have the time. "Please do your best to distract her for me."

Then he turned on the spot and a moment later appeared in the Study with a *CRACK!*

He quickly sent a locking charm toward the door, hoping the variation he used wasn't one Ella would be able to break herself. Then he took a deep breath and opened the small book he had been staring at the night before.

There was nothing for it. He needed to transition the Manor *now*. The fact that he had waited this long was a true failure of duty. Draco recalled from his history lessons as a child that the Manor had actually burned to the ground in the early 1600's thanks to a transition issue. The heir at the time had been traveling when his father died, and his father was buried by his wife before the heir could get back to the Manor to complete the transition. During those

few days that the Manor was wardless, the former Master's enemies had set fire to it.

It gave the new Master an opportunity to reconstruct the Manor from the ground up, but it had certainly been a blow. And it provided a very important lesson for all future Malfoys: close the crypt and then transition the Manor as quickly as possible. It also started a new Malfoy family tradition of having the heir close the crypt himself because that would ensure he was on the Manor's premises when the magic broke.

Yes, Draco was truly an idiot to have wallowed about it the way he did. After all, the Manor and its contents and grounds were the Malfoy assets with which Draco was most intimately familiar. He could take some time to allow his anxiety to spiral about everything else if he wanted to, but not this.

He took a deep breath and then picked up the book and his wand and moved to a bookcase against one wall. Draco had only explored this bookcase for the first time earlier that week, upon reading about it in the little book. The bookcase concealed a tiny room – barely large enough for one person to stand in – with a stone floor and bare walls. Draco felt for the latch inside the lower cabinet of the bookcase and triggered it before watching it swing forward to reveal the small room.

The candles and the sand were already laid out in the correct shape, described by the book. It was simple: four candles, one in each cardinal direction, with sand from the Manor grounds connecting them in the shape of a diamond. Draco had set everything up before his father's crypt was closed and then simply stalled too long to complete the ritual the night before.

Draco stepped into the center of the diamond, lit the candles with his wand and knelt to the ground while he placed the book in front of him so he could read the words. He took a deep breath and then muttered a spell to slice his palm open and pressed it into the stone between his knees as he began to chant.

“Sanguis patris mei evanuit. Sanguis meus implet hanc domum. Utere meo magicae donec moriar. Custodi terram meam, familiam meam, et domum istam.”

Draco felt a sudden tug of his magic from around his heart, and he gasped as the candles flared, and he was pulled down nearly on top of the stone floor. Suddenly there was an audible snap, and Draco was released. He scrambled up and looked down at the blood on the stone that was disappearing, as though being absorbed into the very bedrock of the Manor itself.

Then Draco felt a sense of warmth start around the same place in his heart and travel outward to all of his extremities. His magic tingled and crackled, and now he could feel them: the wards.

Draco blinked, in slight disbelief that it had worked, but he knew it had. He could *feel* them. He suddenly knew exactly how many people were in the Manor with him. He knew how many elves were in the various buildings versus on the grounds. He would know the moment anybody left or entered the premises. It was subtle, to be sure, but it was apparent. Draco could feel the delicate shifts in their layers, and he suddenly knew *exactly* how to control them.

Draco muttered a healing spell to his hand and then snuffed the candles, vanished the sand, and gathered his supplies as he left the small room. He would have no need to go in there ever again. He cast one last glance at it, now completely bare, as he let the bookcase swing shut. He replaced the small book on the third shelf of the trick bookcase, just as his father had left it. Draco – or rather, his own heir if his mother got her way – would be able to find it again someday.

“Florrie!” called Draco.

Florrie appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Yes, Master?” she said.

“Florrie, I secured the wards.”

“Florrie knows it, Sir,” she said. “Master can command all of the Manor elves now, Sir.”

This made Draco pause as he considered it. Florrie was his personal elf, and his mother had her own. They were bound to Draco and Narcissa, respectively, regardless of where they lived. But all of the other elves were bound to the Manor. It was true they usually followed his and his mother’s orders, but they weren’t *required* to, until now.

Draco took a deep breath. “Very well. Please tell the Manor elves that they should keep doing what they’ve been doing for the time being. Tell them to follow orders from Mother unless I say otherwise. I’ll let them know if any changes need to be made once I have some time to think about it.”

Florrie nodded once. “Yes, Master.”

“Good. Also, please escort Miss Vanity home, Florrie. I’ll adjust the wards to keep her out.”

Florrie gave him a slightly disapproving look, but she bobbed and disappeared. A few moments later Draco heard something that sounded like a screech come from the hallway outside of the study, and then he felt the wards shift ever so slightly: a person and an elf had disappeared from the premises.

Before he could second guess himself, Draco concentrated and commanded the wards to exclude Ella Vanity, pureblood witch, and a moment later Draco felt Florrie arrive again and another presence try and fail to arrive. Draco couldn’t suppress a grin. It had worked.

Draco took just a moment to relish his small victory when a familiar owl swept toward the window. Draco recognized her immediately of course – she belonged to Theo.

Draco let her in and pulled the letter from her leg curiously. He hadn't heard from Theo in over a month, ever since he was sent off on some mad project in the middle of nowhere by the Ministry of Magic. He ripped it open and read it quickly.

Mate,

Sorry I've been incommunicado. I've been stuck in a bog for the last several weeks, glamping with my new bestie. She's an absolute dream, though she did inadvertently cast a ward that redirected all of our owls while we were on site, and that's why I've been out of touch. Neither of us realized it until we were packing up yesterday. She sends her sincerest apologies.

I'm writing for a few reasons.

First, I wanted to let you know that I am, in fact, still alive and was not killed by the manticore that we found dwelling in those old ruins in northern England. Second, I thought I should tell you that I'm sort of sorry your father is dead – or rather, I'm sorry I missed his funeral (though to be fair, Pansy and Blaise wrote to say that you told them not to bother coming so maybe I shouldn't be sorry about that).

Third, I wanted to let you know that in lieu of attending that old bastard's funeral, I'm inviting you to a welcome-back-to-civilization party at my place tomorrow night. My partner will be there too, along with some of her friends. I can't wait to reintroduce you.

Floo in around 8, and we can catch up.

Love, hugs, kisses, etc.

Theo

Draco snorted at the letter, especially the sign-off. The couple of owls he sent Theo over the last few weeks had been returned unopened, and eventually Draco had stopped trying. It wasn't the

first time Theo had gone missing on a field assignment, and Draco and his friends had learned not to worry too much unless Theo missed his estimated return date by more than a week. Managing Britain's magical creature populations wasn't always conducive to timely correspondence.

Draco didn't know the details of this particular trip, just that it was meant to be longer than usual, and he had a partner for it this time. Draco furrowed his brow at the odd description Theo gave surrounding their project – *glamping*? He had no idea what that was. But it sounded like they caught a manticore, which was a pretty big deal. Draco was more curious about it than he was willing to admit, not that he needed any curiosity to hear all about Theo's life. If there was one thing Theo Nott liked to do with his closest friends, it was overshare.

Still, Draco was pleased by the invitation. He was sure it would help pull him out of his funk surrounding his father's death and his new burdens as the senior-most male Malfoy.

He had just jotted back his acceptance, and he sent it off with Theo's owl, when he heard somebody outside of his door. A moment later his mother pushed the door to the Study open, her wand still out, evidently having just broken his locking spell.

Draco took one look at her face and suddenly he felt a flash of guilt, though he truly had no idea what he had done this time.

"Draco," she said. "What on *earth* have you done to the Manor?"

Unicorns and Wildflowers

Chapter 3: Unicorns and Wildflowers

AN: It's time to reconnect. And what exactly did Draco do to the Manor?

Hermione

As it turned out, spending a month in a tent with Theo Nott was surprisingly easy. He was just as scrupulous as Hermione was about following their house rules, and she found he was a much better roommate than either Harry or Ron had ever been. She never went into his bedroom of course, but the few glimpses she caught while his door was open indicated that it was surprisingly neat. Harry and Ron had been slobs by comparison, and she had spent much of that year on the run tidying up after them. She didn't clean up after Theo a single time, other than alternating who was on dinner cleanup duty each night.

He was also a creature of habit. After living with him for a week, she found he turned in around the same time each night and woke up at the same time each morning. She learned he preferred tea over coffee and had an almost compulsive need to eat a certain muggle chocolate biscuit Hermione had packed, and she took several trips into the closest village to buy more. Morning, noon, and night, she saw him munching on a biscuit while he worked.

He had been nothing but cordial to her from the outset, and in fact, within a week he was downright friendly. After their first curse incident that went awry, he declared Hermione to be the best Gryffindor he had ever met because she saved his arse. And by the

time their month together was up, Theo announced to the manticore they had just subdued that she was his new best friend.

Yes, in no time at all his walls around her fell. She discovered he was dramatic and prone to making grand declarations and gestures. He could contain it and settle into a classic Slytherin snark when he wanted to, but his true nature was much more open and warm than she had ever expected. She wondered how it had taken her thirteen years to discover this.

It was his friends of course.

Theo had always been in the background of his trio of friends. Blaise Zabini, Pansy Parkinson, and especially Draco Malfoy had always created an imposing picture of exceptionally attractive and unpleasant people at Hogwarts. Even Theo himself was no slouch in the looks department. His light brown hair and very blue eyes were less dramatic than Pansy and Blaise's nearly-black hair and dark eyes or Draco's platinum blonde and gray, but he was quite handsome enough in his own right.

But still, compared to Draco and Pansy in particular, Theo, and to a lesser extent Blaise, tended to melt into the background of his more aggressive friends. Hermione had a tendency to do the same thing, at least when it came to conflict. She had never been shy, but it was usually Harry and Ron who lost their tempers with the Slytherins. She could count on one hand the number of times she had truly lost her cool around them and let hexes or fists fly.

It was no wonder she and Theo never connected as students. But now, as adults in their mid-twenties, she found him utterly delightful, and she had to admit that Hestia knew what she was about when she paired them together.

In fact, Hermione liked Theo so much she was even willing to give his friends a second chance. They had both rather quickly shattered their rule when it came to discussing their friends, and Theo had done a good job of softening Hermione toward them.

“Well Pansy and Blaise are mad for each other but have never admitted it. It drives Draco and me up the wall,” he said one night, about halfway through their trip.

“And what about you and Malfoy?”

“Both confirmed bachelors, though Draco was engaged for awhile. Astoria was perfectly lovely, but she had no fire. Draco ended up calling things off.”

“Really?” she asked. She had heard that he was engaged soon after Hogwarts, but lost track of his social life at some point. She had never been one to read the society pages very often unless she was in them herself, and in any event she never believed half the things she did bother to read. She assumed he had gotten married and had no idea he had called it off.

“Oh yeah. Draco needs a firmer hand than Astoria. Somebody who can pull him out of his moods.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but smiled a little at this. “He’s turned into the dark and brooding type then, has he?”

Theo grinned at this. “He’s always been that way to some degree, but I think it’s gotten worse as he’s aged.”

Hermione couldn’t help but chuckle at this.

“But seriously,” he said, the laughter dying from his voice. “It’s not been easy for him. He’s lived in his father’s shadow his whole life, and their relationship is very strained, especially since the war. At some point Lucius is going to die, and I’m not sure *what* Draco will do then.”

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at this. “Why?”

Theo gave her a knowing look. “He’ll be in charge of an enormous fortune, and Lucius is a control freak. He’s never given Draco the

reins. I know Draco has asked many times to be let in on the family business, so to speak, but Lucius has never allowed it.”

“Why on earth not?”

Theo shrugged. “Draco doesn’t conform as well as Lucius might wish these days. Case in point: he dumped the pureblood socialite he was engaged to, and he’s never been clear about why he did it. It caused a huge scandal, you know, that sort of thing always does. He just said they didn’t suit, but that’s never satisfied the society rumor mill. Regardless of the true reason, it absolutely enraged Lucius. Draco wasn’t actually disinherited for it, but apparently it was a close thing. At that point Lucius *really* cut him out of the family business decisions, and I doubt he’ll let Draco in at all until he’s made a satisfactory marriage and probably reproduced too. Draco has tried his best to learn from books and whatnot, but he really has no idea what to do if Lucius kicks it before teaching Draco the ropes.”

“Well couldn’t you show him what to do?”

Hermione knew that Theo came from money too, or at least she thought he did. She had been under the impression that most Slytherins did, with a few notable exceptions.

Like Snape and Voldemort, she thought with a grimace.

“No,” said Theo. “I have a house we always *called* a manor, but that was really just one of my ancestors being arrogant. It’s old of course, but it’s not exactly an estate. I also have enough gold for two or three generations to live on, but it’s nothing like the Malfoys. That’s why I work a traditional job. It keeps me busy and covers my expenses. It’s not enough to really grow the Nott fortune, but it preserves what I already have so I’m not the generation that pisses it all away. The Malfoy’s though... well, they’re one of the wealthiest families in wizarding Europe, and Lucius has never let Draco control anything except the heir’s share. Draco doesn’t even know the full extent of what they have. But until he conforms and makes Lucius happy again, he won’t find out.”

Hermione was a bit taken aback by all of this. The Draco Malfoy she knew had always followed his father blindly. But then again, she was forced to admit that she barely interacted with him after he was Marked. It was very evident that he had lost his taste for the Death Eaters by the time Voldemort died, and he had gotten in over his head. Lucius's own views about it, however, had always seemed more severe than his son's.

"Anyway," continued Theo, "Draco's a prickly bastard. Always has been. But he's my best mate. I think you'll find him very different from how he was in school."

Forced to confront the rather uncomfortable truth that people *did* change after a war and years of maturation, Hermione finally agreed to let Theo throw a coming home bash for them both. It would be the first time their friend groups had ever mixed, and Hermione was both eager and slightly terrified about how the night would go. Theo, however, was perfectly at ease with the idea.

"Listen, darling. If your friends are even half as good as you, it will be a match made in heaven. We just need to grease the wheels a little bit. Say you'll convince them."

Hermione agreed and selected Ginny, Luna, and Harry for their first get together, which Theo swore would be just one of many going forward. Hermione still saw Ron now and then, but he was the least changed of all of her friends. She thought it was probably imprudent to put him in the same room as a bunch of former Slytherins, at least until she had a chance to vet them first.

And so, upon their arrival back in London, Hermione and Theo turned in their report about Project Chimera, including their success at relocating the mantichore to a remote island in Greece, which was its native habitat. Theo, it transpired, was rather adept at making portkeys, and he had a blanket authorization to do it for magical creature transport. With their project finished, Hermione immediately owled her friends and invited them to Theo's party the following night.

Luna owled back directly, accepting the invitation without any questions.

Ginny, naturally, showed up at the Ministry and hauled Hermione to lunch, where she interrogated her about Theo. By the end of the lunch, Ginny was keen to meet him and promised to strong arm Harry as well.

Harry, of course, was appalled.

“Theo? Theo *Nott*?”

“Yes, of course,” said Hermione calmly.

“And all his other Slytherin friends will be there?”

“Yes, Harry, I’ve already answered this question,” said Hermione. “I obviously haven’t met any of them recently, but we should give them a chance. This whole house rivalry nonsense is awfully passé, don’t you think? And Theo is absolutely delightful.”

She could tell by the look on Harry’s face that he didn’t know what the word ‘passé’ meant, and he was *very* skeptical when she called Theo ‘delightful,’ but he wasn’t willing to ask her for clarification. As it was, when faced with three witches who were all quite keen to go, Harry was so thoroughly overruled that he had no choice but to go along too. And that was how Hermione found herself floo’ing to Theo’s house for the first time the following evening, with Harry, Ginny, and Luna in her wake.

Hermione stepped out onto the threshold and looked around the parlor in surprise. She knew Nott Manor was an old one, but the inside was surprisingly bright. It was true there was some dark wood paneling on the walls, but the space above it was painted a pale yellow, and there was some very modern art over the fireplace from which she had just emerged. Theo told her he had celebrated his father’s demise by redecorating.

“Oh Hermione!” came a sing-song voice as soon as she stepped out of the floo. Hermione turned to find Theo striding toward her, his eyes twinkling. “Hark, how goeth my dearest, *best* Gryffindor friend? My esteemed partner in glamping, my little lioness, my curliest one!” As he said this last bit, he tugged on an errant curl, and Hermione felt it spring back into place. “And her dearest girlfriends, of course – Ginny and Luna.”

“Hi Theo,” she grinned.

Harry just gaped, and she struggled not to laugh. Theo then turned to Harry and raised one eyebrow as he shifted to his Slytherin voice. “Potter. Charmed, I’m sure.”

To Hermione’s surprise, Ginny snorted, and Theo grinned and winked at her.

“Nothing to say?” he asked, as he surveyed Harry’s amazed look with a smirk. “That’s OK. I’ll leave it up to Hermione to sing my praises and expound upon my virtues. I just had to break away from my junior Death Eater support group over there to say hello. Hermione, Ginny, and Luna – please come join us. Potter, you can come too.”

Then Theo leaned down to kiss Hermione’s cheek, and he grabbed her hand and tugged her toward Pansy and Blaise, who were gaping at them with much the same expression as Harry.

Hermione found herself trying and failing to suppress an enormous smile. Theo was really too much, and he had obviously taken great pleasure in shocking his friends.

“Now then,” said Theo as they all settled down together. “Hermione, dear – champagne as usual?”

“Please,” said Hermione.

“And I’ve heard from my best bestie here that Ginny and Luna would enjoy that as well?”

Ginny and Luna nodded their assent.

“Pansy, dear – you’re usual white wine, yes?”

Pansy said nothing, but inclined her head, still looking at Hermione and her friends with a great deal of skepticism.

“And for the gentlemen, I assume we would all like to drown in firewhiskey.”

Harry and Blaise nodded silently.

“Excellent,” said Theo, clapping his hands, as the various drinks levitated to each of their respective recipients. “I’m not usually one for champagne, but Hermione and I did kill a rather nice bottle the other night.”

“Yes, because it was all the alcohol we had left, Theo,” said Hermione with a twinkle. “I used half of it on the gash that mantichore gave you, and then we drank the rest.”

Theo shuddered. “If I didn’t know Hermione was in love with me, somewhere deep down, I would have thought she was trying to kill me. Imagine, please, pouring a carbonated beverage on an open wound.”

To Hermione’s amusement, Harry in particular winced at this.

“Sorry,” said Hermione a bit apologetically. “Alcohol cleanses wounds, and I was out of the normal potion I use for it.”

“Just be glad she didn’t have to cut you open,” muttered Harry. “Her hands shake when she gets nervous.”

Hermione turned and cast an appalled look at Harry, while Theo laughed, and even Pansy and Blaise cracked small smiles.

“They do *not*, Harry James Potter!” she insisted.

“You don’t remember Ron splinching in the woods? You almost dumped our entire stock of dittany trying to get the damn bottle open because your hands were shaking so badly!”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Don’t be dramatic. I had limited resources and Death Eaters on our tail. As I recall, *you* didn’t know what to do either.”

Harry reddened, while the Slytherins gaped at them.

“That’s OK, Harry” said Ginny. “I’m sure you found some way to appear heroic while Hermione actually did all the work.”

“Christ,” muttered Harry, rolling his eyes, as Theo gave a wolfish grin.

Pansy had just opened her mouth to say something, when suddenly the fireplace turned green, and Draco Malfoy stumbled out with a great, “Fuck! Theo, mate, sorry I’m late, but I swear to Salazar I’ve broken the fucking Manor or something. I have no idea what the hell I’ve...”

Then he came to a complete halt as he stared at Hermione, Harry, Ginny, and Luna. He gave a visible grimace as he surveyed them.

“Well if this isn’t the cherry on top of the best fucking week of my life.”

Draco

Draco was running late to Theo’s house. He was terribly late. He was so very late because once again he was trying to understand what the fuck had happened to the Manor after he completed the ritual.

He knew the ritual worked, at least partially. He had mastered the wards, and that was the most important thing of course.

But the magic the Manor had pulled from Draco had wrought any number of odd changes, few of which made any sense at all.

Draco had read in the journal that he should expect small shifts in the appearance of the Manor and grounds after the transition was complete. The furniture and most of the decor in the Manor was always selected by whichever Malfoy wife happened to be in residence at the time. But other elements of the Manor were pulled directly from the Master's magic. It was thought to be a reflection of who he was, his preferences and peculiarities, and the Manor took all of this into account and customized itself for the current owner within certain limits.

The most obvious change — and the reason for Narcissa's confusion when she found him right after the ritual was complete — was the portraiture throughout the Manor. Ironically, Draco actually didn't notice any changes right after he completed the ritual because the Study only contained a single portrait: a beautiful painting of his mother right around the time she married her father. The large portrait of Narcissa had the place of honor over the fireplace, and she was still there, looking as lovely as ever.

But as soon as the real Narcissa arrived in the study to fetch Draco, it became clear that Narcissa's portrait was the *only* painting that had stayed the same. In fact, every other portrait of his ancestors — and to be clear, there were many throughout the Manor — had been removed in exchange for...

"Unicorns!" Draco said to Theo, once he got over the immediate shock of facing a bunch of Gryffindors and Lovegood barely two days after his father was buried.

"The entire Manor is crawling with portraits of fucking unicorns! And fairies, and leprechauns, and I even found one with a goddamn pygmy puff! And don't get me started on the house elves. I swear to

Salazar, every fucking elf we have ever owned has been memorialized in portrait form somewhere.”

To Draco's consternation, the Gryffindor's snorted with laughter, while Pansy and Blaise practically howled.

“It's not funny!” insisted Draco, ignoring the Gryffindors.

He decided he would simply pretend they didn't exist, at least to start. He couldn't deal with them on top of everything else right now. Besides, Granger was wearing short sleeves, and that goddamn word Bellatrix had carved into her arm that day was out in the open for all of them to see. If Draco looked at her, he would look at her arm, and he refused to do it. Even without looking at her directly, he could still see it in his peripheral vision, and it was cracking open memories he had carefully buried and not thought about for years.

“It's hilarious,” said Blaise. “Malfoy Manor, home to paintings of cavorting unicorns? How did you manage that?”

“I just said I have no idea, didn't I?”

Theo, thankfully, calmed down enough to ask, “Did something like that happen when Lucius took over from your grandfather?”

Draco furrowed his brow and shook his head. “No. I mean, I was a little kid, yeah? I don't really remember the differences in the Manor from before Father took over versus after. But Mother remembers it and says the family portraits stayed the same for his transition. She had no idea the Manor's magic affected them at all, nor did I.”

“Where did they even come from?” asked Pansy curiously. “Surely the Manor didn't just conjure them?”

Draco shrugged. “According to Florrie they've all been in the Malfoy Art Vault for centuries, even the house elf portraits. They've just never been hung before because...”

Draco trailed off and shrugged, and all of his friends grimaced at him sympathetically.

“Malfoy Art Vault?” asked Weasley with a note of disbelief in her voice. Draco chose to ignore her.

Truthfully, he didn’t know they had an art vault either, and discovering that they did had been a reminder of all the shit Lucius had never told him. Learning that the Manor could somehow call items from it was even more disturbing. When he questioned Florrie about this she simply looked at him like he was an idiot and said, “How is Master thinking elves is getting a sofa to fit in the goblin carts? The objects vault is the *Manor’s*, Sir. The elves is calling things from it or the Manor is doing it on its own.”

Draco had always assumed the items were just shrunk and removed from the vault in the ordinary way, and he told Florrie as much. She assumed the expression of one explaining something to a simpleton as she said, “No, Master. The Manor, the elves, the wards, the vault, tis all tied to Malfoy magic. The Manor is calling things from its vault that its Master or the elves is needing. The Manor elves is telling Florrie about it, Sir.”

Yes, all of it was bizarre, especially the notion that the Manor had its own vault and could passively control it to some degree. Draco never would have believed it if it hadn’t been for the bloody paintings. He realized that he didn’t have a good grasp of the Manor’s magic, and he found himself on the verge of a panic attack every time he thought about it.

“And look,” Draco continued, “it’s not just the art. The grounds... they’ve gone absolutely mad.”

“How so?” asked Blaise curiously.

“Well you know the gardens of course. They’re very English.”

“Ah yes, the age-old combination of gravel paths, strategic topiaries, and patches of lawn,” said Theo with mock seriousness.

“Right,” said Draco. “And the grounds were very similar when my grandfather owned it. Mother told me that the shape of the hedges changed a little when Father took it over, but that was all.”

It was true. The gardens at the Manor had always been staid, even a bit severe. The hedgerows were cut with precision, the patches of lawn had no weeds to speak of, and the gravel made a satisfying crunch to invite wandering. At the center of it all was a large fountain and a small, rectangular pond. The whole effect was very geometric and precise, and Draco had always thought it felt a bit cold.

“What, did your grandfather have peacocks too?” asked Potter. Again, Draco ignored him, though he was a bit disconcerted to find his friends snickering at this comment.

“Anyway,” said Draco, pressing forward determinedly, “now there are flowers.”

“What’s wrong with flowers?” asked Granger.

Draco definitely ignored *her*. That bloody scar of hers was like a fucking beacon, and he absolutely refused to be drawn in.

“What kind of flowers?” asked Pansy instead, and Draco decided he could answer her.

“Absolutely mad ones! I have no idea what they are, but they’re wild and unkempt and *colorful*. You know the gardens! There wasn’t a single flower in sight because Father liked things tidy.”

“Yes, and it made your gardens bloody boring,” said Pansy.

“But this is like a whole fucking *field* of wildflowers!” insisted Draco. “I couldn’t even tell you where the weeds stopped and the flowers

began! There's no organization, no *system*, no nothing, just thousands of fucking flowers!"

"Well are the pond and fountain still there?" asked Theo curiously.

Draco frowned. "The pond is, but it's not rectangular anymore. It looks like a pond you might find in the wild with lily pads and everything. And the fountain is missing entirely. Where the fuck did it go? They were the centerpiece of the gardens before. Now there is no center, not really. It's just... color, with a natural pond on one side and a rough path cut through the flowers to get to it."

"That sounds so lovely," sighed Lovegood. Draco grimaced but felt he probably should acknowledge her. After all, she wasn't technically a Gryffindor.

"And what makes you say that?"

"Oh it just sounds so natural. Maybe the Manor has decided it's time to attract animals and insects. A whole field of wildflowers? It's positively whimsical."

He had to admit, the word she used was exactly right. *Whimsical*.

Ever since Draco had performed the ritual, the Manor – which had always been formal, heavy, and cold – had been imbued with a distinct sense of whimsy. The moment Lucius's magic broke, Draco felt something lighten around the grounds. He assumed the heaviness of the Manor's magic would return as soon as he completed the ritual and the wards reactivated, but it didn't. Only in the past couple of days had Draco learned that the Malfoy magic that had always made the Manor feel unapproachable wasn't actually *Malfoy* magic, but Lucius's magic. Draco had never recognized it as being keyed to his father specifically. After all, the Manor felt much the same way when his grandfather Abraxas was alive. Draco had lived with it his whole life and thought that was just the way things were at the Manor. He was accustomed to it, and he didn't *mind* it, exactly. But with the portraits of sneering ancestors gone and

riotous, wildflowers filling the gardens, not to mention some of the other, smaller changes he had noticed, the Manor felt almost *warm* now.

"It *is* whimsical," he acknowledged. "It's fucking ridiculous."

"By *why*?" asked Blaise again. "Why did all that happen?"

Draco gave a slightly overwhelmed shrug. "I told you, I don't know. I mean, the Manor's magic is so old that when the Master dies the heir has to do a blood ritual to transition things. That's how all the blood wards pass down and all."

All three Slytherins were nodding, and Draco wasn't terribly surprised to see Granger nodding in his peripheral vision too. The others looked a bit confused, but Draco decided he wasn't going to take the time to explain it to them.

"Anyway, I did the ritual," he continued, "and the book I used explained that the Manor pulls the magic from the Master once the ritual is complete. Apparently it's supposed to be a reflection of *me*. But I must have done something wrong, because there is no way, *no possible way* that fucking unicorns and wildflowers reflect *me*. I was fairly hungover when I did it so maybe that was the problem?"

To Draco's consternation, everyone was trying not to laugh. "I don't know mate," said Blaise through snickers, "you look like somebody who might want to ride a unicorn that has wildflowers in its mane."

Draco gave Blaise his most withering stare. Then to Draco's surprise, Granger spoke up.

"Well did the ward transition work?"

Draco glanced at her, saw the scar on her arm, and his jaw clenched as he looked away. "Yes," he said through gritted teeth.

“Then the ritual worked as intended,” she said. “Plenty of ancient, magical buildings change a little bit during a transition. Hogwarts, for one, certainly does, whenever a new Headmaster claims the wards. I’ll admit that what you’re describing sounds a bit... *severe*, but it’s keyed entirely to your magic. If the wards transitioned then you did it correctly.”

Draco knew this of course. He didn’t need Granger to tell him he had done the most important aspects of it correctly. He just couldn’t believe the side effects. Surely *something* had gone wrong with it. He didn’t deign to respond to her, but then Theo jumped in.

“Well is there anything that *does* reflect you?”

Draco paused. “Actually, yes. The Manor gave me a quidditch pitch.”

His friends’ eyes got big, and Draco couldn’t help but glance at Potter and Weasley while he said this.

“A fucking quidditch pitch?” asked Potter in amazement. “Is it regulation size?”

Draco hesitated, because he generally made it a rule not to speak to Potter when they saw each other in passing. They had come to some sort of silent agreement to let the hostility from the past go and not interact going forward after Draco’s trial was over. That had always worked very well for Draco, but now Theo had thrown them together. Draco wished he could ignore him and the others, but they seemed determined to actually *talk* to Draco.

Goddammit.

He took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes. The rings aren’t there yet, but I’m going to install some, along with a broomshed and a small locker room on one end of it. The field itself, however, is exactly the right size and shape for it. That has to be what the Manor was getting at when it gave it to me. I begged Father to put one in for me in that precise spot ever since I was old enough to know what

quidditch *was*. We always had the space to do it, but Father never allowed it because it would have taken over part of the gardens and made his hedgerows asymmetrical.”

“Bloody hell,” Potter muttered. “Wish I had a quidditch pitch.” Draco couldn’t help the smirk that crossed his face.

“The garden at the Burrow does perfectly well,” said Granger. Draco couldn’t help but notice that both Potter and Weasley rolled their eyes at this.

“Only because it’s magical and remote,” said Weasley. “It’s not nearly large enough to play a *real* game.”

“Well you have to admit it works better than Harry’s house,” said Granger. “Nobody is flying around a townhouse in London.”

Potter gave her a marvelous eye roll at this, and Draco felt his lips twitch.

“Well if you can add things like quidditch rings, could you change the gardens and paintings?” asked Pansy curiously.

Draco hesitated. “Florrie thinks I can. But the Manor might... resist it to some degree, unless I call the Manor to accept my changes as its Master. I have no idea what the fuck that means though, and I haven’t had time to research it.”

“Who’s Florrie?” asked Weasley.

Draco glanced at her. Evidently he wasn’t getting away from the Gryffindors any time soon.

“She’s my elf.”

“Do you *pay* her?” asked the predictably shrill voice of Granger from the corner.

Draco refused to look at her directly while he said, “Of course I don’t fucking *pay* her.”

“That is so — ” she started, but to Draco’s utter shock Potter interrupted.

“Oh knock it off Hermione, won’t you? You know I don’t pay Kreacher either.”

Draco blinked. Had Potter just *defended* him?

Out of the corner of his eye Draco watched as Granger rounded on Potter.

“Yes, and I’ve been telling you for years that it’s not *right!* It’s slave labor, you know that!”

“Hermione, they *like* it!”

“Because they’re brainwashed! You know as well as I do that *Dobby* wanted to be free and paid for his work!”

Draco felt an odd lurch in his stomach. He remembered Dobby of course, his father’s former elf. Lucius had freed him after he failed in some task, but Lucius had never provided any details about it. Draco had no idea Potter and the others even knew Dobby until he randomly showed up that horrible day at the Manor to rescue them after Granger was tortured. It was one of the most surprising moments of the war for Draco.

“Look, Dobby was... different. You know he was horribly abused,” said Potter bluntly. “I freed him because he wanted to be freed. Kreacher has never wanted to be free, nor does he want to be paid. I’ve offered many times.”

This was diverting enough that Draco suddenly looked at Potter. “Wait, *you* freed Dobby? How? He was bound to Father.”

To Draco's surprise Potter just smirked. "I ran into Lucius and Dobby right after the Chamber of Secrets shitshow at the end of second year. I was covered head to toe in slime, and I shoved a nasty sock into Lucius's hands before he realized what I was doing. He was so disgusted by it he threw it, and Dobby caught it."

Draco just gaped at him before saying, "Father always said *he* freed Dobby."

Potter shrugged. "Well of course he did if you want to be technical about it, but he certainly didn't mean to."

"Fuck..." muttered Draco, and Potter just grinned at the memory.

"Well *anyway*," interjected Granger, "I still don't think it's *right*."

"I suppose this is a bad time to tell you I'm going to get another one then?" asked Potter.

At this, Draco finally did look squarely at Granger for the first time, and he was a bit taken aback by what he found. Her curls were softer than he remembered, and her skin was very tan, presumably from camping outdoors for the last month. She had a few freckles across the bridge of her nose, and her lips were a rosebud pink. Her hazel eyes were flashing in anger toward Potter as her jaw dropped.

"*Excuse me?*"

Potter just shrugged, and Draco privately thought he was an idiot to courting such obvious danger, but then again he was the fucking Boy Who Lived Twice.

"Managing Grimmauld Place and also me and Gin is a lot for Kreacher. He could use some help," said Potter simply.

"But —"

"Look," he said, rolling his eyes. "I'm sure this lot all have elves. Hell, Malfoy probably has a dozen. Malfoy Manor is huge."

Granger turned an accusing glance at all the Slytherins.

“Well?” she demanded.

Draco was pleased to see his friends all giving Potter disgruntled looks. Listening to the Gryffindors have a go at each other was surprisingly entertaining, but it was much less so when Granger’s ire was directed toward them instead.

“I have one,” admitted Blaise.

“Me too,” said Pansy.

“As do I, darling,” said Theo.

“*Theo!*” she gasped.

Theo just shrugged. “I know, my darling. But I pinky swear that I will offer to pay him if that would make you happy.”

Granger pursed her lips, but nodded.

“And you?” she said, now glaring at Draco.

Draco felt a muscle in his jaw twitch, as he glanced at his friends. He could see he was getting no help from those quarters.

“Florrie is mine, and my mother has her own. There are six more tied to the Manor. Three manage the interior and the other three manage the grounds and outer buildings.”

Her eyes flashed. “And do you pay any of them?”

“I already told you, didn’t I?” he said.

Granger just glared at him. “That’s appalling. They are sentient, *magically powerful* beings. If you really can’t manage your lifestyle without them, then the least you could do is use some of that ridiculous wealth of yours and *pay* them for their service. Slave labor

has been illegal in muggle England for well over a hundred years, and yet wizards have never caught up.”

And with that she crossed her arms and huffed as she turned to face the other Slytherins.

To Draco’s shock, Blaise was nodding. “You’re right of course. I do pay Effie.”

Everybody turned to stare at him in shock. “Pardon?” interjected Pansy.

Blaise just shrugged. “You know I didn’t inherit an elf like the rest of you did. I pay Effie. She wanted to be bound to me, so I allowed it, but I told her she had let me pay her too. It was the only way I could bring myself to do the binding ceremony. I don’t think she’s ever spent any of it, but I send gold directly to her account at Gringotts each month. It’s there if she ever wants it.”

“But *why*?” asked Pansy in disbelief.

Blaise raised an eyebrow. “Because I don’t believe in gratuitous servitude. I never have. That’s why I didn’t join Voldemort. And I personally think that if I don’t pay my elf, then I can’t claim to be *that* morally superior to him. I mean sure, I’m not murdering or torturing people, but I’m still using a magical being for my own purposes, right? Is it really that different from Voldemort recruiting Death Eaters? Supposedly they all wanted to join too, in much the same way we say elves want to work without pay. He could make the Death Eaters do anything he wanted, and we can do the same thing to bound elves. I’ve never liked it.”

Draco just stared at one of his oldest friends in disbelief, a deeply uncomfortable feeling unfurling now. He had *never* heard Blaise espouse these views.

“You’ve never said anything mate,” said Theo quietly.

Blaise shrugged again. "None of you ever asked, and we don't really talk about it, do we? But I happen to agree with Granger here. It's nothing more than slave labor if you don't pay them. And the excuse that they don't want payment is a piss poor one. You can always *order* them to take payment if you must. Or just set up an account for them at Gringotts and take it out of their hands. They get used to it eventually. Effie doesn't spend her money, but after a couple years of it, she started to tell me how much she has saved. She likes it now. And if something ever happens to me and she becomes unbound, she has some money to live on. She doesn't have to seek another master unless she wants one."

Draco glanced at Potter, who was looking about as sick as Draco now felt.

"Yes *precisely* Blaise!" said Granger approvingly. Then she turned on Potter again. "You see? It's not just me!"

Potter just grimaced at her, but Draco got the impression that he was turning Blaise's words over in his mind in a way he had probably never done before with Granger's. He saw Weasley, Pansy, and Theo all looked a bit perturbed too, though Lovegood was nodding along.

Fucking hell. Am I really no better than the Dark Lord if I don't pay the elves?

Draco contemplated it for a few moments but then pushed it aside. He didn't know if he would go *that* far with it, and in any event he couldn't think about it now. He had about a thousand other problems he had to solve first.

He glanced toward the Gryffindors and once again Granger's arm flashed that foul word at him. He turned to look away. This week had already been terrible enough without being forced to examine his feelings about Granger's torture too.

The others were still talking, but Draco couldn't hear anything. He was occluding Granger and house elves and the burdens that had fallen on him the moment his father died. He had no idea how much time passed, and he only resurfaced once his thoughts were safely locked away in the recesses of his mind. He shifted ever so slightly to make sure he couldn't see any part of Granger, not even in his peripheral vision. If he looked at her again and saw that word on her arm, he would be back to square one.

Suddenly he was pulled out of his musings by Theo's voice. "And tell them about our project darling," he said.

Granger piped up, and Draco gritted his teeth at the sound of her voice. "Oh yes, Project Chimera. It was fascinating. They had us stationed in the northern York moors. Evidently there have been several muggle disappearances from the area, and the Ministry's preliminary investigation led them to a set of ruins, which was practically covered in curses and emitting odd sounds. So they sent me to curse break and Theo to deal with whatever magical creature we found inside. It ended up being a mantichore, if you can believe it."

Satisfied that he understood the gist of what Theo had been up to for the last month of his life, Draco tuned her out again, trying desperately to resurrect his occlumency walls.

It didn't work.

Scars

Chapter 4: Scars

AN: Draco's been stewing, and it all comes to a head.

Hermione

Hermione was at the Ministry, having just finished a two-week debriefing about Project Chimera. She had returned to the site that morning to confirm that nothing new had popped up since the project was complete, and sure enough all was quiet.

"Excellent," said Hestia. "I'm very pleased you two worked so well together."

"She is the light of my life," declared Theo, and Hermione felt that now-familiar mixture of warmth and exasperation at his words. Hestia raised her eyebrows, but Hermione could tell she was suppressing a grin.

"Very well," said Hestia. "If we ever have a project overlap like that again, I'll know who to call. In the meantime, Mr. Nott please feel free to return to your department. Hermione, I have another assignment for you."

Theo stood and leaned down to give Hermione a peck on the cheek before shaking Hestia's hand and making his way out the office and toward the lifts. He threw a wink back over his shoulder at her.

"He's really something else," muttered Hestia.

Hermione just chuckled. "That he is. Now why don't you tell me about the next project?"

Hermione watched curiously as Hestia's brow furrowed a bit. Hestia was technically Hermione's superior, being the Undersecretary to the Minister in charge of magical law enforcement, magical accidents and catastrophes, the unspeakables, and the obliviation department. Whereas the department heads reported to her and employees of those departments reported to their heads, Hermione's situation was a bit unique. Her job was a hybrid one, suspended somewhere between the DMLE, the aurors, and the unspeakables.

Right out of Hogwarts Hermione had briefly considered joining the Department of Mysteries, but she ultimately decided to train as a healer. During her healing training she learned about spell reversal and curse breaking and found her calling. St. Mungo's trained her to curse break on humans, but Bill Weasley took her under his wing and also trained her to curse break on buildings and artifacts. It was a very rare skill set to be able to do both, and it soon became clear that working for St. Mungo's exclusively was too narrow for Hermione's abilities.

Hermione approached Kingsley Shacklebolt about it, and he created a job for Hermione within the Ministry of Magic, while also permitting her to do contract work for St. Mungo's on a specialized basis. She belonged to no specific department at the Ministry, but floated around as needed. She went on auror and DMLE raids to curse break buildings and perform field healing to stabilize injured personnel before sending them to St. Mungo's for further treatment. She had a designated chamber in the Department of Mysteries where she worked on magical artifacts that were cursed and performed her experiments. And she was occasionally called in as a specialist by the Ministry or St. Mungo's to help break curses that affected the human body. She loved her job, and it felt like the culmination of years of fighting Voldemort and solving ways to defeat dark magic.

Still, with no department as her home, Hermione also had no department head to report to. So Kingsley simply skipped the normal chain of command and made Hestia her direct superior. Hermione

found Hestia to be warm, competent, and willing to give Hermione space to do her job her own way. For Hestia's part, she valued Hermione's flexibility. Hermione was an asset who could be deployed in many different ways. Hestia often said that Hermione filled a hole they didn't even realize they had until she came on board.

"This one is a bit different from usual," said Hestia slowly. "As you may know, Lucius Malfoy died a couple weeks ago."

Hermione nodded. Her reintroduction to Draco Malfoy had been a couple days after Lucius was buried. She had seen him two more times at Theo's house since then, but he barely acknowledged her. Still, she knew enough from Theo to know that Lucius had died while she and Theo were arranging for the manticore to go to Greece. Lucius had been buried very quickly the day before they returned to London, and then Draco Malfoy reappeared in her life two days after that looking strained and utterly baffled by the events that had taken place at the Manor. He hadn't talked about it again, but Hermione got the impression that it wasn't just the portraits and grounds that had changed.

"Yes I'm aware he's gone," said Hermione.

"Well as I'm sure you know the Ministry can hold the contents of a will for thirty days to make sure no dark objects are being passed down. The law was changed after the war to give the Ministry six months to examine the assets of convicted Death Eaters. The reasoning, of course, was that they would have more to hide than most witches and wizards, and the Ministry would have to perform a search."

Hermione raised an eyebrow, wondering if this was going where she thought it was going.

"And?" Hermione prompted.

"*And* we've hit a snag with Lucius Malfoy's assets. His will was surprisingly short, leaving some money to his wife, but everything

else that wasn't already entailed to his son Draco, including all of his personal effects. But there's no complete list of assets, and the Ministry personnel who have interviewed Draco Malfoy say that he seems to be woefully unaware of what or even *where* certain objects might be found. We are all quite certain that Lucius had a collection of dark objects, but so far they haven't turned up. And according to Draco Malfoy, the Manor has been uncooperative."

"Uncooperative?" asked Hermione skeptically.

Hestia shrugged. "I don't pretend to understand it. But Mr. Malfoy seems to believe that there are dark objects on the premises, but the Manor is hiding them."

Hermione gave her an incredulous look. "Are you sure it's not *Draco* who is hiding them?"

"Well that's what I thought of course," said Hestia, "but according to the representatives from the Wills and Estates Division, Draco himself is being as cooperative as he can be. And his exact words were, 'I want you to take every fucking object that Lucius hid on the property and get them the fuck away from me. They'll probably curse my bollocks off if I touch them.' Pardon my language, but I think a direct quote in this instance is helpful."

Hermione snorted. She had to admit that *did* sound like the Draco Malfoy she had met over the last few weeks.

"So where do I come in then?" asked Hermione.

Hestia sighed and pulled her glasses off as she rubbed her nose. "I'm afraid it's a bit of a fishing expedition. I suspect Draco's correct that there *are* cursed objects on the premises, and we need you there if they are discovered. But we also need your help locating and identifying them in the first place. Despite Draco's rather colorful prediction, I expect some of the objects are enchanted so they don't hurt Malfoy blood. If that's true, then he may not even be able to identify them himself since he's immune, so to speak."

Hermione was nodding slowly. "Yes... yes that's certainly possible. Alright. I can do that."

"Excellent," said Hestia. "We'll need you to sweep his vault too of course. That's standard protocol."

Hermione hesitated, but then nodded. "And if I don't find anything dark before the six months are up?"

Hestia shrugged. "Then we'll assume Lucius really did get rid of those items before he died. Either that, or he hid them so well they aren't likely to pose a threat. In any event, the law is clear about it: our hands are tied after six months, and Draco gets everything without any strings attached. Given when Lucius died, the firm end date for Ministry review is the second of January. If any cursed or illegal objects are discovered after that date then Draco is supposed to turn them in to the Ministry voluntarily. But given his history..." She trailed off.

"He'll either keep them or make them disappear," murmured Hermione. "Of course. He won't risk Azkaban by coming forward."

"Correct," said Hestia. "And frankly, that's one reason why I think he will cooperate. The Wills and Estates Division seems convinced that he does not want those things in his house, and he can't be charged with any crimes for owning them while Lucius's will is still under Ministry review. Draco has amnesty for anything that's discovered during these six months. It's in his best interest to find them and turn them over now."

"Alright," said Hermione. "I can do that. I'll admit the Manor is not my favorite place, but..." She grimaced, and Hestia gave her a sympathetic look.

"Believe me, Hermione, I know," she said. "And if you want me to ask Harry to accompany you, I'm happy to do that. I wouldn't ask you if we had anybody else who could do what you do."

Hermione sighed. "It's fine. I'll be fine. I actually met Draco again just after his father died, and... well, he's rather cold toward me, but he's not hostile. And he says the Manor looks very different. I'll manage, and if I have trouble with it, I'll ask Harry to come along on future visits."

Hestia nodded. "Excellent. In that case, please give yourself a couple weeks to prepare and review the notes from the Wills and Estates Division. You have plenty of time, so I'll be giving you other projects to complete while you work on this over the next several months. That being said, when you're ready to visit the Manor, just reach out to him directly to schedule it."

Hermione nodded and rose, before bidding Hestia farewell. She made her way back to her office and sank down in the chair as she contemplated the Slytherins that were now in her life and especially Draco Malfoy. She would be seeing them all again tonight. The Slytherins had a weekly get together on Friday nights at Theo's place, and for the last few weeks Hermione and her friends had joined too.

Theo, of course, was by far the best. He had warmed to Ginny and Luna instantaneously, and he was communicating normally with Harry by the end of the second visit. His blue eyes twinkled with mirth as he watched the groups try to intermix. He was the only one, besides Luna of course, who seemed perfectly at ease with every other person in the room.

The next best was Blaise Zabini. He had always looked haughty with his dark eyes, wavy hair, aquiline nose, and olive skin. Hermione privately thought he looked like an ancient Roman statue. She had never said this out loud, always believing him to be arrogant enough without compliments like that. However, she had to admit he had mellowed out as he got older. His views on house elves were certainly in line with her own, and he was the only one besides Theo who made any real effort to talk to her.

After Blaise came Pansy. She had grown into her features as she got older. She was fair and striking, with flawless skin and nearly black hair that fell straight down in a shiny sheet to the middle of her back. She had a slightly upturned nose and dark eyes that glittered with wariness whenever she saw Hermione. She wasn't *rude* exactly, but she was very blunt, and for the most part she only spoke to Hermione if they were in a larger group. She didn't seek Hermione out individually, and Hermione didn't seek her out either.

Finally, there was Draco, who had always stood out among his friends. Nobody else had that precise shade of platinum blonde hair, and he was the only person she had ever met whose eyes were truly gray. There wasn't the slightest hint of blue or green in them. In their earlier years at Hogwarts, Draco had slicked his hair back, and Hermione thought he looked slightly vampire-like that way. But at some point in sixth year he had stopped doing it, and now his blonde hair swooped across his forehead. His fringe was almost artistic, and he was far more attractive than he had any right to be. He had gotten taller and had filled out in the years since the war. That ashen, pinched look that had been on his face during sixth year and again at the height of the war was gone, but he still had a moodiness about him that reminded Hermione that he had a dark side. She sensed that Theo was right, and Draco's darkness came from unresolved issues with his father and the burdens of the Malfoy estate. In an odd way, it seemed like they had matured him.

She had to admit he wasn't as bad as he used to be at Hogwarts. He wasn't openly hostile, and she had caught him speaking to Harry and Ginny a few times. But improvements and maturity aside, he still pointedly ignored Hermione whenever he could and barely even acknowledged her. Hermione sighed as she realized she was bound to spend the next few months working with somebody who clearly didn't like her at all.

She would have picked literally any of the others – even Pansy – over Draco.

There was nothing for it, though. The assignment was what it was, and Hermione had worked in unpleasant conditions before. At least this project had a firm end date, and she would be able to work on other things at the same time. Perhaps they would get used to each other, and if they didn't then when the six months were up they could go back to ignoring each other during Theo's get togethers.

Sighing to herself, Hermione slowly gathered her things and made her way to the atrium. She would floo home for a couple hours before heading to Theo's. She was eager to see Theo and her other friends, and she was determined that the project with Draco Malfoy wouldn't ruin it.

Draco

The last few weeks were worse than he had been expecting.

First, there was Theo. At Hogwarts, Draco and Theo had mutually bonded over having fathers who were Death Eaters. Lucius was much kinder than Tiberius Nott – in fact, Lucius was practically a fucking unicorn by comparison – and Draco idly wondered if *that* was the reason for the sudden influx of unicorn iconography in the Manor. But while Lucius wasn't nearly as bad as Tiberius, he was still stern, expectant, and he always insisted Draco fall in line. Theo's father had behaved the same way once he decided to take Theo in hand, though Tiberius's methods were far more physical than Lucius's. And so over the years Theo and Draco talked to each other about it and found some comfort in their shared experiences. It was the reason they were each other's best friends, though Blaise was a close second for both of them.

Granger and the others had barely left Theo's house when he pulled Draco aside and told him he saw some odd things at work just before the assignment with Granger came through. It was concerning, possibly illegal, but Theo couldn't be sure. Theo wanted Draco's help to dig a little, but they would have to be careful because of Theo's relation to Tiberius and Draco's own reputation as a former

Death Eater. They couldn't cast accusations about criminal activity without having some evidence first or nobody would believe them.

Then there were the meetings. Draco had spent the last few weeks in innumerable meetings with Lucius's lawyers and financial planners reviewing everything Lucius had left behind. Draco discovered that they owed a rather astonishing amount of real estate, and quite a bit of their wealth was from rental income. Lucius was also a partner in multiple businesses, and now that he was dead the lawyers were having to go through the legal documents for each one to determine what happened to Lucius's share. In some cases, Draco inherited the shares directly and in others there were rights of first refusal he had to give to other stakeholders before the shares would be his. It was a mess, and Draco wished he had a rubric to keep it all straight.

Then there was the Ministry. Draco was doing his best to be cooperative with the Ministry's Wills and Estates Division, but the representatives had been incompetent. Draco gave them free reign to investigate the Manor because he wanted to turn over everything that was dark, but they had discovered nothing. Draco himself hadn't turned up anything either, but in all fairness he did not have a great deal of time to look. He was spending his days in meetings with the lawyers and financial planners and Gringotts, and he couldn't spare the time to coax the Manor into revealing all of its secrets. He had been told a specialist would be coming in soon to help, and Draco only hoped they would be more competent than the others from that department. Salazar knew that was a low bar to clear.

Then there was Ella Vanity, who had more than fulfilled his mother's predictions about her. She was still warded out of the Manor, but Draco ran into her twice while out for business, and she sent him owls constantly. Draco had sent her one letter back thanking her for the night but telling her he wasn't interested in anything more. Still, she was undeterred and continued to reach out. It was driving Draco mad.

Finally there was the new group of friends that Theo was trying to force down the others' throats. For years Draco, Pansy, and Blaise

had spent Friday nights at Theo's house. Out of the four of them, he was the only one who had a place entirely to himself where there was no risk of a parent or other relative walking in on them. The others still visited Draco at the Manor now and then, and of course there was the occasional brunch with Blaise's mother and Pansy's parents too – but when it was just the four of them, it was always Theo's house.

The problem, of course, was that it was no longer just the four of them. The presence of the Gryffindors and Lovegood put a real damper on everything, especially Granger. If Theo had pushed Draco to be very honest, he would say that the others really weren't so bad anymore. Potter and Weasley were always good for a quidditch discussion. Draco had no clue what Lovegood was saying half the time, but it never felt rude or underhanded. Granger, though, was as quick-witted and sharp as ever. And Draco still struggled to look at her and felt his occlumency walls falling every time he did.

The problem with Granger was that she *never* wore robes. Draco had known this about her in some oblique way. He had seen her around Hogwarts in jeans and jumpers often enough over the years to realize that she preferred muggle clothes to wizarding ones. It wasn't that muggle clothes themselves were a problem. Plenty of wizards wore muggle clothes, and even Draco had developed a taste for them. But Granger's choice of muggle clothing made Draco wince, because it was summer and warm enough for short sleeves.

Every Friday night at Theo's place, Draco watched as Granger arrived with her scarred arm on full display. She never glamored it. She never hid it. She seemed to completely ignore it. After two weeks of this, everybody but Draco seemed to have grown accustomed to it, but he could not. He didn't understand how she could be so unconcerned by it, and some part of him was certain it was all an act.

Hermione Granger was flaunting her scar to make him feel guilty.

There was no other explanation for *why* a witch like her would allow the word “mudblood” to be seen on her arm so frequently. The only possibility was that she was taunting Draco with it. She was reminding him that he had been a coward and that it was *his* fault she had been marked in that way. It resurrected years of self-loathing that Draco had carefully locked away in order to move on with his life. Ever since Granger had arrived at Theo’s house that first night, Draco was thrown back into his old nightmares of her, and he found himself dwelling on it when he was supposed to be figuring out the estate. Draco knew he was barely hanging on by a thread.

Draco himself glamored his Dark Mark. It didn’t work very well, and it made his whole arm appear oddly smudged so he kept his sleeves rolled down most of the time too. But even under his sleeves he held the glamor in place. He didn’t want *anybody*, including himself, to have to see it.

Granger, it appeared, had no such qualms, at least around Draco and his friends. Draco was absolutely certain that he was the reason for it. It made him resent her for ruining the peace he found at Theo’s house, but mostly it made him resent himself for the role he had played in it all those years ago.

“You’re staring again mate,” said Blaise’s low voice later that night, as he noticed the direction of Draco’s gaze. Draco was sitting in a chair and brooding as he tried to keep his eyes off of Granger.

“I can’t help it,” Draco muttered. “It’s just... she’s taunting me with it.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” said Blaise skeptically. “She completely ignores you.”

“She’s Granger, and I’m me,” said Draco. “She’s not capable of ignoring me, what with... everything. You know she has some ulterior motive. She probably read some book about psychological torment and has chosen me to be her victim.”

Blaise snorted at this. "If that's true, mate, then you're fucked," he said.

Draco knew Blaise was right. Draco was so fucked. Because that word that he had called her so many times and that his aunt had carved into her skin just stared back at him malevolently every time he glanced her way. And the more he looked, the more he *kept* looking. He couldn't seem to stop himself, no matter how hard he tried.

"Hermione, George reckons he has a new formula for a scar removal paste that might work," said Weasley's voice. Draco immediately started to eavesdrop, as all good Slytherins did.

"It's not going to change anything Gin," said Granger in a long-suffering voice. "I told you. Cursed scars don't go away."

Draco felt his stomach clench. They were discussing her arm. They had to be. A dull kind of thudding started in his ears as he shut his mind toward everything else around him and started to listen closely.

"George's bruise paste is miraculous though," reasoned Weasley. "At least *try* it."

"No," said Granger. "It's pointless."

"Hermione..." said Weasley.

"No, Gin," said Granger. "And please stop telling him to try and fix it!"

"And why's that, Granger?" Draco found himself saying. Every eye in the room suddenly whipped around to look at him. Draco had no idea what had gotten into him, but he found himself standing and moving toward her. "Why not let George Weasley fix it?"

"Because it's *pointless*, as I'm sure you know!" she insisted.

A muscle in Draco's jaw twitched. He *did* know that curse scars couldn't be healed, but that didn't matter. He knew the real reason

why Granger was resisting help.

“Why don’t you tell Weasley the truth. You don’t *want* to fix it. You want to parade it around to shove it in my face. That’s what you’ve been doing for the last couple of weeks isn’t it? You don’t hide it. You don’t glamor it. You make no effort whatsoever to try to fix it. It’s because you want to remind me that I was a fucking coward that night, isn’t it?”

Draco was breathing heavily, and he vaguely saw Theo shaking his head frantically out of the corner of his eye and Potter slowly pulling out his wand, but Draco ignored them both. Seeing that word on her arm had been like a poison for the last few weeks. It had been the thing intruding on the sanctuary Draco always sought from Theo and his other friends, and Draco had to get it out in the open. Maybe if he heard her admit it, maybe if she took her anger out on him, maybe if she would stop being so passive aggressive about it, he could finally, *finally* stop looking at it.

Granger’s mouth dropped in shock, and then she stood up angrily too.

“You ARSE! What the hell are you implying?”

“I’m not *implying* anything! I’m telling you that the reason you wear that scar like a badge every time you come here is to fuck with my head! It’s to force me to remember what that bitch did to you! You want to remind me that I stood by and did nothing to stop it!”

“HOW THE HELL WERE YOU SUPPOSED TO STOP IT?!” she shouted.

“I DON’T KNOW, BUT I SHOULD HAVE TRIED!” he yelled back.

“YOU WOULD HAVE BEEN KILLED!”

“THEN MAYBE I SHOULD HAVE DIED! ISN’T THAT WHY YOU SHOVE IT IN MY GODDAMN FACE EVERY TIME I’M HERE? TO

REMIND ME THAT I SHOULD HAVE DIED?"

Draco vaguely realized that all the others were standing now too, watching him and Granger with huge eyes, but all of his attention was focused on her. Her eyes were flashing, her skin was flushed, and she was practically swelling with rage now. She stopped shouting, but her voice dropped dangerously low as she started to stalk toward him. She was small, but she was fierce, and the look on her face made Draco gulp.

"Do you really think that's why I don't glamor my arm? Do you think that this is the only scar I have? Are you really so fucking arrogant that you believe you occupy even a *moment* of my thoughts when it comes to decisions about my own body? Because if so, please allow me to correct a few things for you. Bellatrix did this to me. Bellatrix. Not you, not your parents, not even fucking Grayback who brought me to the Manor that day, but Bellatrix. And she wasn't the only one who marked me."

Draco was practically spellbound now as she suddenly yanked her shirt off and shoved her pants down, and to his disbelief she was standing there in just her bra and knickers, as she continued to walk toward him slowly. Draco unconsciously found himself backing away from her.

"This one was Dolohov in the Department of Mysteries in fifth year," and she pointed to a large purple scar that ran across her chest and stomach.

"This was my own rebounded spell when I had to save Harry from Nagini," and she pointed to a deep red scar on her upper arm.

"These are all from the goblins when I was nearly buried alive in burning treasure at Gringotts," and now she pointed to a series of small burn marks that crept up her legs.

"This was from Crabbe's fiendfyre in the Room of Requirement," and now she showed him a large shiny burn on her upper thigh.

“This is from Mulciber in the final battle,” and she pointed to an odd orange scar on her hip.

“And this one was Voldemort himself, when a piece of his fucking *soul* tried to kill me before I killed it,” and now she pointed at the last mark, something that looked so bruised it was almost black, right under her breast.

“And I haven’t even pointed out all the other scars from my job as a damn *cursebreaker*. If you think I’ve never gotten curse scars from *that*, then you are sorely mistaken.” At this, she gestured vaguely around herself, and Draco saw a few more marks that she hadn’t specifically identified.

“I don’t glamor my scars because I would have to glamor my entire body to hide them. I don’t bother, because it happened. Every single bit of it happened, whether I wanted it to or not. I was called to be a child soldier in the war, just like you were called to be an assassin. It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t right, and the adults in our lives should never have allowed it, but none of us can take it back. These aren’t *badges*, but reminders that there is true evil in this world. That’s all they are. These scars aren’t *me*.”

She picked up her clothes now and walked right up to him. Draco had run into the wall now and couldn’t back away any further. He found he couldn’t tear his eyes away from her.

“So take a good look, Malfoy. You may have been a bullying git as a kid, but there’s not a single mark on me that’s from you. So don’t flatter yourself by believing that I have *any* thoughts about you when I look at my scars. Because you were *never* as evil as you pretended to be, and that means that for the last eight or nine years of my life, you were utterly unimportant.”

She shoved her clothes into his chest hard, and he gasped as the air left his lungs. Then she turned around and marched toward the floor and threw some powder in it. She shouted her address, as she spun away.

There was an awkward silence as everyone left in Theo's parlor stared at each other. Draco felt oddly numb as he dropped her clothes on the floor. This seemed to snap Weasley out of it, and she sprinted toward the floo and called out Granger's address. She returned a moment later shaking her head.

"She closed her floo," was all she said.

Draco glanced at Pansy and Blaise who were both watching him nervously. Then he looked at Theo, whom Draco was surprised to see glaring at him.

"You're an idiot, I hope you know that," said Theo, as he suddenly turned on his heels and marched out of the room. They heard a door slam down the hallway, and Draco winced.

There was another long silence between the Slytherins and Granger's friends, until suddenly Blaise broke it. "She's right, you know."

Draco spun around to stare at him. "What do you mean?" he asked, and he was dismayed to hear his voice sounded a bit choked.

"About her scars. They aren't badges. And you weren't that evil mate."

"I took the fucking Mark," ground out Draco.

"Because your whole family would have died if you didn't," said a female voice, and Draco spun around to see Weasley staring at him with some disapproval, her hands on her hips. "Surely you must realize Hermione knows that? We all know that. She wouldn't have agreed to hang out with you if she thought you actually believed any of it." Weasley gave him a marvelous eye roll at this.

To Draco's consternation, both Lovegood and Potter were nodding in agreement.

“You lot have *no idea* what I saw... what I did...”

Potter just snorted. “Well I certainly have *some* idea, thanks. I was literally watching you do it from inside of Voldemort’s head, you know. Obviously I told Hermione all about it. And I’ll tell you this much, we all crossed some lines in the war. So if you want this to work,” and now Potter gestured around the larger group, “then I suggest you not turn it into a competition with her or with us.”

Draco felt his throat closing up just a bit. He had no idea what Potter meant by saying that he watched Draco from the Dark Lord’s head, but he couldn’t focus on that now. He just nodded once, and then he turned and strode to the fireplace, ignoring Blaise and Pansy who were calling after him.

He floo’d to the Manor and narrowly avoided his mother as he took the stairs two at a time.

He stomped into his room and flung himself onto his bed before he finally rolled up his sleeves and stared at the smudged skin that hid his glamored Dark Mark. He took a deep breath and tapped his wand to it and the glamor disappeared. The Mark had faded into its own scar, but the outline of the skull and snake were still very visible. He traced it with his fingers as he thought about her words.

“It wasn’t fair, it wasn’t right, and the adults in our lives should never have allowed it, but none of us can take it back. These aren’t badges, but reminders that there is true evil in this world.”

His scar was a reminder of evil, she was right about that. But had *he* really been evil? Or was his evilness really so shallow compared to the other Death Eaters that she had never even thought about him once the war heated up?

She’s right, whispered a small voice. *You never really wanted it.*

He knew he was a coward, but he wasn’t evil. Not really. She didn’t let her mudblood scar nor any of the others on her body define her,

but Draco realized he had allowed his Dark Mark to define him for years. He hid from it. He occluded from it. He tried to lock it away so he wouldn't have to confront it. But his avoidance measures had done nothing except give the Mark power over him, power that he didn't want it to have. As Draco laid there he realized it didn't have to define him. It was a memory, a reminder of what can happen when evil touches you, but it didn't have to be *Draco*.

For the first time in a very long time, Draco looked at his Dark Mark and thought about it. He really, truly thought about it and the words Granger had said. And as he did, he felt the tiniest bit of that poison leaching out of him. The overwhelming disgust he had lived with for so long and had locked away out of self-preservation reduced just the slightest bit. It wasn't very much, but it was enough that he could examine his Dark Mark out in the open and breathe while he did it.

Draco exhaled as he unbuttoned his shirt and stripped it off. He was scarred too, just as badly as she was. He had always glamored his scars when other people might see them, but maybe she was right about this as well.

Draco laid down in bed, naked from the waist up, and he tucked his hands under his head as he stared at the ceiling of his room. He closed his eyes and sighed, and before long he drifted off slowly, not a single glamor charm in place for the first time in six years.

The Many Talents of Terry Boot

Chapter 5: The Many Talents of Terry Boot

AN: Theo is ready to party.

TW: Implied sexual assault/rape in Draco's section

Hermione

Hermione felt slightly mortified by the fact that she had become so irate with Draco Sodding Malfoy that she stripped to her knickers in front of seven other people. Then again, something about it seemed to break a lot of the underlying tension in the group.

To Theo's utter shock, Hermione didn't refuse to see Malfoy or the other Slytherins. He thanked her profusely and told her he owed her one, but she just waved him off. The things that she had said to Malfoy and that he had said to her had really needed to come out into the open.

Once she calmed down enough to sort through their entire fight, she realized that Malfoy harbored an enormous amount of guilt for what happened to her that day at the Manor. As for Hermione, she had always blamed Bellatrix for it and had never given a great deal of thought to Malfoy's feelings about the whole thing. She knew now that this had been a grave oversight because even if Malfoy didn't like her, he *wasn't* like most of the other Death Eaters. Of *course* he would have been affected by watching somebody he knew get tortured. Hermione felt chagrined that she had never taken the time to really consider it before.

Malfoy didn't apologize to her, and she didn't apologize to him, but the air between them lightened quite a bit the next time she saw him. And to her surprise, he was wearing a T-shirt too, and she caught the sight of his own Dark Mark, unglamored on his left forearm. When her friends noticed it for the first time, Harry had gaped a bit, Ginny winked at her, and Luna just smiled serenely. Hermione realized that something she had said to him that night must have sunk in.

The two groups were still a bit cautious around each other, but they were definitely warming up. Hermione was relieved. She doubted she would ever be as close to the others as she was to Theo, but it was much more comfortable than the stilted interactions that had existed between the groups at the beginning. And that's why Hermione had no trouble defending the Slytherins to Ron when she and Ginny met him for lunch near the end of July.

"Honestly Ronald, they have been *fine*. I told you, Malfoy and I had one big fight, but it was really to clear the air about some things. It needed to happen, and he didn't attack me. Harry was there and can confirm it."

"She's right," added Ginny. "I mean, they're still Slytherins so they're quite snarky, but there's no real animosity anymore."

"There's just no way," said Ron. "I mean, it's *Malfoy*. He was a Death Eater. And Nott's father was one of the worst!"

"First of all, Malfoy was tried and completed his sentence years ago. He was a Death Eater, but we all know he wasn't like the others. As for Tiberius Nott, he may have been dangerous, but Theo is lovely. He's becoming a very good friend of mine."

"Speaking of..." muttered Ginny as Theo walked into the restaurant, with Malfoy trailing behind him.

"Oh Hermione darling!" he sang. "And Gingersnap! What a wonderful surprise seeing you two lovelies here today," As he said this last bit,

he tugged on one of Hermione's curls.

"Hello Theo," Ginny said, as Hermione grinned. She saw Malfoy glance her way and dip his chin in greeting.

Ron just gaped, and she struggled not to laugh. Theo turned to him and gave a saccharine smile. "And Weasley. Be sure to bask in the superior company these two are giving you."

Ginny snorted. Hermione knew that Ginny was in agreement that out of the entire Slytherin group, Theo was by far the best.

"Kneazle got your tongue?" he asked, as he surveyed Ron's amazed looks with a smirk. "That's OK. I'll interpret it as an expression of awe and wonder at my overwhelming presence. Hermione, Ginny, my lovely ones – I'll see you both tonight."

Then Theo leaned down between them and turned left to kiss Hermione's cheek and then right to kiss Ginny's before standing up and winking at them as he strode off. Malfoy gave them a smirk as he followed.

"He's... he's..." said Ron weakly.

"Not a Death Eater," finished Hermione wryly.

"He *kissed* you!" said Ron in disgust.

"Oh for heaven's sake, Ronald, it was on the cheek!"

But Ron was staring at Theo with a look of consternation on his face.

"Theo's delightful," said Ginny mildly as she picked up a fry and munched on it. "And he only acts that way to get a rise out of the other Slytherins.... And you, I suppose. He's far less dramatic one-on-one."

"*You've been one-on-one with Theo Nott?*" asked Ron in horror.

“Yes I have, Ron, and like Hermione said he’s becoming a friend! He’s perfectly lovely and respectful! And Hermione lived with him in a tent for an entire bloody month!”

Ron huffed but dropped it, seeing the expressions on Hermione’s and Ginny’s faces.

Hermione switched the subject abruptly, and to her relief the Slytherins did not come up again until the very end of their lunch.

“Let me know if you need anything,” said Ron as he pulled her in for a hug. “I know you like them, but please... be on your guard.”

Hermione sighed, but just nodded as she hugged Ron back and released him.

Hermione bid them both farewell and then slowly made her way back to the Ministry. As she arrived, a voice she didn’t immediately recognize called, “Hey Hermione! Hermione!”

Hermione turned curiously to find Terry Boot hurrying up toward her.

“Terry, what’s wrong?”

“Oh... erm, nothing Hermione. I just... Well, I was talking to Harry earlier, and he mentioned you’re single.”

“I am,” said Hermione, totally nonplussed.

Terry grinned at her broadly. “Great! I mean...”

He gave her an awkward look. Hermione still had no idea what was going on. She and Terry were perfectly cordial, but she never talked to him. She thought he worked in one of the muggle relations departments, but she couldn’t be certain.

Terry cleared his throat. “Hermione, I was hoping I could take you out to dinner next week. Maybe next Friday?”

Hermione just stared at him. "Like on a date?"

"Yes, of course," he said, and he waited eagerly for her response.

"Oh... erm... alright then," she said awkwardly. She felt ambushed and didn't know what else to say. Her stomach sank as he grinned broadly.

"Perfect! Do you want to meet at the restaurant or should I pick you up?"

"Oh the restaurant is fine," she said, thinking quickly.

"Perfect," he said. "I'll make a reservation and owl you details. See you then!"

To her horror he leaned in and kissed her cheek and then practically skipped away.

Hermione just stared after him.

What the actual hell?

She was in a daze as she made her way back to her desk, and she hardly accomplished anything else that afternoon. She kept turning the odd exchange with Terry Boot around in her mind.

Before she knew it work was over, and it was time to floo to Theo's. They were meeting earlier that night to celebrate Harry's birthday before the traditional Weasley party that weekend.

Hermione stepped out to find Ginny already there, bouncing on her feet.

"Got it," she said, smiling broadly.

"Got what?" asked Hermione.

"You'll see," said Ginny, winking at her.

A few minutes later the floor lit up and Luna came through, followed by Harry. Surprisingly, the Slytherins were nowhere in sight.

“Happy birthday!” said Hermione, coming up to give him a hug.

“Yes Harry, happy birthday,” said Luna.

Harry smiled at them both, as Ginny said, “Over here!”

They walked over to a small table in the parlor, and Ginny pulled something out of her pocket and tapped her wand to it. It expanded, and Hermione looked at the white box curiously.

“Open it!” said Ginny eagerly, and Harry lifted the lid to find a beautiful chocolate cake.

“Mum made it for you!” said Ginny. “She’ll do a bigger one for your real birthday this weekend, but I told her we were celebrating tonight with the snakes.”

Harry smiled broadly as he cut a slice for each of his friends. “Tell your mum thanks.”

“Tell her yourself tomorrow you idiot,” said Ginny rolling her eyes and giving Harry a light shove.

He just smiled and was about to say something else, when suddenly Theo came walking in, carrying a large glass jar that had something that looked like cards in it.

“Happy birthday to the Boy Who Kicked Voldy’s Arse! It’s time to party our way,” he said enthusiastically, and to Hermione’s surprise the other three Slytherins followed him in, all casting highly skeptical looks at Theo. She noticed that Malfoy was carrying a couple of handles of firewhiskey, and Blaise had a stack of shot glasses. Pansy just had her arms crossed and was rolling her eyes.

“I brought our favorite party game. It’s a Slytherin birthday tradition since forever,” said Theo, as he shook the glass jar a little bit.

“Erm...” said Hermione uncomfortably, as she eyed the firewhiskey in Malfoy’s hands. She noticed Harry rubbing the back of his neck a bit awkwardly.

“See?” said Pansy with exasperation. “We told you they would never do it.”

Hermione felt a lurch of annoyance at this. “Whatever it is, we’ll do it. We just don’t know what it is.”

There was a ringing silence at this, and Theo smirked as the other three Slytherins frowned a bit.

“In that case, let’s get a slice of cake and then come sit on the floor by the fireplace. The rules are simple.”

Hermione glanced at her friends questioningly. Ginny had a determined glint in her eye. Harry grimaced but nodded. Luna looked perfectly unperturbed as she ate her cake and wandered toward the middle of the room.

The group slowly settled down in a loose circle, Theo’s friends on one side and Hermione’s friends on the other. Theo placed the glass jar in the middle.

“This is a variation on truth or dare,” said Theo. “Draco invented it in third year when he realized that Slytherins almost *never* take dares. We call it Secrets and Truths.”

Hermione cocked an eyebrow at this, as she exchanged a glance with her friends.

“I haven’t played truth or dare since before the war,” she said. “It’s a bit... juvenile, isn’t it?”

The Slytherins gave her discontented looks, but Hermione just shrugged.

“Ours is a bit more adult,” said Theo. “Or I should say it’s turned more adult as we’ve gotten older. We have hundreds of questions in the jar. We’ve been putting questions in for years whenever we think of one. All you do is pull a question out of the jar, and everybody has to answer it. If you can’t answer it or you don’t want to answer it, you have to take a shot to pass. If you lie, you have to take two.”

“And how do you know if we’re lying?” asked Ginny curiously.

“With this,” said Theo, and he pulled a sneakoscope out of his pocket and put it in the middle of the circle. “If you trigger it, you have to take two shots.”

“And how do you win?” asked Hermione, now realizing that the presence of alcohol certainly would make it more adult than the relatively innocent truth or dare games she used to play in the Gryffindor common room.

“Whoever takes the fewest shots when the game is called wins. Or, I suppose, whoever takes the most shots wins. It depends on your definition of winning, really.” Theo smirked at this.

Hermione took a deep breath as she stared at the four Slytherins across from her.

What would their questions be?

Blaise looked politely skeptical. Pansy just pursed her lips and arched one perfectly-plucked eyebrow. Theo looked excited. And Malfoy... Malfoy looked like he was having serious second thoughts. But none of them were backing down, so Hermione couldn’t either. She glanced at Harry and could tell he was thinking the same thing.

“Fine, let’s do it then,” she said.

“Birthday boy first,” said Theo, pulling the top of the canister off with a flourish.

Draco

This was a terrible idea. This was a *monumentally* terrible idea. But somehow, after Granger lost her shit and stripped in front of all of them, Theo had fallen even more in love with her. And he now insisted that the Slytherins needed to become close friends with Granger and the others and not just casual acquaintances. Theo was of the opinion that Secrets and Truths would be a fantastic way to get to know them better. It was true they often played it for birthdays, but Draco knew it had been quite some time. They certainly hadn't done it for his birthday in June. Draco suspected that Potter's birthday was really just the excuse to pull the lid off the jar and play Theo's preferred ice breaker game.

Draco didn't want to be friends with Granger. They had settled into something that was not openly hostile, and that was good enough for him. He still felt a small lurch of guilt when he saw her arm, but it wasn't consuming him anymore. And once he started showing his Dark Mark around Theo's parlor and none of the others reacted to it, he found it started to break the spiral of negative thoughts about everything he had done in the war.

But Secrets and Truths had a lot of questions that might require revisiting the war — things he had intentionally locked away and still had not fully examined even with his new openness about scars and the Dark Mark. Sure, there were plenty of innocuous questions. And of course there were a whole host of sexual questions too. But there were enough questions that touched on darker experiences that odds were good at least one of them would get drawn. In fact, his friends had to add the rule that you could take a shot to pass a question after the Dark Lord rose because there were suddenly so many questions Draco wasn't *allowed* to answer that he could no longer play without some way to pass. The shot was the solution to that little problem.

Historically speaking, Draco was almost always the first one to get pissed.

Draco had raised his concerns with Theo, but Theo brushed him off. In Theo's mind, there were enough innocent questions or funny questions that the game would be fine. And he insisted that Granger and the others were made of strong stuff, and if they really didn't want to answer something or if it was classified, all they had to do was take a shot. They weren't playing with veritaserum.

So here they were, and Potter's hand had just reached into the jar. Draco tensed.

"How many sexual partners have you had?"

Oh thank Salazar.

"Wait," said Granger. "Are we talking all the way? Or like hands and tongue? Or what? Because the question isn't terribly clear, and there are multiple ways to interpret it."

Draco just stared at her. Nobody had ever questioned the *phrasing* before. Typical Granger.

"All the way," supplied Blaise.

Potter nodded a bit. "One," he said, gesturing toward Weasley.

Draco struggled not to roll his eyes. Of *course* his only sexual partner would be Weasley. They had been together since Hogwarts. It was bloody boring though.

"I've also had one," said Granger.

Draco tried not to grimace. Hers would be Ron Weasley then. It was so in character for her.

"Three," said Weasley, and this surprised Draco a bit. Evidently she hadn't saved herself for Potter.

"Excuse me?" asked Potter in amazement.

Draco was suddenly very confused. Didn't Potter know? He exchanged slightly mystified looks with the other Slytherins, but suddenly Draco was a lot more interested in this game.

"Yes, three," said Weasley.

"I thought I was your only!" he insisted.

"Oh please Harry, of course you weren't," she said blithely, patting him on the knee.

"But... but... *when?*" he asked.

"Fifth year before you and then sixth year after you temporarily dumped me," she said without missing a beat.

"Bloody hell..." he muttered. Draco tried not to laugh at the look on his face. He looked both pained and aroused, as though he couldn't make up his mind.

"Three for me as well," said Lovegood, and Draco's eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hairline. He was not expecting that.

"Four," said Pansy.

"Three," said Blaise.

"Four," said Theo.

Draco just sighed and took a shot.

"What? Why?" asked Granger.

"He can't answer that one," said Theo smirking. "Draco has had too many to count..."

Granger wrinkled her nose at this, and he just stared her down. "I'm a member of a sex club. It's confidential, anonymous, and perfectly safe. But I haven't really kept count."

The Gryffindors' mouths were all hanging open, though Lovegood was looking intrigued.

"My turn then," said Weasley after she cast one last amazed look at Draco. She reached into the bowl. "Describe something you're dreading."

Draco's stomach turned at this a little bit, but he thought hard as he listened to the others answer.

"I'm dreading my birthday," said Weasley quietly. "According to my mother, I'll be an old maid."

"I'm dating you!" said Potter in confusion.

"Yes, but until you get down on one knee and actually pop the damn question Mum is going to be driving me mad. She says my eggs are expiring."

Potter spluttered, as Draco and several others snorted.

Potter chewed on his lip and said, "I'm dreading the gala season coming up in the fall. It's a command appearance every month, and fucking Rita Skeeter is at all of them."

Draco felt an unexpected flash of sympathy for Potter at this. He used to be jealous of Potter's fame, but even Draco had to admit Rita was brutal. As he had gotten older Draco had avoided the spotlight too. He knew he would have to start attending more galas now that he was directing the Malfoy donations, but at least he could be selective about it. Potter was expected at everything.

"I don't dread much at all, so I should probably take a shot," said Lovegood passively. And to everybody's surprise she took one.

"I'm dreading my sister's wedding in a few weeks," said Pansy with a grimace. "Mum is going to be impossible once she realizes I'm her only unmarried child." Weasley gave her a very sympathetic look at

this, and Draco did too. Narcissa's recent insistence about similar matters paled in comparison to what Lorna Parkinson was capable of. She had four daughters, and Pansy was the youngest.

"I'm dreading work on Monday," said Blaise. "There's an inquiry in my department. Evidently some client funds went missing, and the DMLE is interviewing everybody."

Draco's eyes widened. Blaise worked for a wizarding financial firm that was a rival of the one Lucius had always used. Draco was planning on moving some accounts to Blaise once everything was sorted with the estate. He hadn't done it yet, and he was sure Blaise was honest. But if there was somebody at his firm who *wasn't* honest that created a real wrinkle in Draco's plans. He sighed.

Then it was Theo's turn. He opened his mouth, then closed it, glancing at Draco before sighing. "Nevermind," he muttered, and he took a shot, as the others gave him curious looks. To Draco's relief, however, nobody immediately pressed him on it.

Draco decided to jump in before anybody changed their minds about that.

"I'm also dreading Monday," said Draco. "Some Ministry grunt is coming to look around the Manor again for dark objects."

"Oh thanks!" said Granger with a huff.

Draco looked at her in confusion. "What are you on about?"

"The Ministry grunt coming to the Manor on Monday is me."

There was a shocked silence, as Draco gaped.

"What?" he finally asked. This didn't compute.

"Didn't Brenda tell you?"

"She didn't tell me your name!"

Granger sighed. "God, I wish I could fire her... she's a lovely person, but she's *terrible* at her job..."

Draco blinked and pulled himself together. "Why are they sending you?"

"I'm a curse breaker. Dark objects are one of my specialties."

"But we haven't found them yet," he pointed out.

"No, but I'm being sent for a treasure hunt. I'm rather good at finding things too, as it happens."

Potter snorted at this, and she gave him a conspiratorial wink.

Draco was still processing this before he finally threw up his hands. "Fine. Well I answered the bloody question didn't I?"

"But are you still dreading it now that you know it's Hermione?" asked Theo shrewdly.

Draco opened his mouth to say yes, and the sneakoscope went off. Granger smirked at him, as he rolled his eyes.

"Goddammit," he said, and he took two shots, as the others laughed at him.

Now it was Granger's turn.

"OK, I know how this is going to sound, but I am honestly dreading my date with Terry Boot next weekend!"

Everyone looked at her in surprise. "You have a date?" asked Weasley curiously.

"Ugh, yes, and I should have said no when he asked."

"Why didn't you then?" asked Blaise.

“He just ambushed me! I panicked!” said Granger.

“He’s not that bad,” said Lovegood. “He was one of my shags, you know.”

Everyone looked at her in surprise, but Granger just groaned and put her head in her hands. Draco found himself chuckling a little.

“Alright my turn then,” said Granger after she pulled herself together, and she pulled out a piece of paper.

“Who has given you your best sexual experience, and what was it?”

She furrowed her brow and thought about it. “Wait, is this also all the way? Or are other things permissible too?”

Draco tried not to roll his eyes, “Anything that’s sexual,” he said, as the others nodded in agreement. “In this context that interpretation makes the most sense.”

She pursed her lips for a bit but said, “Come back to me then. I’m trying to decide.”

“Well my best sexual experience was with Terry Boot, actually,” said Lovegood. “He’s an excellent shag, but his hands are also fantastic. He actually found my clit at Hogwarts.”

Draco felt his eyes bugging out as he stared at Lovegood, who appeared totally unconcerned.

“He does know where it is, that’s true,” chimed in Pansy, and now Draco turned to stare at her in slight disbelief. “In fact,” added Pansy, “I’d say he was my best too. He’s also one of my shags, and he got me off twice after a charity fundraiser once.”

“I’m in the fucking twilight zone,” muttered Blaise. “But fine. My best sexual experience was with Daphne Greengrass, just before Graham Montague started courting her. She sucked me off. Her lips

are..." he trailed off with a slightly dazed expression on his face. Draco noticed that Pansy rolled her eyes at this.

"My best sexual experience was with Parvati Patil. Excellent shag. She's very flexible," said Theo calmly. Draco noticed Granger wincing a bit at this.

"My best was with Jeanine," said Draco. "It was just sex, but I was in a terrible headspace that night. She... fixed things."

"Ah yes, the mythic Jeanine," grinned Theo, as the others looked at him curiously.

"Shut it Theo," said Draco.

"Is she part of your sex club?" asked Granger curiously.

Draco hesitated, but Theo answered for him. "Nope! She was Draco's one and only muggle shag. First names only, he never learned her surname. She was a one night stand. He's been pining for her for years."

"Theo, I'm going to fucking murder you," said Draco. Then he glanced at Potter, who was the only auror in the room. "Once Potter's gone I mean."

Potter cracked a grin at this, as did the others. Granger, however, had a slightly odd look on her face, but then seemed to shake herself out of it.

"Well mine is Gin, obviously," said Potter. "I like her mouth."

Again, Draco wanted to roll his eyes.

"Hermione?" prompted Theo, and Draco internally grimaced. It was time to hear all about Weasley.

"My best sexual experience was with myself," she said with a little smirk. "And my vibrator of course."

There was a stunned silence for a moment as Draco felt something in his brain misfire. Then to his shock Pansy burst out in peals of laughter.

“OK Granger, I’ll admit that might be the best answer I’ve ever heard to that one. And I’m going to take mine back. The vibrator wins every damn time.”

“True,” said Lovegood. “That was a very intelligent answer, Hermione.”

“Was it your green one or your purple one?” asked Weasley curiously, and Draco felt himself choking as he stared at them.

“The purple one,” said Granger calmly. “It has that slight hook on the end, you know...”

“Christ, Hermione, I did *not* need to know that,” said Potter with a wince.

“Holy mother of Merlin,” muttered Blaise under his breath, and Draco turned to find him staring at the witches with an absolutely gobsmacked expression on his face.

“Well I’m going to have to agree with Hermione on that question,” said Weasley. “Definitely myself. Harry, you’re good, but no bloke beats the vibrator.”

“*Excuse me?*” he gasped, and now Draco found himself laughing harder than he had in weeks. Potter sounded unbelievably put out.

“It’s nothing *personal*,” insisted Weasley. “It’s just the truth! You’re welcome to play with mine all you like. It would probably improve our sex life if you used it.”

Potter choked, as Draco turned to stare at Weasley with some admiration. He never thought he would ever meet a Weasley he

actually liked, but he had to admit Ginny was breaking his own rule about that.

“Ginny’s right. The vibrator is always better than a man,” said Pansy.

All of the witches nodded in agreement with this statement. Draco stopped laughing and suddenly felt slightly offended on behalf of wizards everywhere. “Are you telling me that all four of you would choose a vibrator over cock?”

“Certainly,” said Lovegood calmly. “It’s perfectly shaped, we can be in control, it can do things the male member cannot do, and it never goes flaccid.”

“Fuck me...” whispered Theo under his breath, and Draco turned to find him staring at Lovegood like he had never seen her properly before. His eyes were gleaming.

“Alright, my turn then,” said Lovegood lightly. She fished into the bowl and pulled out a question. “Where is the worst place you’ve ever been?”

Draco felt like he had just been plunged into a bucket of ice. Lovegood and Granger would both say the Manor, if they even answered at all. He was sure of it.

“The death chamber in the Department of Mysteries,” said Lovegood quietly. “It was... very sad. You could feel them there – all the prisoners the Ministry has sent through the arch over the centuries.”

Well fuck.

Draco didn’t know if he should be relieved or horrified by what Lovegood had just said.

Pansy looked like she was weighing something and then she reached forward and took a shot.

They watched a bit curiously, but then it was Blaise's turn. "Our safe house during the war. Mum and I fled to a shack in the North Sea. It was so remote, so cold. We lived there for months so the Death Eaters wouldn't recruit me. It was awful."

The Gryffindors looked at Blaise in surprise, but he just shrugged.

Theo grimaced. "Mine's easy. My father's study, the night I refused to take the Dark Mark. He tortured me until I passed out. My elf saved me. Father nearly killed him afterwards, but he got me out and into hiding."

Granger and Potter both looked shocked by this. Draco realized Theo must have never told Granger this during the month in the tent.

Draco took a deep breath and said one word. "Azkaban."

He felt the mood in the room shift a little, but he said it because it was true. He had been there for several weeks awaiting his trial, and it was terrible. He knew it would surprise none of them. For some reason he glanced at Granger as he said it, and he saw she was giving him an intensely thoughtful look. It didn't appear judgmental, but more like she knew exactly what he meant.

But how? How could she know?

But Draco didn't have time to question this further, because now it was Granger's turn. His stomach clenched as he waited for it.

"Bathilda Bagshot's house," she said quietly.

Everyone looked at her in utter confusion. Once again Draco felt something in his brain go awry.

What the fuck?

"Harry and I visited her during the war because we thought she had something we needed. It ended up being a trap. Nagini was inside Bathilda's body and literally burst through her neck to squeeze Harry

to death, and then Voldemort arrived. It was... well, it was bad. I had to save both of us all by myself, and I barely managed it. Then something magically adhered to Harry's chest during the encounter, and I also had to sever it off without any of the supplies healers would normally use for that sort of thing. I practically butchered him to do it, and he nearly bled out. It was..."

She trailed off, looking pale and haunted. Draco was staring at her in disbelief while Potter grimaced and rubbed her back. "You were incredible Hermione. You saved my arse a couple times that day."

She took a deep breath and gave him a tight smile before she looked straight at Draco as she continued to speak. "I think that was the single most stressful moment of the war for me. I had to fly solo with Nagini and Voldemort, and it's a miracle that Harry survived it. If I had died, it would have been a blow. But if *he* had died, we would have lost the entire war. I was always prepared to be tortured or to die if I had to in order to get Harry to the end. I was *not* prepared to be responsible for saving him without any help."

Draco felt his heart thudding out of his chest, as her eyes bored into him. He understood what she was telling him: she didn't blame him for what happened to her that day at the Manor. She would rather it have been her than Potter. She had prepared for it. She had even expected it. And it wasn't Draco's fault.

It wasn't Draco's fault.

More of the poison leached out as he stared into her hazel eyes.

Weasley broke the spell as she gripped Granger's hand. "Well for me, the worst place I've been to is the Chamber of Secrets."

Granger grimaced at this. "Oh yeah, that place is pretty bad as well."

"Tell me about it," muttered Potter.

Draco stared at them, and he sensed Theo and the others watching them cautiously now too.

“Voldemort... manipulated me,” said Weasley a bit hesitantly, “in my first year, when the Chamber was open. I woke up in it after Harry rescued me. It was... it was terrible.”

“And the basilisk skeleton is still down there,” said Granger, wrinkling her nose. “It’s decomposed, but it’s incredibly creepy.”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Theo.

Then it was Potter’s turn, and Draco truly had no idea what he was about to hear.

“I have quite a few,” he said quietly. “The Ministry death chamber, Bathilda’s house, the Chamber of Secrets, Azkaban before they got rid of the dementors, my aunt and uncle’s home...”

Draco jerked a little. He knew Potter lived with his aunt and uncle growing up, but he had no idea what was so bad about it.

“But I think the one that tops them all is a cave near the sea where Voldemort hid something. Dumbledore took me there the night he died. There was a lake in the cave filled with inferi, and we had to take a fucking row boat across it to get to an island in the middle of it. Dumbledore made me force feed him a potion that showed him his worst nightmares and seriously weakened him, and then the inferi attacked us on the way out. I almost got dragged into the lake like Regulus did. And the entire mission was pointless. The thing we went to retrieve was already gone.”

Potter said all this with an almost flat voice, and now Granger was rubbing *his* back. Draco just stared at him in disbelief, and he saw the other Slytherins did too. Then suddenly, something Potter just said registered.

“Regulus?” Draco asked.

Potter shot him a look. "Yes, Regulus Black. He turned at the end of the first war and successfully stole the thing we needed to kill Voldemort. He got there years before Dumbledore and I did, and he gave it to his house elf. He never made it out of the cave though. He was one of the inferi in the lake."

Draco felt an odd coldness wash over him, and then Potter continued.

"In fact, for all the blood purity bullshit the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black espoused over the years, that particular generation was filled with so-called blood traitors. Sirius was always an open blood traitor and Andromeda was too. Then Regulus betrayed Voldemort at the end of the first war, and your mum did the same thing at the end of the second. In fact, the only one who was loyal to him to the very end was Bellatrix."

Draco blinked. He had no idea that Regulus had defected too.

"Can I... tell Mother? About Regulus I mean?" he asked hesitantly.

Potter nodded. "Of course. The thing he stole is classified, but he died a hero. That shouldn't be a secret. In fact, he saved his house elf's life and sacrificed his own instead because only one of them could get out of that cave. Kreacher is my elf now, but he reveres Regulus and rightfully so. Regulus was only eighteen when he did it."

"Great Salazar," muttered Draco, giving Potter an appreciative nod. Narcissa had always been fond of her younger cousin, but all she knew was that he died during the first war. She learned he was dead from the family tapestry, but she never knew the details. Draco knew the manner of death would be upsetting to her, but he realized Potter was right: Regulus Black was incredibly brave and should be remembered that way.

"My turn for a question," said Pansy, breaking the tension as she stuck her hand into the bowl.

“Oh this is good. Who did you lose your virginity to and where was it?” She cleared her throat. “Mine was Draco, obviously, and a broom closet on the third floor corridor of Hogwarts.”

Draco smirked as the others rolled their eyes.

“Bianca Grimaldi, a lovely Italian witch I met the summer before sixth year. I lost it in my bedroom at our villa in Sorrento,” said Blaise.

“Susan Bones,” said Theo, smirking now. “Behind the greenhouses at Hogwarts.”

“*Seriously?*” asked Weasley in surprise. “You shagged it out for the first time outside?”

“Sure did,” said Theo. “It was more invigorating than you might expect.”

“Oh yes, an alfresco shag is lovely,” said Lovegood. “There’s something rather primitive about it.”

Theo licked his lips as he smirked again, and Draco just shook his head. Theo had always been incredibly transparent about certain things.

“Mine was Pansy, same broom closet,” said Draco, which also earned him an eye-roll from everyone present.

“Mine was Ginny, a few days after the Battle of Hogwarts in her room at the Burrow,” said Potter, now eyeing his girlfriend a bit suspiciously. Draco suppressed a grin.

“Bloody hell, mine...” Granger trailed off, and again Draco braced himself to hear about Weasley. She exhaled. “I’m going to answer this as honestly as I can, alright? Mine was some random muggle I picked up at a bar. We shagged against a wall in an alleyway behind some bins. He told me his name was Mark, but I’m almost positive he was lying to me about it, so I really have no idea who he was.

Does that pass the question or do I have to take a shot since I don't know who he was?"

Draco realized his mouth was hanging open, as a truly bizarre thought crossed his mind.

No. It couldn't possibly be...

Then he glanced at the other wizards, all of whom looked gobsmacked. Pansy looked reluctantly impressed. Weasley looked amused. Lovegood, as usual, looked perfectly unperturbed.

"Shot, Granger," said Pansy, now smirking at her. "You can't answer the question."

"Dammit," muttered Granger as she took a shot.

"Wait, back up darling," said Theo. "I need more details about this. You've had one sexual partner, and it was some random muggle you lost your virginity to during a one-night stand?"

"Yes," said Granger simply.

"But *why*?" asked Blaise. "I always thought you would be one to save it."

Granger shrugged uncomfortably. "I would have, but things were deteriorating with the war pretty quickly. I was afraid I would be caught. I didn't want my first time to be forced. And besides, that particular day was one of the worst days of my life. I needed a release and shagging Mark accomplished both objectives."

Fuck it all. She assumed she was going to be raped.

Draco saw that Theo and Potter both had utterly stricken looks on their faces at this. The witches, however, all looked grim and were nodding slightly in agreement with what Granger just said.

She would have been raped too, thought Draco. He felt sick as he thought about it. There were a few Death Eaters who did that to prisoners, and the Dark Lord never tried to stop it.

No. Don't think about that now. This is just a stupid game.

Thankfully Weasley jumped in. "Well my first time was with Terry Boot. We did it a couple times in his dorm. I wanted some practice before Harry."

This broke the spell, as all the wizards gave her appalled looks now. "Terry Boot? I thought you were going to say Dean Thomas!" said Potter.

"No, Dean was after you dumped me to go hunt Voldemort without shagging me first," sniffed Weasley. "Though it was not for lack of trying on my part, if you recall. I actually propositioned you despite the fact that you dumped me, but you were being all noble about it. So yes, I might have revenge-shagged Dean to make myself feel better once I got back to Hogwarts."

"Goddammit," muttered Potter, and Draco felt a small smile slip across his face, despite himself.

"What I want to know is how the *fuck* did Terry Boot hook up with every single one of you?" asked Blaise with consternation.

"He hasn't hooked up with me," pointed out Granger.

"He asked you out on a date though. It's just a matter of time," retorted Pansy.

Granger just groaned again, and Draco felt another reluctant smile tug at his lips.

"My first time was with Seamus Finnigan," said Lovegood. "We did it in the dungeons."

Draco heard Theo groan slightly, and he struggled not to laugh. Theo was *gone*.

Now it was Blaise's turn, and he reached forward for the jar of questions. He fished it out and paused for a long moment when he read it.

Draco's stomach clenched.

"What is your greatest fear?" Blaise sighed. "The Dark Lord coming back."

"Same," said Theo.

"Me too," said Draco.

"And me," said Pansy.

Granger looked at them all and frowned a bit. "He's not coming back," she said.

"He has before," said Pansy a bit harshly.

"Well yes, but that's because there was something keeping him alive before. He doesn't have it anymore."

There was a long pause and then Blaise said, "How can you be so sure?"

"Because Harry and I helped destroy it. That was our mission that year."

Draco just gaped.

"You're absolutely certain?" asked Theo with uncharacteristic seriousness.

"Positive," interjected Potter calmly. "He's really gone, and he can't come back."

Draco exhaled, and he felt some tension drain from the room.

“Well I don’t have any fears, so I suppose I’m drinking again,” said Lovegood passively. Draco and his friends suddenly looked at the sneakoscope because there was no way *that* could possibly be true. But to his utter shock, it stayed silent.

Weasley hesitated for a moment before lifting her chin ever so slightly. “These days my greatest fear is Harry changing his mind about us.”

Potter gave her an incredulous look. “Why on earth would I do that?”

Weasley shrugged uncomfortably. “You tell me. We’ve been dating for six years.”

Draco heard the unspoken message in her words: *You haven’t asked me to marry you yet.*

Potter looked deeply uncomfortable. “I’m not changing my mind.”

She just shrugged, but refused to look at him. He gave her one more concerned glance before he said, “I think mine is fucking up my kids. I didn’t have any role models as a little kid, and my godfather died before he could parent me too.”

Everyone blinked, and Weasley gave Potter a hard look. “Wait, really? Is that why...”

He shrugged. “Mostly, yeah.”

“Merlin,” she muttered. “You and I are going to have a long talk when this is over Harry.”

He gave her a slightly embarrassed look.

“How about you then, Hermione?” asked Theo, now turning to her. “Tell us your greatest fear, darling.”

Granger got an odd look on her face as she thought about this. “I think... I think my greatest fear is that I’ll die at my desk without ever finding somebody. I love my job, I love my work, and I’m not chomping at the bit to get married or anything like that... but I do want companionship. Lately my job hasn’t felt like enough.”

“Well we can certainly find you a lovely bloke to shag at the very least,” said Pansy. “Your dry spell is damned depressing.”

Granger smiled a little at this. “Maybe. But I have three criteria for my next shag.”

Draco’s eyebrows flew up, as did everybody else’s.

“And they are?” asked Pansy.

“First, I have to care about him. Casual sex works for some people, obviously,” and here she nodded at Draco. “But I did that once, and it doesn’t work for me. It was necessary at the time, and I don’t regret it at all, but I cared too much afterwards. I fell for some muggle bloke I didn’t even know just because he made me feel good during a really low moment. It took a few months for me to move on from him. I don’t want to develop feelings for a casual shag and get blindsided again.”

Pansy inclined her head. “Alright. And what else?”

“Second, I need to know he’s into me because I’m me. Not because I’m the Golden Girl or the Brightest Witch of the Age or the Muggleborn Princess or the Curly Cursebreaker or whatever other bullshit title Rita Skeeter gives to me. It’s unbelievably difficult to find a bloke who just wants me and doesn’t want my fame too.”

Pansy pursed her lips, but Draco thought Granger had a point.

“And last?” asked Pansy.

Now Granger smirked. "I need to believe he'll perform at least as well as my vibrator. Otherwise what's the point? And as we've already established, the vibrator wins almost every time."

All the witches laughed at this, but an odd sensation swooped through Draco's stomach.

"Needless to say, I've never found him despite many first dates and quite a few snogs," she added.

Pansy thought about this for a moment and nodded. "Right then. We're going to find you a man, Granger."

She looked confused for a moment, and Draco felt another odd lurch at this.

"But why?"

Pansy looked her directly in the eye. "Because you just relieved my greatest fear. I'm going to return the favor."

The Master's Hiding Place

Chapter 6: The Master's Hiding Place

AN: Thanks for all the notes and reviews! I read everything!

And now, it's time for Hermione to meet the unicorns.

Hermione

Hermione had to admit that the Slytherin's game of Secrets and Truths was unexpectedly intriguing. She learned that Malfoy and Pansy lost their virginity to each other, though she had always suspected it. She learned that Harry and Ginny had quite a few things in their relationship they needed to clear up. And she learned that Terry Boot was apparently some sort of closet sex god.

Even the questions that touched on the war in some way weren't so bad. Hermione knew she had shocked the Slytherins with some of her confessions. She was certain Malfoy had been waiting to hear her say that Malfoy Manor was the worst place she had ever been. Her reason for losing her virginity had clearly stunned them, and Theo in particular looked almost devastated when she said it. But all of it was true. And like her scars, Hermione wasn't willing to hide what happened, unless it was something classified like the details about the horcruxes.

Mercifully, the next two questions were easy, though they caused some debate. Theo pulled "Have you ever stolen something? What was it?" and Hermione had so much to report for this one it took her a moment to decide what she should say. She was still thinking about it while it was Harry's turn, and he said, "I once stole a necklace from Dolores Umbridge."

The others started to laugh in amazement, when Hermione shot him a look. "You didn't steal that, I did. You should just take a shot."

Harry frowned, and the others watched them curiously now. For some reason Hermione glanced at Malfoy, and he was studying her intently.

Harry, however, scowled. "Fine. Then how about the thing I stole out of Bellatrix's vault?"

Hermione frowned. "You touched it first, I'll grant you that. But I'm the one who broke in, and I lifted you up to the top shelf so you could reach it."

"I broke in too!"

"Only technically. You went in under your cloak. I'm the one who polyjuiced into Bellatrix and had to talk to the damn goblins."

Malfoy's face transformed into one of awe and horror at this.

"This is unbelievable," muttered Harry. "But fine. How about that car in second year?"

"Ron stole that," said Ginny.

"She's right," added Hermione. "I don't know that you've ever stolen something by yourself, Harry."

Harry's mouth opened and closed a few times before his eyes lit up. "Malfoy's wand! I stole Malfoy's wand!"

"You gave it back though," pointed out Hermione.

"Goddammit..." muttered Harry, thinking hard, as the others started to grin at him.

"Just take your shot like a man and be done with it," advised Hermione.

Harry glared at her. "Fine. But why don't you share with the group what *you* stole, since you've evidently created a rule about doing it without any help. I *did* help with the necklace and the thing in Bellatrix's vault, you know."

Hermione just raised one eyebrow. "How about the potions ingredients I stole from Snape in second year? Or the twins' collection of skiving snackboxes I stole during fifth year when they were driving me mad? Or the dark books I stole from Dumbledore's office at the end of sixth year? Or the Order's entire store of polyjuice that I stole before we went on the run? Or all the food I stole while we were on the run once we ran out of muggle money? And there may have been one or two things I've stolen from the Ministry and St. Mungo's since getting out of Hogwarts, but you're an auror now so I'm not going to tell you about those."

Everyone's mouths were hanging open, and then Theo started to clap slowly. "Darling, that might have been the sexiest thing I've ever heard you say."

Hermione rolled her eyes at him, but grinned nonetheless. She exchanged a look with Malfoy, whose eyes were practically glittering as he studied her.

After her recitation, Hermione discovered that all the Slytherins were thieves and Ginny was obviously a thief too. Luna, however, had never stolen anything. She earned yet another shot for this and was starting to become rather drunk.

And then Malfoy asked, "What is your favorite sexual position?"

Since Hermione had only one position she had ever tried she had to report, "Whatever you call it when you do it against the wall. Upright missionary maybe?"

"I think she has to take a shot," said Pansy. "She's only saying it because she's never done it any other way. Besides, all forms of missionary are questionable, even the arguably hot ones."

“Missionary can be amazing for the witch if the hip angle is right,” retorted Malfoy.

“Well *you* never got me off that way,” said Pansy.

“For fuck’s sake, that’s because I was a goddamned teenager when we shagged,” said Malfoy rolling his eyes.

Eventually it was decided that Hermione had to take a half shot, and Luna was feeling so free she took another too.

At that point Hermione was feeling rather warm and Luna was very drunk, so they called the game.

Their friends bid them farewell, and Luna surprised them all by walking up to Theo and saying in a slightly slurred voice, “That was a delightful game, Theo. We should play it more often,” and then she kissed him on the cheek before turning around and staggering through the floo. Hermione noticed Theo eyeing her as she walked away, and Hermione couldn’t hide a small smile at that.

Yes, Secrets and Truths was surprisingly fun. It gave her plenty to think about over the weekend as they celebrated Harry’s birthday in a much more traditional way with the Weasleys before Hermione allowed herself to think about the next thing that was about to happen: her first visit to Malfoy Manor in more than six years.

Hermione had to admit she was nervous about it. Malfoy’s attitude toward her had certainly improved since their fight, but he was still a little guarded around her. They had never exchanged more than a few words without the others around, and she didn’t know what to expect from him when she arrived.

Narcissa was also a cause for concern. Hermione had never spoken to the woman directly. She had exchanged a stiff nod with her on occasion when they ran into each other in Diagon Alley or the odd restaurant, but it was very distant. Hermione knew that Narcissa and Andromeda had started to reconnect a little bit, but it was still

strained after decades of silence. Hermione didn't know how Narcissa would react when she saw a famous muggleborn in her home, one who had been tortured there before.

And of course, Hermione's torture was the last thing making her thoughts troubled. She had done a very good job of examining it, thinking about it, and moving on from it. But she still had the occasional nightmare about it, and for all of Draco's assurances that the Manor looked different Hermione was sure she would be affected by it. Hermione was a professional cursebreaker and a healer to boot. She was not somebody who was easily intimidated, and very little made her scared or squeamish. But she had to admit that Malfoy Manor was one of the few places that did. It might not be the *worst* place she had ever been, but it landed in her top three.

She spent most of that Sunday reviewing her notes, doing breathing exercises, and convincing herself she could do this. She was a professional. She was an adult. The Malfoys may not be thrilled to have her there, but she would be in no more danger at the Manor than she usually faced at her job. And she had to admit that the project was an interesting one: discover Lucius Malfoy's hiding places and decommission his dark objects. It was a cursebreaker's dream project really, and she told herself she would enjoy it once she got used to it. Besides, while she didn't have an *entire* six months for it — the clock started the day Lucius died — there was still plenty of time for it. She could ease into it and take it slowly.

On Monday morning she dithered over what she should wear to something like this. Normally she dressed in jeans, trainers, and T-shirts or casual jumpers when doing field work, which this technically was. But Malfoy always looked like he stepped straight out of a magazine every time she saw him. Even his T-shirts looked tailored and incredibly expensive. And Narcissa, of course, was the epitome of elegance at all times.

Hermione finally settled on some slacks she could move in, her nicest tank top, and a summer blazer she could remove if her plans changed and they actually found anything today. She clipped her

hair half back and felt that was good enough. She wasn't expecting to do much more than get a sense of the scope of the project today.

She took a deep breath and tried to calm her stomach as she turned and apparated to Malfoy Manor. On this first trip she felt she should come through the front gate instead of floo'ing into Merlin knew where.

Hermione stared up at the gates she hadn't seen in over six years, but she furrowed her brow. She hadn't been able to study them the last time she was here, but she thought they looked quite different. She remembered the gates being almost like prison bars in an imposing black with the Malfoy crest in gold on top. But this looked rather delicate, with bars in silver that weaved in and out of each other to create the illusion of vines and flowers. The Malfoy crest was still there, but it was woven into the pattern. It was beautiful, and Hermione found herself staring at it in puzzlement as it suddenly opened to admit her.

She glanced past it and saw the blond head of Malfoy striding down the lane to greet her.

He made a striking picture in the morning light, the sun practically glinting off of his hair. Hermione blinked in surprise but tried to shake herself out of it as he approached.

"Granger," he said, as his eyes swept over her.

"Malfoy," she said cautiously.

There was a slightly awkward pause, and she hurried to add, "The gates. Are they... different?"

He glanced at them and sighed. "Yes. Another thing that changed. Though I'll admit..."

"They're much nicer like this," she said quickly. A ghost of a smile crossed his face at this.

“I think so too. Come on in, and we can get started. Mother is out this morning visiting with one of her friends, but she’ll be back for tea. You’re welcome to join us if you’re still here.”

Hermione hesitated. “We’ll see. I really just want to get a sense of the scope today and maybe review the transition ritual with you.”

He nodded and led her inside. The doors opened for him, and Hermione found herself in an enormous gallery that she vaguely recognized, but it looked different. The proportions were the same, the windows were the same, the marble floors were the same, but it still felt lighter somehow, airier. And there, immediately to her left as she walked in was an enormous portrait of...

“Bloody hell,” she muttered, as she stared at the nearly life-size unicorn, calmly munching some grass.

She glanced sideways at Malfoy’s face. He had an almost pained look as he stared at it too, and Hermione couldn’t help it. A snort escaped her, then a giggle, and then before she knew it she was laughing so hard her eyes were tearing up.

“I’m sorry,” she gasped, as another round of giggles bubbled up.

Malfoy was trying to look annoyed, but a smile was escaping.

“I’ll stop, I swear, this... is... so... unprofessional... of me,” she said through giggles as the unicorn tossed its mane.

“You like unicorns then?” he asked with a small smile.

Hermione took a few deep breaths and finally calmed down as she nodded, though she was still smiling broadly. “Yes, of course I like unicorns. But this is just... wasn’t there a huge portrait of Lucius here before?”

Malfoy raised an eyebrow and nodded.

“Well this is quite the improvement, if I may say so.”

Now he gave a full grin. "I agree. Though I feel the Manor may have gone a bit overboard with it."

"Not at all," she said, as they started to walk down the foyer, Draco leading the way. "And honestly, it's a bloody relief."

"What makes you say that?"

Hermione shrugged and chewed on her lip a little bit as she decided whether she could tell him this or not. "I was a bit... nervous to see the Manor again. But if this is what I'm going to see when I finally go exploring, I think my biggest problem is going to be controlling my laughter, not having a flashback. You said it was different, but I didn't really believe you."

He studied her a bit as she said this, but she sensed he was both surprised and pleased by her reaction. "Laughter is preferable to screaming, I'll grant you that," he finally said. "Come on, let's start in the Study. That's where I performed the ritual."

She nodded as he led her toward a handsome door. There was a little gold plaque outside of it that said, *Fidelio Room*.

"The Fidelio Room?" she asked questioningly. Draco glanced at the plaque and nodded a bit as he gestured for her to come in. "Yes. That was something else that changed. The rooms have always had names. This used to be the Wiltshire Room when it was my father's. Mother says the names were the same for my grandfather too. They were all places in England and a few places abroad. Now that I'm starting to put together an asset list, I'm pretty sure they were all places where the Malfoys own property. For me, though..." he shrugged. "They're all spells. I have no idea why."

"The fidelius charm?" she asked.

Draco nodded. "I've cast it once. It was for a safe house that I bought just after I turned seventeen and gained control over the heir's share of the fortune. My father never knew that I owned a small cottage

during the war. Mother and I decided to go into hiding for good if Potter lost, and I warded the shit out of it, including the fidelius charm.”

Hermione had to admit she was impressed. It was an inordinately complex charm, and she had never attempted it herself. It fit though. She knew Malfoy was talented and powerful. He would have had every motivation to get it right if it was his escape plan and if Narcissa had consented to flee too. And something about it made sense as the name for the room where the secrets to the Malfoy rituals and blood magic were kept. The Malfoys had more famous rooms than this one – the Library being the most notable – but the Study was the Master’s private domain. It was where he controlled the fortune and the magic of the estate. Hermione was actually surprised Malfoy was inviting her in.

She nodded slowly as she thought about the room names changing. The more she heard about the Manor’s magic, the more it felt like the Manor was almost sentient, and it knew something about Draco Malfoy that he hadn’t even discovered for himself. Hogwarts had always felt sentient to Hermione too, and just like Hogwarts the Manor had centuries of magic layered on it. She sensed she needed to learn everything about it if they were going to find Lucius’s cache of dark objects.

“Are all the rooms named after spells you’ve cast then?”

He hesitated and got an odd look on his face. “All but one,” was all he said.

Hermione opened her mouth to ask more questions, but he just said, “Come on. I’ll show you where I did the ritual.”

He led her over to a bookcase and opened the lower cabinet before reaching his hand in. To her surprise she heard a click, and the bookcase swung forward. He stepped back so she could peer into the tiny room, barely the size of a closet. Hermione walked into it slowly and closed her eyes to feel the magic. It was here, the center

of the Manor. Without even realizing what she was doing, she kneeled down and traced a diamond on the floor. Then she opened her eyes and pressed her palm into the middle of it.

“The magic comes from here,” she said. “It’s yours.”

She turned back to find Draco staring at her intently. He nodded slowly.

Hermione stood and turned back to him. “Tell me your theories. I’ve done a bit with wards and blood magic over the years, but not to this extent. I’ll need to study up.”

He nodded and led her to a round table in one corner of the room after plucking a small black book from the shelf.

“Quite a bit about the Manor changed when I did the ritual, as you can tell,” he said. She nodded in agreement with this.

“One thing that wasn’t apparent until recently was that the Master’s Hiding Place disappeared.”

Hermione quirked an eyebrow in question.

“Every master has a hiding place,” he continued. “It can only be opened by the Master, and he has to let guests into it. I knew where Father’s was, but I could never get into it without him, and in any event the door to it has disappeared.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes as everything she knew about Lucius Malfoy came back to her.

“It was under the Sitting Room floor wasn’t it?” she asked quietly.

Malfoy’s eyes widened in shock. “How on earth did you know that? I didn’t talk to the others about ritual magic. I hadn’t put it all together when they were here.”

She gave him a small smile. "Harry and Ron might have polyjuiced into Crabbe and Goyle over Christmas during second year, and you might have told them all about it."

He looked at her in disbelief. "Why on earth did they do that? And *how* did they do that?"

She grinned. "They wanted to question you because they were sure you were the heir of Slytherin. As for how they did it, I brewed polyjuice. That's why I had to steal those potions ingredients from Snape."

He gaped at her, and she chuckled.

"Fucking hell," he muttered. "Of course you were brewing polyjuice as a second year. What else did I tell them then?"

Hermione's face fell a bit. "You told them you hoped the monster would kill me."

His eyes widened, and then he sighed and seemed to deflate. Hermione bit her lip and started jiggling her foot a bit nervously. She shouldn't have told him that. There was no reason to. He had been a kid. Granted, he was a mean one, but it was obvious he no longer felt that way.

I'm an idiot. Why did I have to bring it up? Why did I have to remind him about our history? We were just starting to get along, and I need this to work and...

But then her thoughts were cut off as he looked at her squarely. "Granger," he said, "I'm sorry I was such a little shit as a kid. There's no excuse for it. I should have apologized to you ages ago, but... anyway. Here we are. I'm sorry."

Hermione blinked. "It's fine," she said. This was awkward.

"No, it's not fine."

“Malfoy, you were a kid.”

“So were you. And you were never that cruel.”

Hermione pursed her lips a little bit, trying desperately to think of something to say that would move them past this. She appreciated the apology of course, but she didn’t want this to become stilted.

“I don’t know about that. I did hold Rita Skeeter hostage in a jar for a month...”

She glanced at Malfoy as she said this. He was still looking at her cautiously, but she saw the ghost of a smile cross his face.

“And I might be the person responsible for Marietta Edgecomb’s acne. Though even I’m a bit surprised it’s hung around this long...”

Now the corners of his mouth were definitely quirking up.

“And the first time I saw Ron snogging Lavender brown I conjured a bunch of canaries and made them attack him. He still has the scars from it.”

A slow smile started to cross his face now.

“And I did slap you in third year. Let’s not forget that.”

“That wasn’t cruel though, that was hot,” he said.

Now it was Hermione’s turn to gape. “Wait. What?”

There was the slightest hint of pink tinging Malfoy’s cheeks now, but he gave her a look that said he wasn’t going to take it back. “You heard me. It was really hot. It turned my very light crush on you into something I could hardly control for a few months.”

Hermione was in disbelief. “You’re joking. There’s no way...”

He shrugged. "I was thirteen. Most of the cute girls in school caught my eye at some point. But with you... I thought I could keep it contained. I trained myself not to look at you or think about you that way because I wasn't supposed to like you at all. Then you had to go and slap me, and it just... flooded my brain or something. I was terrified my father would find out and disinherit me for my impure thoughts."

He was giving her a teasing smile now, and Hermione felt herself turning crimson. "I cannot believe you told me that."

He turned serious again. "Consider it part of my penance for being such a little bastard to you. I really am sorry about it, and I'm not going to try to excuse it. Though I will say that you made me pay for it over and over again during school. I had a crush on you for the rest of third year. It took the fucking veelas from the World Cup to finally banish you from my thoughts. I hated every second of it."

He gave her a surprisingly genuine smile at this.

Hermione shook her head and chuckled a little. "Well I appreciate the apology. And I returned the favor in sixth year, so don't feel too bad."

Now Malfoy looked intrigued. "Never say so."

"Oh yes," said Hermione. "If we're confessing to Hogwarts crushes that we despised, I did have a crush on you for part of sixth year. You were clearly spiraling, and I didn't know why. I've always been a sucker for the broody types you know. And you fixed your hair that year. The slicked back look was never my cup of tea."

She felt herself blushing again, but she refused to feel embarrassed about it. He gave her a cocky grin now. "What did you want to do to me, Granger?"

She rolled her eyes. "I am *never* telling you that. I just watched your head inflate when I told you about my crush. It would never fit

through that door if I told you what I wanted to do.”

“That good huh?” he said, wiggling his eyebrows at her, and she couldn’t help but laugh.

“You’re impossible.”

He shrugged. “Nah, just amazed that I attracted the indomitable Hermione Granger, if only for a brief period of time.”

Hermione blinked. She was sure she had never heard him say her first name before. It sounded almost sensual. She mentally shook herself out of it.

“Alright Casanova, let’s get back on track.”

“Who’s Casanova?” he asked curiously.

Hermione blushed again. “It’s a muggle phrase. It means you like to seduce women.”

He raised one eyebrow at this. “Fascinating that you think I’m that good.”

“Well you *do* belong to a sex club don’t you?”

His eyes narrowed a bit. “I do, that’s true.”

“There you go then,” she said.

“Granger, that’s not really how it works.”

Hermione felt herself reddening again. She was truly out of her depths when it came to that sort of thing. “Oh?”

“It’s more like a matching service. I have a profile that says what I want, witches have profiles that say what they want, and they arrange meetings between us. I don’t know who they are, and they don’t know who I am. If I’m in a public place in the club, I’m

transfigured. If I'm doing something private with a witch, they're blindfolded. Nobody has any idea I'm even a member, except for the management. They do host parties where you can mingle and find your own match, but I've never gone to them. There is no seduction required."

Hermione was intrigued despite herself. "And that... works for you?"

He shrugged. "It's not perfect, but it works well enough. All the women I know whom I've slept with have blown up in my face. In any event, I haven't seduced anybody in years. The last one was Astoria I suppose, though she expected pureblood courtship traditions to be followed stringently. They're quite chaste, and I didn't like her enough to bother with anything romantic. By the time we had sex we were engaged, and I think she went along with it because it fit within the updated courtship guidelines."

Hermione had about a thousand more questions she wanted to ask, but there really wasn't time.

"At some point we're going to revisit the fact that you got engaged to somebody you didn't really care about, but right now we should probably focus on the job."

To her surprise he grinned. "What's that? Not having fun?"

"I'm actually rather fascinated, as I'm sure you can tell, but Brenda told me I only had you for a short time this morning before you had to run off to some other meetings."

He wrinkled his nose at this, and it was such an uncharacteristic gesture that Hermione found herself laughing again.

"Fine," he sighed. "So back to the Master's Hiding Place. You're right that Father's was under the Sitting Room floor. It's been years since I've seen it open, so I didn't even think to check there until the Ministry had visited the Manor twice and couldn't find anything. When I finally did look, I discovered that it's gone."

Hermione nodded. She read in the reports that Malfoy had given them free rein of the Manor and provided an elf to show them around. He hid nothing. But he had also been tied up in meetings, and the Wills and Estates Division didn't spend any significant time interviewing him other than preliminary questions about an assets list.

"What about your hiding place then?" asked Hermione.

Malfoy hesitated. "That's the really odd thing. I haven't found mine yet."

Hermione furrowed her brow. She wasn't expecting that.

"I assume you've looked?"

He nodded. "Yes, and the elves have looked too."

Hermione's eyes widened. "The elves can't find it either?"

"No, nor Father's stash. I'm almost certain there were some dark objects and potions in his hiding place when he went to Azkaban. Nobody but him could get into it so I never tried. According to this book, that cavity in the Sitting Room floor has been the Master's Hiding Place for the last seven generations. Prior to that it was in the Master's Suite for several generations. When it moved from the Master's Suite to the Sitting Room floor, all the objects moved with it. Part of me wonders if the Manor didn't just... vanish it and everything inside of it instead of moving it."

Hermione nodded slowly. "It's certainly odd..."

He inclined his head.

"And you're sure that the Master's Hiding Place is the *only* place his dark objects would be?"

"No," he said. "It wouldn't surprise me if there are other things scattered around the Manor. There are rooms I haven't gone into in

years. I haven't searched the Library thoroughly. There are a lot of other places he could have stashed things, but I think the biggest cache was in his hiding place. And his hiding place has disappeared, and mine hasn't been found."

"It's fascinating," she said thoughtfully. "I'd like to study this book if you don't mind. And then at some point I'll need to go through the Manor room by room, but I imagine it will take some time..."

He nodded. "There are one hundred and twenty-seven rooms in the Manor. Plus the grounds and several outbuildings."

Hermione looked at him incredulously. "Seriously?"

He nodded. "Yes and the Vaults of course. I don't know, Granger. I hope you have some good identification spells, because it's just..." he trailed off and gave her a hopeless gesture.

She felt an odd surge of sympathy for him. She wasn't the type to give grace to those who had everything and didn't use their resources for the greater good. But for the first time she was really starting to understand the tangle Lucius had left for him, and she knew it wasn't his fault. She sensed Draco Malfoy could do a lot of good in the world, and he might even want to. But he had to sort out this mess first. He had to have the confidence that he could do it. And it was becoming increasingly evident to Hermione that he really needed help with it.

"Alright," she said, giving him a firm nod. "We have about five months to work through everything. I know you're busy, so I won't drag you into it unless I need you for something, and I'll keep you apprised of my progress. But for now, let me start by studying this blood magic. I just have a feeling this is part of it."

Malfoy nodded. "Fair enough. You can work in here for as long as you need, or anywhere else if you find a better spot."

Hermione raised an eyebrow. "It's your study though."

He shrugged. "Sure. But it's private. Absolutely nobody will interrupt you in here. Mother has guests in and out of the Manor all the time. As long as you don't mind my using it too..."

"No, of course not," she said quickly.

"There you go then. You can have the table to spread out, or you can use the Library or one of the spare bedrooms if you want. There are a few dozen. It's entirely up to you."

Hermione gave him a small smile at that. "Thanks Malfoy. I really appreciate it."

"Of course. And also... don't kill me for this, but... Florrie!"

A small elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

Hermione jumped.

"Florrie, this is Hermione Granger."

Florrie's eyes got huge, and her ears started flapping so quickly Hermione wondered if she was about to levitate.

"You is Harry Potter's Hermy!"

"Erm... yes, I am," she said, shooting a glare at Malfoy who had to clap his hand over his mouth to keep from laughing.

"Dobby is telling Florrie all about Harry Potter and his Wheezy and Hermy."

Hermione gave the elf a soft smile, despite the rather horrid nickname. "Dobby was a wonderful friend. He was a very brave elf."

Florrie's eyes filled with tears, as she nodded.

"Florrie," said Malfoy, and Hermione was surprised to hear how gentle he sounded. "Miss Granger is going to be in and out of the

Manor for several months helping us find Father's dark objects and potions. If you or the other elves discover anything, please inform her immediately. And please answer her call."

Florrie started to nod and curtsy as Hermione said, "Malfoy you don't _"

"Also," he continued, in a slightly louder voice to carry over her, "please make sure she eats. Miss Granger always liked to skip meals when she was working on a project at school, and we can't be having that here."

Florrie nodded seriously as Hermione just gave him a confused look. How had he known that?

"As for *you*," he said, now turning to Hermione and using a stern voice, "call Florrie when you need something. The Manor is huge, and you'll get lost without her help until you learn your way around. Besides, she can tell you when rooms are vacant, including mine and Mother's. We both know you'll be searching them at some point, and I imagine you'll want privacy while you do it."

Hermione opened her mouth to say something but then closed it again and just nodded. He was right of course. Florrie could certainly help Hermione find her way around the Manor and also be discreet while she did it. Hermione didn't fancy searching occupied rooms, unless Malfoy was helping her do it.

"Good," he said. "Now I have to be off. Hopefully I don't murder my fool of a financial advisor. Azkaban would be a bit of a letdown after all these years."

"That bad?" she asked, giving him an amused smile as he pushed his chair back and started to stand.

Malfoy just rolled his eyes. "He's a simpering blood purist. Very old guard and practically worshiped my father. I want to move everything to Blaise, but I can't until I hear how that investigation goes at his

firm. I'm sure he's not involved in it, but if his firm doesn't have firewalls to block accounts from those who aren't managing them..." he sighed as he trailed off. "Anyway, that's another problem for another day. I'll be back for tea at three, so if you're still here I'll join you then."

She nodded as he moved to the fireplace before turning around and looking at her one last time.

"Oh and Granger? Feel free to floo directly into the Study whenever you want to swing by. Just say 'Malfoy Manor, Master's Study,' and you'll appear in the correct fireplace. There's no need to tell me in advance when you're coming."

Hermione caught a shocked look on Florrie's face for a moment before she smoothed it out into something resembling passive interest.

"Oh... alright then. Thanks."

He just nodded and threw some floo powder into the flame. "Beavill and Pearson Financial!" he called, and a moment later he was spinning away.

Pansy Parkinson's Plot

Chapter 7: Pansy Parkinson's Plot

AN: The alternative title to this chapter is “Terry Boot: Giant Man-Whore.”

Draco

Draco was pretending to work at his desk, while his gaze continued to be pulled by the sight of Hermione Granger working at the round table in the Study. This was the third time she had been at the Manor this week, always working with her brow furrowed. She had a habit of chewing on the end of her muggle pen while she was thinking, and Draco watched in slight fascination as each day she would chew deep marks into it before repairing it with her wand for the next days' use. It was so reminiscent of their years at Hogwarts, that he couldn't help but glance at her every few minutes.

So far, Granger hadn't left the Study. Draco had been pulled away rather often, but he got the impression that she appreciated the sanctuary away from his mother and any guests. Florrie had even taken to serving lunch in the Study, and twice Draco ate with her, though she always made a point to leave before tea. He was certain she was avoiding his mother.

As she worked, he could tell something about the Manor's magic was bothering her, but he wasn't sure what she was looking for. She told him she would need to start going through the rooms next week regardless of whether or not she made any progress with the ritual that caused all of the changes. Draco told her she was welcome to go wherever she liked, though he pulled Florrie aside and ordered

her to fetch Draco before Granger went to the Library. He couldn't wait to see her reaction to it.

Yes, Granger was a good companion while Draco spent time reviewing legal documents and financial reports at his desk. She was quiet, polite, and very diligent. Still, Draco found himself constantly distracted by her, though it was never enough to make him seek some other part of the Manor for his work. The three days she had spent at the Manor that first week broke up the routine he had established, and he found he quite liked it. Distraction or not, he liked seeing her hunched over her notes at the round table. It looked like a place where she belonged.

"That's it then," she said as she closed her notes. "I have some working theories, but I'll need to do more research before I'm sure. I'll start working through the Manor next week while it percolates a bit."

Draco gave her a small smile at this. "Are you coming to Theo's tonight?"

To his surprise she groaned and rolled her eyes. "Ugh. Yes. I'm going to dinner with Terry Boot, and Pansy says she has to help. For some reason she wants to meet at Theo's to do it."

Something unpleasant lurched in Draco's stomach at this, but she looked so annoyed by it that he found himself chuckling anyway. "I won't keep you then. I suppose that's why he wanted us to come over earlier than usual?"

She nodded. "Yes. I need to run home to pick up a few things, and then I'll be at the mercy of Pansy I suppose. God knows what she's going to do to me."

Draco smiled. "I'll see you in a bit then."

She nodded and made her way to the floo, and a moment later she was gone.

“Florrie!” he called, and Florrie arrived with a *CRACK!*

“Yes Master?”

“Florrie, I’m going to Theo’s for dinner tonight.”

“Excellent, Sir. Is Miss Hermy going to be there?”

Draco cocked an eyebrow at her. “Yes she is, for a short while.”

Florrie gave a toothy grin at this.

“Why?” he asked suspiciously.

“No reason, Master. Florrie is liking Miss Hermy, ‘tis all. She is very kind to Florrie.”

Draco inclined his head at this and then remembered the thing that had been on his mental to-do list since that first night Granger and her friends appeared at Theo’s.

“Florrie, there’s something else I wanted to discuss with you. I think it’s time that I started paying you and the other elves.”

Florrie blinked and suddenly looked suspicious.

“Paying, Sir? But elves is not paid Sir.”

“Some are paid now,” he said carefully. “In fact, I know it’s something that is very important to Miss Granger. It would make her happy if you and the others were paid.”

Florrie thought about this for a moment and then nodded. “Very well Sir. If Miss Hermy is liking elves to be paid, then Sir must pay us.”

Draco raised his eyebrows a bit at this, but nodded. “Excellent. I’ll pick up some paperwork to open accounts for each of you next time I’m at Gringotts. Please let the others know. I’ll be paying Nonnie as well on behalf of Mother. Oh, and if you could give me the names of

any elves maintaining other Malfoy properties, I would be much obliged.”

Florrie bobbed and Draco sent her on her way, wondering what Granger would say if she knew he was finally doing this. He had thought about it quite a bit and eventually decided that Granger and Blaise were both right. He couldn't claim moral superiority while he benefited from slave labor. Besides, Granger was right that he could afford it. The Malfoy elves had served diligently and lived with some very harsh masters before him. It was the least Draco could do for them.

Draco jotted down a few notes to discuss this with his financial advisor and Gringotts, and then he checked his watch. He decided to head on to Theo's before his mother waylaid him.

He stood up and made his way to the fireplace, and then a few moments later he stepped out of the floo at Nott Manor. He looked around curiously. It appeared to be deserted. He slipped out into the hallway and heard female voices at the end of the hall near one of the guest bedrooms. Draco slowly made his way toward it and paused as he listened just outside the door.

“I'm helping,” said Pansy authoritatively. “You three have no idea what the hell you're doing, and I will not be able to stand by watching you try. Now then, *this* is the dress you're going to wear, and I'll do your hair and make up to match.”

“You can't be serious,” came Granger's voice.

“I'm completely serious,” said Pansy. “I told you, I'm trying to break into witches' fashion, and it's absolutely impossible. But if *you* are wearing my things I might finally get noticed.”

Draco's eyebrows flew up, but he had to admit Pansy might be onto something. She was a designer and had a small business that turned a reasonable profit on wizarding wear. It was the only business Draco had ever invested in with the heir's share to support

his old friend. It had proven to be a decent, if not terribly lucrative, investment, and it made Pansy happy. Draco, Theo, and Blaise all wore whatever Pansy dressed them in, and they were quick to tell the media what they were wearing whenever the society pages featured one of them. Pansy had made a bit of a name for herself as a wizarding designer that way. But wizarding fashion was far less competitive than witches' fashion, and Pansy had never been able to really break in.

If she got Granger on board, however, that could change everything for her.

Draco heard some muffled sounds, as Pansy was evidently pulling a dress over Granger's head. Then he heard Granger's voice again.

"What the hell is that?"

"Makeup Granger, honestly. You're supposed to be smart, aren't you? Now sit down over here, and stay *still*."

Draco suppressed a grin at this.

"OW!" howled Granger, and Pansy just snorted at her.

"If you would bother to actually *condition* your hair, it wouldn't hurt so much. That's your own damn fault."

"You know, Pansy's onto something," came Weasley's voice. "Your hair could really be amazing."

"It's just uncontrollable though," insisted Granger. "I've never been able to do anything with it except charm it a different color."

"It is *not* uncontrollable," said Pansy firmly. "You're just lazy and uninformed."

Draco suppressed a laugh as he heard a sound of protest coming from the room. He was sure that nobody had ever accused Hermione Granger of being lazy or uninformed about anything.

“Why you little...”

“Shut up, Granger, I’m trying to concentrate,” said Pansy seriously. He heard Granger huff, but then she fell silent.

At long last Pansy declared herself satisfied and then said, “Alright now, makeup.”

“Pansy, honestly, this is pointless. I don’t even want to go on this date.”

Draco felt surprisingly upbeat at this statement, but he couldn’t examine it too closely because then he heard Pansy’s voice again.

“You *will* go on this date, and you will give him a chance. I’m not saying you have to shag him tonight, but Terry Boot is sexually adept enough to pull the stick out of anybody’s arse, including yours. And besides, even you must know that the best way to attract one man is by impressing another.”

“I have no idea what you’re —”

“Later. Mouth open... no, not like that, *Circe*, like an O... pretend you’re about to blow Terry...”

Draco scowled at this, while Granger made another noise of protest and Ginny and Luna howled.

Then he heard Pansy say, “Perfect. Stay just like that. Now blot.”

Draco decided he had eavesdropped long enough and headed back to the parlor to wait and see whatever magic Pansy wrought on Granger.

Theo, Blaise, and Potter had arrived by the time he returned, and Draco went to pour himself a drink when he heard Pansy clear her throat expectantly behind him.

"I need a consult," she announced and Draco turned to find himself staring at Granger.

Pansy had forced her into a navy dress with a low V-neck. Her hair was in soft curls, instead of her typical frizz. And her eyes practically glowed.

Fuck she looks good.

He immediately cursed himself for the thought.

"What do you think?" she said, as she waved her arm toward Granger. "I want Terry to shag her eventually. We need to compare notes."

Granger just rolled her eyes at this.

Draco's stomach dropped at the thought, as his eyes roved over the new and improved Granger.

"Your tits are divine, darling," said Theo, giving her a cheeky grin.

Draco cast a glare toward his friend, but Granger just snorted with laughter.

"Thank you Theo," she said.

"Blaise?" asked Pansy lightly.

"You look lovely, *leonessa*," he said.

Granger gave him a surprised, but gratified look at the nickname, and Draco scowled at him too.

"Potter?"

"Nice I guess?" he said. "Honestly, Hermione's practically my sister. Don't ask me."

Pansy then turned to Draco. She had a peculiar glint in her eye that he couldn't quite identify. "What do you think, Draco? Should I push Granger's tits up a bit more?"

Draco's jaw clenched, though his eyes dropped involuntarily and surveyed a part of her he *really* should not be checking out.

"Her tits are... perfectly adequate."

He mentally winced as Granger raised one, newly-penciled eyebrow.

"Well there's damning with faint praise if I ever heard it," she muttered. Then she turned to Pansy. "You see? I have perfectly adequate tits. Even Malfoy thinks so, and we all know he's seen plenty of them!"

Pansy huffed at this and cast an annoyed look at Draco. "Fine. But at least give Terry a chance to use his hands on you if you won't let him shag you. He's really excellent."

Granger rolled her eyes again, but Pansy just glared at her.

"Alright *fine!* I'll let Terry Boot get me off! Happy?"

No, I'm not happy about that at all, thought Draco a bit desperately. But he was being ridiculous. There was no reason why he should care where Terry Boot's hands were. No reason at all.

"Yes, *thank you* Hermione," said Lovegood, now chiming in. "We just want to compare notes. You're the last one."

"Fucking hell," muttered Blaise, and Draco glanced around at the others. All the wizards had slightly pinched looks as they considered this.

"Oh and since you're being so cooperative now..." started Pansy in a falsely sweet voice, as she grabbed Granger's shoes. "Here."

She tapped them with her wand and the heels got higher and narrower.

“What the hell is this?”

“You need ‘fuck me’ shoes,” she said.

“But I don’t *want* him to...”

“*Fine*, then you need ‘fuck me with your hands’ shoes.”

“Jesus Christ,” muttered Granger, ignoring the looks from all the others as she grabbed the shoes and shoved them on her feet.

“There. Can I go and get this over with now?”

“Yes, but bring him back through the floo so we can make sure you did it!” said Pansy excitedly.

Oh fuck no, thought Draco.

“Do you really want him to see...” started Granger.

“It’s fine,” said Theo, with a look of unholy glee on his face. “We can ignore you, my darling. We certainly wouldn’t want to interfere with your chance at true love.”

Pansy looked approvingly at Theo, though Draco gave him an appalled look. At least Granger rolled her eyes.

“No, I mean, should he really see three witches he’s actually shagged all in the same place right before he gets me off?”

Everyone paused to consider this. Draco desperately hoped it meant that he would *not* have to witness Granger taking some bloke into one of Theo’s spare bedrooms.

“That’s a good point,” said Lovegood.

“Yes, you should probably just bring him to a room without all of us here,” said Weasley. “Luna and I can eat in the dining room. Pansy will let us know.”

“Oh my *God*,” said Granger, but her friends ignored her as they gently pushed her toward the fireplace.

As soon as she stepped through the floo, Pansy turned around to give the others satisfied looks. “Excellent.”

“Why are you pressuring her?” said Draco suddenly. “She clearly doesn’t want to do it.”

Pansy’s eyes narrowed at him for just a moment before smirking with satisfaction, as though she knew something he didn’t.

“Because Granger needs to find a man. And Terry’s not a bad choice, truly. She’s just skittish because she’s so inexperienced. You know her. She won’t *actually* do it if she doesn’t want to.”

“Pansy’s right,” said Weasley. “None of us could actually force Hermione to do that sort of thing. She just needs a good prod to have confidence in herself. Trust me, if she follows through, it’s because she really wants it.”

For some reason Draco’s stomach sank.

For the next two hours, Draco debated going back to the Manor. He even stood up to leave once, before Pansy called him back. Draco really didn’t want to find out what had happened on Granger’s big date. It had seemed funny at first because she was clearly dreading it, but all the talk of Terry Boot’s sexual prowess had put Draco in a foul mood.

It wasn’t because it was *Granger*, surely. Of course she looked nice tonight, but Draco had secretly thought she looked nice ever since that mad crush he had on her in third year. Besides, Draco had seen her practically naked a few weeks ago, and it hadn’t affected him

that way. It was just fucking obnoxious that all of the witches seemed to think *Boot* was so sexually competent. It didn't fit at all, and Granger was the holdout. If she agreed with the others then it would actually be true.

And so he waited, telling himself it was really a Boot problem and not a Granger problem. He forced down some dinner and sipped on a drink while he listened to the others talk until finally, the floo flared green.

To his dismay, Granger marched in, pulling a happy-looking Boot behind her. She cast a glance at Pansy and nodded firmly, before hauling him into the hallway, the sound of a door slamming shut soon echoing toward them.

"Yes!" said Pansy, punching the air.

Theo and Blaise both looked rather annoyed by this, which made Draco feel a bit better.

"There's no way he's actually that good," said Blaise.

"He is," said Pansy. "I can assure you. Granger will be getting off any minute. I bet she will love it. She'll be perfect, *loud*... don't you think, Draco?"

"God, spare me..." muttered Potter.

Draco didn't respond, he just glared at Pansy who was smiling at him sweetly. His stomach was churning as they waited and about twenty minutes later a slightly dazed Boot meandered back into the parlor and gave them a vague smile as he left through the floo. A few minutes after that Granger came in and flopped on the sofa.

"Well?" asked Pansy eagerly.

Granger just raised her eyebrows. "He was... perfectly adequate," she said, trying not to laugh as she caught Draco's eye.

He stared at her hard, and to his surprise she winked at him as Pansy turned to talk excitedly to Theo and Blaise and Granger turned to talk to Potter.

Draco furrowed his brow for a moment, before it finally hit him.

Maybe, just maybe...

Blaise and Pansy were standing up to go home now, and Potter was heading into the dining room to collect Weasley and Lovegood. Draco started to follow, but he lingered behind just a bit. As Theo started to leave the room, he suddenly reached out and caught Granger's arm. She gasped a little as she turned around to look at him with surprise.

"What did you use on him?" he muttered.

Now her expression changed into a very satisfied smile.

"*Confundus*," she whispered. "Don't tell Pansy."

He released her with a grin and turned around, suddenly feeling lighter than he had all night. "I'll see you next week Granger."

"Night Malfoy."

Draco spent most of the weekend mulling over his odd reaction to Terry Boot. When Pansy, Blaise, and Theo showed up at the Manor for brunch on Saturday, they howled with laughter at the new artwork and then settled down with Narcissa while Pansy gossiped excitedly about Granger and her bloody date with Boot the night before. For some reason she kept casting glances at Draco while she did it, but Draco wasn't sure why.

Pansy was thrilled that Granger agreed to wear a dress she made, and evidently Granger had signed up for the full scope of Pansy's services. Pansy had decided to make Granger a bit of a project in the hopes that it would really launch her witches' fashion line.

All the talk about that date and Granger's new and improved wardrobe at the hands of Pansy made Draco surly and put him in a very poor mood by the time brunch was over, so much so that Narcissa was giving him odd looks. He escaped to the Study, where he stared at the latest statements from Gringotts without seeing them.

Even though Granger had managed Boot the night before, the fact that she had consented to go on a date with him in the first place perturbed him. And based on Pansy's reaction, Draco was sure Boot would be back for more. Granger was kind enough to give the bloke more than one chance, and Draco was sure Boot was only out for one thing.

Terry Boot had actually shagged three of the witches, and now he was going for the fourth. And the fourth one really should be off-limits. Granger was practically a virgin, albeit one who seemed open to having sex if she could find the right bloke. But still, she was inexperienced. She had been hurt in the war. There was no way Boot would be prepared to see her scars if he got her naked. Only somebody who had scars of their own could understand them, appreciate them, and not judge her for them. Granger was attractive, maybe even beautiful if she took Pansy's lessons about her hair to heart. But that's all Boot was seeing, surely. He didn't understand any of the shit she had been through, and he would surely think her scars were ugly if he saw them.

They aren't. They're beautiful too.

It was true her mudblood scar had deeply disturbed him at first, but after their fight and reconciliation he was coming to appreciate what she was doing by just being herself. And none of the other scars she showed him that night bothered him in the least. There was no way Terry Boot would understand them.

So Boot was three for four with the witches, and Draco was sure there were others too. Yes, Draco had had many partners, but most of his sex had been of a more *contractual* nature. Boot had obviously

shagged any number of witches he actually knew, and that put his sexual forays into a different category than Draco's.

As Draco considered it, he was certain that Terry Boot was a man-whore and had to be kept away from Granger. In fact, he wasn't just a man-whore but a Giant Man-Whore.

Granger's first real sexual experience since her muggle bloke all those years ago should be with somebody who was adept, capable, and generous. But her partner shouldn't be a Giant Man-Whore because Giant Man-Whores strung witches along. They used feelings to elicit sex. Then they left a string of broken hearts behind them when they moved on to the next. Or at least, that's what Draco *thought* a Giant Man-Whore like Boot would do. In any event, the Giant Man-Whore was clearly not to be trusted around witches like Granger. She said herself that she started to care too much when she became intimate with someone, and there was no way in hell Draco would allow her to actually *care* about Terry fucking Boot.

Draco turned this over and over in his mind. Saturday passed in a haze of speculation, and Draco slept very poorly on Saturday night. By Sunday he was starting to wonder if his frustration about the Giant Man-Whore situation stemmed from an admiration of *Granger* as opposed to resentment toward the Giant Man-Whore himself.

It seemed almost impossible. He had not thought of her in that way since his adolescent brain was filled with dancing veelas at the World Cup, just before fourth year at Hogwarts. It was true he liked her now as an acquaintance, maybe even as a friend. And yes, he kept his eye on her more than the others. But his attention was surely because she was helping with the Manor now, and she was capable of turning dangerous in an instant if Draco tripped her temper again.

But hypothetically, say he *was* interested... where would that leave him?

Granger was a war hero. She was a workaholic. She was probably a genius. And she wanted to be emotionally invested in the next bloke she shagged *before* she shagged him. That's what she meant by seeking companionship. She wanted a boyfriend, she might even want to fall in love. Maybe she wasn't counting down the days until she was walking down the aisle like other witches her age, but it was clear to Draco that she was thinking about a relationship. She wanted something established before she explored her sexuality with anybody other than herself. And for all of Draco's own exploits, he respected her commitment to this. She was so innocent – so beautifully innocent – that Draco fully supported her decision to save it for somebody special to her. But could Draco ever be that person?

Not likely.

Even though she had clearly forgiven him for his past transgressions, she was still Granger, and he was still Draco. There were years of baggage between them, and nothing about it would be simple. Capturing her interest would be such a monumental task that there was really no point in even trying. Draco didn't have the time, and he told himself he didn't have the interest to commit to a project like that. Besides, he would have no idea where to begin, and he was already neck-deep in problems that made him feel incompetent.

By Monday he had convinced himself that Granger's own principles would serve to keep Giant Man-Whores away. Draco would keep an eye on it to be sure — just in case she needed an assist — but surely Granger was smart enough to identify a Giant Man-Whore when she saw one. Kind or not, she was very principled.

Once Draco made that decision his own mind stilled as he thought of her. He didn't need to pursue her. He could just be her friend, and that would be enough.

Feeling more upbeat than he had all weekend, he waited for Granger to arrive by floo. It was a rare day when he had canceled all of his other meetings that morning, claiming an urgent Ministry of Magic appointment that could last hours. The truth was that Granger was

coming, and she said she wanted to start exploring the Manor today. Draco intended to give her privacy while she searched, but this first day he was surprisingly eager to give her a bit of a tour.

Suddenly the fire turned green and Granger stepped out, before delicately brushing soot off of her clothes. She turned to look at Draco and his eyes widened.

“You look... nice,” he said awkwardly.

She did. She was in tailored black pants and a gauzy top that seemed to float a little. Her hair was in those same soft curls that he saw Friday night, and her eyes seemed to glow just a little. She was wearing ballet flats, and the whole effect made her look even tinier than she was.

She turned a bit pink at the compliment and said, “Oh, thank you. It’s all Pansy’s fault. I swear, she’s an absolute nightmare, but I did promise to stick with it at least through the end of gala season, so...” she shrugged as she trailed off.

Draco swallowed as he thought about the gala season coming up in the fall. If Pansy was going to be designing Granger’s dresses, maybe he should make a point to attend some of them this year.

No. Stop it. You decided to be friends with her. That’s all.

Draco forced a smile on his face. “Pansy’s doing an excellent job, but you’re right she can be a bit much. I found it easiest to just let her go through all my clothes and replace the things she didn’t like.”

Granger looked like she couldn’t decide if that was funny or horrifying.

He chuckled at her expression before saying, “So work today – do you still want to start looking in some of the rooms?”

This seemed to snap her out of it because she nodded. "Yes. If you're busy, I'm sure Florrie can suggest a place to start."

"I have a little free time," he said lightly, "and I had a thought about that. Follow me."

He led her toward the door and she said, "Is your mother in?" in a seemingly casual voice.

He glanced back at her and saw she was biting her lip. "No," he said just as casually. "She had some errands this morning."

Granger nodded in relief, and Draco filed this away for further review. He had been right then, and Granger was avoiding Narcissa. Draco suspected it and told his mother to clear out this morning. He didn't want to ruin the thing he was about to show Granger. But he also knew he would have to think about how to deal with this going forward. Granger certainly couldn't avoid her forever.

"This way," he said, as he led her out into the large gallery and toward a pair of double doors at the very end. As they walked, he heard Granger start to giggle, and he turned to look behind him and caught her staring at the paintings.

"They're terrible, aren't they?" he asked.

"No!" she insisted. "I think they're wonderful! They're just..." and then she dissolved into laughter again.

Draco found himself smiling at this. He had been rather eager to remove the bloody paintings when he first saw them, but he hadn't had the time to deal with them yet. But now, hearing Granger laugh in delight he didn't feel as keen to get rid of them. He had to admit they were conversation pieces, especially...

"Firenze!" she said in delight.

“Ah yes, Harry Potter’s friend,” said the faraway voice of the centaur in the painting near the double doors. “I suppose I taught you as well?”

More than any other painting in the Manor, *this* one had truly stunned Draco. Firenze had been his Divination teacher in fifth year after Umbridge sacked Trelawney, and Draco had no idea he had ever sat for a portrait, let alone one commissioned by the Malfoys.

“No, actually,” said Granger delicately. “I’ve never been much for divination. But we did meet a few times in the Forbidden Forest.”

“Ah yes,” he said a bit dolefully. “Fate is a funny thing, is it not? I helped a Malfoy once against my better judgment, and he honored me with this painting in thanks. And yet, it is not a Malfoy I see now, but a friend of Harry Potter’s.”

Granger looked a bit perplexed, and Draco couldn’t blame her. Centaurs had never made any bloody sense to him.

“Yes, well, it’s lovely to see you,” said Granger. “I may stop by for a chat later, if that would be alright?”

“Human prattle is but a distraction, though a diverting one at times. I will study the stars as I wait for you, and perhaps your purpose will become clear.”

“Erm, right. Thank you,” said Granger, now giving Draco a meaningful look.

“This way then,” he said, gesturing toward the doors.

They approached them, and he caught Granger studying the small gold plaque next to them. “The *Silencio Room* then?” she asked.

Draco smirked. “It’s a bit more than a room, but I’ll admit the name is fitting. Go on in and see for yourself.”

She gave him a curious look, but she slowly opened the doors, and Draco didn't tear his eyes away from her face. Sure enough, she did not disappoint. As soon as she realized he was showing her the Library, her expression transformed, and she looked like that little girl he had met all those years ago, when magic was still new to her.

"Oh Draco..." she whispered, as she stepped forward to look around in awe, and Draco's breathing stopped for a split second.

She had never said his first name before, he was certain of it. And saying it like *that*... Draco could suddenly imagine, very clearly, a similar sigh, a breathy gasp as he...

No. Control yourself.

He wrestled with his thoughts to put them back in a box where they belonged, and he forced himself to relax. His trousers were suddenly far too tight, and he shifted a bit to hide that bulge from her. But through all of it, he couldn't take his eyes off of her face.

She walked in slowly, almost reverently, as she turned in a slow circle to take it all in.

"It's incredible, it's... oh, I've *always* wanted to see it..."

This unexpected confession made her turn a little pink, but she was smiling so broadly that Draco couldn't help but smile too.

The truth was, he had always wanted her to see it too. As a child, he wanted to boast about it, to rub it in her face that *this* was his magical heritage. As a young teen in the throes of his crush, he imagined kissing her against the shelves in here, the books so overwhelming they would convince her to succumb to his baser desires for her. As a young adult, just after he was Marked, he wondered if the answers to whatever she was doing to win the war could be found here. If the Dark Lord hadn't moved in and his father hadn't been so dangerous, Draco would have found a way to contact her and turn her loose in here. And when the war was finally over

and Granger became almost as famous as Potter, Draco idly wondered if she was still devoted to books or if her childlike wonder for them was gone. He wished he could find out by showing her his collection.

Yes, some part of him had wanted to show Hermione Granger his library since he was eleven years old. Her reaction was better than he had ever imagined.

“Are all the books in the Manor magical then?” she asked in amazement.

He hesitated just a split second too long, and she turned to look at him curiously.

“All but one,” he finally said.

Her eyes lit at this, and she looked distinctly intrigued. “Which one?”

“You’ll have to look and see if you can find it.” Draco wasn’t sure what made him say it, but he suddenly had a vision of Granger spending hours in here, touching every book in the Malfoy collection in search of the one muggle book he owned — the book he confessed to stealing from a bookstore during Secrets and Truths, though he didn’t tell the group the title.

Of course, he didn’t keep that particular book in the Library, though Granger didn’t know that.

The light of a new challenge flooded her face, and her eyes twinkled. “I’m sure I’ll find it if I look hard enough. Though...” she trailed off and craned her neck up. “The shelves are very *tall* aren’t they?”

It was true. The entire Manor library was three stories high and took up most of the back wing of the house. It was shaped a bit like a squat T, and they were in the bottom-most section, which felt a bit like a corridor to the main stacks, though it was lined with books and had a single reading table in the middle of the floor. There was an

arch at the far end of the corridor that opened to a wide room that spanned most of the back side of the Manor, where several more reading tables were located, along with a fireplace and several large chairs.

“You’re right they’re tall, but retrieving books from the top is easy enough for a Malfoy.” Then he turned to the room and called out, “Find *Potions of Southern England!*”

A small book came zipping down from one of the top shelves in the corridor where they were standing and landed neatly on a reading table in front of them.

“Oh!” she said in delight. “Find *Noblest Blood!*”

Nothing happened.

She turned to look at him in confusion, and he suppressed a grin. “I said it works for a Malfoy.... Find *Noblest Blood!*”

Then another book, much larger this time, came whizzing around the corner from the main stacks to land on the same table.

She harrumphed, and Draco struggled not to laugh at the look of dismay on her face. “Does it work for your mother then? Or just you?”

“It works for Mother. She’s a Malfoy.”

“I thought she was a Black,” said Granger.

“She is, but she became a Malfoy too when she got married. Even though she’s widowed she has most of the rights of a Malfoy wife, and that includes calling books from the Library. The only thing she can’t do anymore is get into the family vaults alone.”

Granger sighed. “So I can’t call the books unless I’m a Malfoy then?” She sounded disappointed, almost forlorn as she looked around the high shelves.

Unless she's a Malfoy...

Suddenly Draco had a flash of Granger running barefoot through the library, her curls bouncing wildly as she called and returned the books with delight because she could finally do it. She looked happy, almost effervescent as her eyes lit up and her cheeks flushed with pleasure. She turned to Draco and beamed, her smile almost as blinding as...

Fuck it all. Stop that. Stop that right now. You can't think about that.

Draco forced himself to be smooth as he approached to stand next to her and then nudged her a bit. "Chin up, buttercup. Florrie's a Malfoy too since she's bound to me. She can call them for you."

Granger blinked in surprise. "Buttercup?"

Draco internally winced. He had no idea why he had called her that, but he forced his expression to remain smooth. "Why not? Theo has a nickname for you and Blaise does too. They can't have all the fun."

She narrowed her eyes, and he saw a small smile cross her face at this. "Fair enough. But buttercup is so..." she trailed off, wrinkling her nose as she thought about it.

He chuckled. "Alright, not that then. I'll have to keep trying until I find one, won't I?"

"Hmmm, I suppose." Her cheeks were tinged pink again, and Draco unconsciously licked his lips.

I have to get out of here.

"Do you want to continue the tour, or do you prefer to explore in here for a bit?" he asked.

"Oh, I'd like to stay... please. If that's not too much trouble?"

“Not at all. I’ll send Florrie to you. I’ll be in the Study if you need anything.” Draco stepped away as he said this.

She nodded and turned back to the shelves of books, and as she did so the light caught her. The Library only had three windows due to the need to preserve the things inside of it, and to ensure that there was plenty of wallspace for their collection. One window was in the corridor, and the other two flanked the fireplace in the main stacks. And the Library, being a library, always seemed to have dust floating in the air, no matter how often the elves cleaned it. It had never bothered Draco because it always felt peaceful, old, and magical. As she stood there in the light shining through the corridor window, desperately trying to make up her mind about where she should begin, the dust motes floated over her head and gave her a halo effect.

Fuck she’s beautiful.

It struck him that she was – she *really* was. And she had never been more beautiful than that very moment, bathed in the morning sun cast through his library window, totally oblivious that the Master of Malfoy Manor was memorizing the sight of her like this.

Draco had to escape. He had to think. He had to really, *really* think about this. Something about her continued to draw him in, but he wasn’t sure that he wanted it. He wanted to preserve the wall between them because friendship was safe. Friendship he could do. Anything else though...

He cast one glance back at her as he slipped through the double doors and nearly groaned. Her slight figure, her soft curls that were barely tamed, the hum of magical books all around her – it was enough to make him hard.

One wank. You are allowed one wank and then you need to fucking think about this.

Draco closed the door softly and fled to his room. As he dropped his hands to his pants his teenage fantasies about her unburied themselves from the crevices of his brain, but this time they were mixed with all the experiences wrought by adulthood. He finished with a grunt and looked down at the mess he had made, disbelief and a little fear rolling through him as he stared at it.

This was dangerous. This was so very dangerous.

Salazar help me.

The Weirdest Thing You've Ever Done

Chapter 8: The Weirdest Thing You've Ever Done

AN: It's Ginny's birthday, and you know what that means...

Hermione

Hermione spent two weeks buried in the Library. She was a bit embarrassed to admit it, but it might have become her new favorite place in the magical world. She had always adored the Hogwarts library, but it was inevitably filled with other students, many of whom did not follow library etiquette as scrupulously as Hermione did. Even the library that contained the archives in the belly of the Ministry of Magic was imperfect. It felt cold and a bit forbidding, and the archivists always watched her with a suspicious eye when she scoured the shelves for documents. The Malfoy library, however, was everything Hermione had always wished a library would be: it was enormous, peaceful, filled with surprisingly cozy furniture, and she usually had it all to herself.

Admittedly, it wasn't as private as the Study. Malfoy came into the Library rather frequently and the other elves did too. Hermione had even met several of Narcissa's guests who came in for a look, though "Mistress Cissy," as Florrie called her, had not yet appeared herself. But still, it was the most elaborate, most remote library she had ever been in. She could lose herself in its treasures for hours, days at a time, and she was sorely tempted to do just that.

As much as she wanted to spend the rest of her life buried in its books, she knew she had to cut herself off at some point to investigate the rest of the Manor and decided to devote two weeks to it. Florrie explained that in terms of square footage it took up nearly

fifteen percent of the Manor's main building, and of course it contained innumerable objects to be sorted through. Spending a couple weeks was a reasonable use of her time, and if she happened to enjoy herself while she did it there was nothing wrong with that. And so with Florrie's help and, surprisingly, Malfoy's old racing broom, Hermione scoured the shelves for dark objects and illegal treatises. But as Malfoy expected, the prospect was so daunting she was only a third of the way through it by the time her two weeks were up, and she had found nothing.

"They is not likely to be in here anyway, Miss Hermy," said Florrie, as she served lunch to Hermione and Malfoy at one of the reading tables on her last day. "I is guessing they is in the Book Vault if they is not in the Master's Hiding Place."

"A book vault?" she asked curiously.

"What book vault?" asked Malfoy suddenly.

Florrie looked between them in surprise. "The Book Vault, Sir," she said, and Hermione got the impression that Florrie was struggling not to roll her eyes at him. "The Book Vault in Gringotts. 'Tis where the truly rare and valuable volumes are kept."

"Fuck," he muttered, as he put his hands over his face for a moment. He lowered them, and Hermione saw that same look on his face that she was coming to associate with the strain of the estate. "I had no idea we had a book vault. I assumed the books on the asset list were all in here. Most of them aren't listed by title. It just says things like '34 books about the goblin rebellion of 1589' or other such rubbish."

"No Sir, 'tis a separate vault for rare books, like the art. Florrie hears from the Manor elves that the Book Vault tis rather small though."

"Florrie, I'm going to need you to make a list of all the special vaults I'm supposedly in control of," said Malfoy. "Because Salazar knows the goblins haven't been any help with this. They track the gold fairly

well, but not the objects unless they're goblin-made. The Manor elves know the Object Vault much better than I do."

Florrie gave him a curtsy before disappearing with a *CRACK!* and Malfoy just sighed as he leaned back and closed his eyes for a moment. "I never thought I would hate my father quite this much," he muttered.

Hermione gave him a sympathetic smile. "He left you with a mess, didn't he?"

Malfoy nodded. "Yes. And I'll get it sorted with enough time. But that window of amnesty for turning in dark objects..." he hesitated as he glanced at her. "I don't know, Granger. I want to move on from all the shit my father did and turn everything in. But there is so much he didn't tell me. And I'm busy, and I know you'll be busy with other projects too. I honestly don't know if six months is long enough."

She surprised both of them by reaching out and patting his arm. "We'll do the best we can with it. You've been very cooperative, and nobody at the Ministry thinks you're trying to hide anything. I've been very clear about that in the progress reports I'm submitting. If nothing turns up in six months, well..." she trailed off and gave him a knowing look.

He raised an eyebrow at her. "Well what?"

"Look, let's just say I haven't always followed Ministry protocol alright? You won't be going to Azkaban because some dark object your father left behind magically appears after your six months is up. I won't allow it. I'll call in favors from Harry and Kingsley Shacklebolt if I need to."

He blinked in surprise, but then a slow smile started. "Hermione Granger, never say you're willing to break curses off the clock? Isn't that against the rules?"

She chuckled. "Someday you should ask Harry about all the rules I've broken over the years. Decommissioning dark objects without Ministry approval would hardly even rank."

She sensed some of the tension draining out of him at this. "That's... thank you. If you would be willing to do that..."

"I am," she said. "I still intend to do a thorough search during your amnesty window. I have to try. But I'm serious, Malfoy. Don't let the six month deadline stress you out. I'll help."

At this he gave her a brilliant smile, and Hermione blinked.

"That might be the best piece of news I've gotten since Father died," he said. "Seriously, I can't thank you enough."

Hermione gave herself the rest of the afternoon and evening to enjoy her last hours in the Library before moving on to the rest of the Manor the following week. She was due at Theo's that night, but it was going to be later than usual. Pansy's sister's wedding was the following day, and Pansy, Theo, Blaise, and Draco were all expected to attend the rehearsal dinner. Hermione and her friends offered to skip that week, but Theo wouldn't hear of it.

"It's Gingersnap's birthday! And you know what that means!"

Technically Ginny's birthday had been the previous week, but she failed to tell them about it. Once they found out, Theo insisted on another round of Secrets and Truths to make up for their lack of a timely celebration. This time, Pansy was very much in favor.

"I need an excuse to stay the hell away from my mother as much as possible next weekend," said Pansy when she showed up unannounced at Hermione's flat to bring some more clothes to her. "So yes, we are still meeting Friday night, and we are *also* celebrating Ginny's birthday. It has to be something like that or my mother will never let me go."

So Hermione spent that last Friday ensconced in the Malfoy library. Malfoy himself checked in with her just as he was about to leave for the rehearsal dinner, and Hermione caught herself staring at him. He looked far too good in that suit, and she suddenly had a rather deep appreciation for Pansy Parkinson. Pansy might be annoying, but she certainly had an eye for clothing.

“Mother and I are about to head out. I’ll see you at Theo’s later, yes?”

She just nodded, not quite trusting herself to speak.

“Good,” he said. “I expect we’ll all be halfway to drunk before the game even begins so you lot will have an advantage tonight.”

Hermione smiled at this as he bid farewell, and she took Florrie up on her offer to stay for a private dinner in the Library. It was glorious, knowing that she had her favorite place all to herself, and she indulged in a search for the muggle book that Draco had hidden somewhere among the shelves.

She looked for several hours but never found it, and eventually it was time to floo to Theo’s. She was the last to arrive and stepped into his parlor to find Pansy slamming the glass canister down in the middle of the floor so hard, Hermione was worried it would shatter.

“My mother...” she grumbled. “My *fucking* mother... *Oh Pansy! Why don’t you try dating that sod who’s so closely related to you that you probably shouldn’t have children with him?*” she said in a mocking voice.

Hermione and Ginny winced, as Blaise scowled. The others, however, were struggling not to laugh.

“You’re sure you want to play?” asked Hermione carefully. It was already rather late, and Pansy was clearly in a very foul mood.

“Oh we are playing,” she said seriously. “Salazar knows I need an outlet if I’m not going to *Avada* her before the fucking wedding tomorrow. Potter, you didn’t hear me say that.”

“Noted,” said Harry in amusement.

Everyone settled in as Blaise arranged their shot glasses and Theo put the sneakoscope in the middle of the circle. It wasn’t lost on Hermione that it had taken nearly two months, but the groups had finally integrated enough to really mix. Luna was sitting in between Theo and Blaise. Pansy was on the other side of Blaise, with Ginny next to her. Then came Harry, then Malfoy, and Hermione found herself between Malfoy and Theo. She smiled to herself just a bit.

“I’ll start,” announced Pansy, and she pulled out a card. “What’s your favorite feature about the opposite sex?”

She smirked a little as she thought about it. “Cock. Obviously,” she said, as the wizards rolled their eyes. “Ginny?” she asked innocently.

“Definitely eyes.” Harry smiled a bit at this.

“Legs,” said Harry, giving an admiring stare toward Ginny’s. She had always been rather short until her growth spurt during her teen years. Now she was tall and willowy, a bit like Ron. Hermione was much more petite, comparatively speaking.

“Arse,” said Malfoy promptly. The witches snorted at this answer, but the wizards grinned.

Hermione thought about it. “I think... overall form.”

“What the fuck does that mean?” asked Malfoy with consternation.

She glared at him a bit. “I mean I like wizards who are larger than me. Not beefy, necessarily, but tall, broad shoulders, nice arms, that sort of thing. I like to feel small.”

All four wizards stared at her with slight incredulity, but to Hermione's surprise Pansy jumped in. "I get it. I like that too. You want somebody who's stronger than you. If you're having sex the wizard can just..."

"Take you," finished Hermione.

"Exactly," said Pansy.

Hermione suddenly felt a frisson of awareness from the wizard on her left. Blaise was giving Pansy an appraising look, and Theo was twinkling at her knowingly, but Malfoy... well, she didn't dare look at Malfoy.

Hermione's feelings toward Malfoy were distinctly mixed. She no longer disliked him. In fact, she liked him quite a bit. Spending so much time at Malfoy Manor over the last three weeks had given her an appreciation for who he was and the burdens he carried. As an adult he was quieter, moodier, and more introspective than either Theo or Blaise. But he was growing on her, and ever since their fight he had started to really open up to her, albeit very slowly.

And then there were the looks he gave her. She frequently caught him studying her, watching her, usually with a slightly perplexed look on his face. She rather thought that she confused him almost as much as he confused her.

She didn't know how she felt about him now, and she didn't know how he felt about her. But she knew something was changing. And the tiny part of her that had always thrived on risks craved it. But still, she couldn't bring herself to look at him after the thing she just said. Somehow she just *knew* he was imagining it.

Theo broke the spell as he said, "Tits. Obviously."

"How are mine Theo?" asked Luna curiously, and Hermione was amused to see Luna staring down at herself.

Everyone laughed and Theo smirked. "From what I've seen, yours are fantastic Luna-love."

Hermione couldn't help but notice that Theo took a very long look as he said this.

"Oh good," said Luna with relief. "One always wonders."

Luna looked at Theo again and studied him for a moment. "Lips," she said, nodding as she turned back to the group.

"Tits and arse equally," said Blaise.

"You have to pick," said Pansy, rolling her eyes.

"I can't pick," said Blaise, grinning back down at her.

"Then you have to drink," said Pansy, raising an eyebrow.

He nudged her a little. "Only if you do it with me, *fiore*."

Pansy rolled her eyes but smiled a little. "Fine. I would love to get smashed tonight. Bottoms up then."

They took their shots, and then it was Ginny's turn.

"What's a kink you've never tried but would be open to exploring?" Ginny laughed and said, "Alright, let me think... I'd be into trying bondage."

"Wait, seriously?" asked Harry, and Hermione winced a bit at the eager look on his face. "How did I not know this?"

"You've never asked," she said lightly.

"Well I'm into it too," he said quickly. "That's going to be mine too."

"Save it for later, *please*," muttered Blaise, and the rest of them nodded fervently.

Then it was Malfoy's turn. "Shibari," he said, without looking at her.

"What's that?" asked Hermione.

Now he did turn and look at her. "A very special type of bondage. There's probably a book on it in the Library if you're curious."

Hermione turned crimson, as she cleared her throat and looked back at the group. She noticed Pansy studying her intently. "Teasing," she said. "Excessively."

"You want to be edged, Granger? You want to beg for it?" came Malfoy's voice, and Hermione turned to look at him again.

He had an odd expression on his face, and it made something in the pit of her stomach feel like it was coming unbalanced. She was sure he was only saying this because he had already had several drinks at the rehearsal dinner. But it was still doing something to her.

"I wouldn't hate it if a wizard actually took his time," she said carefully.

Theo nudged her a little with a twinkle. "It is hot, that's true. Alright, a kink I want to try... rollplay with me. Make me your servant, my lady."

Everyone laughed at this.

"I'd like to do bondage too," said Luna. "But I'd really like to tie up my partner."

Hermione couldn't help but notice Theo bit his lip at this.

"I've always wanted to try food. You know, whipped cream, chocolate, whatever." said Blaise. "I would just lick it all off of some willing witch."

Pansy raised an eyebrow at this and then looked right at Blaise. "Spank me."

“Fuck,” muttered Blaise with wide eyes, as Pansy turned back to the group with a satisfied smirk.

Hermione tried to suppress a grin. She remembered what Theo said about Pansy and Blaise wanting each other. Hermione wondered if the wedding was going to send Pansy into such a state that she might finally do something about it.

“My turn then,” said Malfoy as he reached in for a question. “What’s the weirdest thing you’ve ever done?”

“Oh damn,” muttered Hermione. Everybody laughed at her.

“I can’t wait to hear yours and Harry’s,” said Theo, grinning at them both.

Hermione was wracking her brain while Malfoy said, “I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but turning into a ferret was pretty fucking weird.”

Hermione snorted as Harry started to laugh. “That might be Ron’s favorite memory of you,” she said.

He rolled his eyes, but there was a small smile on his face.

“Come back to me at the end,” said Hermione seriously. “I’m trying to decide.”

Theo nodded and said, “In fifth year I ended up in the Forbidden Forest during detention and ran into an acromantula den.”

“Oh you met Aragog’s family then?” said Hermione, slightly diverted by this. “Obviously you got away.”

“Pardon?” asked Theo.

“The oldest acromantula’s name was Aragog. He died in sixth year,” clarified Harry.

“How the fuck do you two know that?” asked Blaise, while the others looked at them in confusion.

Harry shrugged. “Long story, but I actually went to his funeral. It was a favor to Hagrid.”

The others looked at him askance as he said this.

Then Luna spoke up. “Well the weirdest thing I’ve ever done was go on a hunt for a Ukranian Ironbelly. They’re supposed to be a type of dragon, you know, but I’m pretty sure they don’t exist.”

The others all stared at her.

“Ukranian ironbellies definitely exist, Luna,” said Hermione slowly.

“No, I don’t think so. They aren’t like Snoracks. It was awfully odd searching for a magical creature that was entirely made up.”

Hermione opened her mouth to object again, but she caught Ginny’s eye. Ginny was shaking her head, and Hermione shut her mouth with a sigh, and then gave Blaise a look that clearly said, *move this along please*.

“The weirdest thing I’ve ever done...” started Blaise. “Probably the time I inadvertently set my mother up with the funeral director right after one of her husbands died — it was her fourth or maybe fifth husband, I can’t remember. But I got to the funeral parlor first and the director was asking me about the grieving widow. I told him Mum never grieved much, and he asked her out right after the wake was over. I actually caught them shagging against his casket, after the other guests had left.”

Everybody winced at this, Malfoy in particular.

There was a slightly awkward silence and then Pansy jumped in. “Well the weirdest thing I’ve ever done is arrange Umbridge’s fucking kitten plates on her wall and coordinate them with matching doilies.”

Hermione started to laugh. "Please tell me you broke one."

"I broke three," confirmed Pansy. "The lime green, electric blue, and neon yellow. It's been years, and I still have nightmares about them."

Everybody laughed.

"The weirdest thing I've ever done is ride an invisible thestral from Hogwarts to London," said Ginny.

"Oh yeah, that was incredibly weird," agreed Hermione fervently.

"I thought it was an excellent idea," said Luna passively.

"She's right, it was much faster than brooms," added Harry.

"Yes, but you two could see them," said Ginny. "Hermione and I couldn't. Nor Ron."

"Excuse me, but why did you do this?" asked Malfoy incredulously.

"That's how we got to the Department of Mysteries," said Hermione. "It was all Luna's idea."

"That's way weirder than turning into a ferret," muttered Malfoy. Hermione smiled a little.

"Potter's turn then," said Blaise a bit eagerly.

Harry furrowed his brow. "I've done some weird things, though truthfully some of Hermione's might have been weirder... but the weirdest thing I've ever done? Probably dying. That was weird."

There was a shocked silence at this.

"You didn't *actually* die though, right?" said Pansy incredulously. "I know the papers reported it that way, but..."

“No, I’m pretty sure I died,” said Harry. “Or I ended up in limbo or something. I had a choice about whether to come back or move on.”

“Holy fuck,” muttered Blaise.

“What was limbo like then?” asked Theo curiously.

“Careful what you ask,” muttered Hermione, and the others laughed a bit uncomfortably.

“It was very white. And then eventually I realized I was at Platform 9 ¾. Dumbledore showed up and...”

“Wait, Dumbledore can just come and go in fucking limbo?” asked Draco incredulously.

“Evidently,” said Harry. “And some part of Voldemort was there too, but he was like this burned baby...”

“*Excuse me?*” demanded Theo.

“Told you,” said Hermione. “It’s enough to give you an existential crisis isn’t it?”

Harry rolled his eyes at her. “Well *anyway*, all three of us were there, and Dumbledore gave me the choice to board the train and move on or go back and finish it. Obviously I went back. I assume Dumbledore got on the train, and we just left baby Voldemort under a train station bench.”

“Fuck it all so the Dark Lord is permanently in limbo?” asked Malfoy in horror.

Harry shrugged. “Part of him maybe. But the whole thing was super weird.”

“I still can’t believe you left a *baby* there,” Hermione scolded.

Harry rolled his eyes. “It was *Voldemort*, Hermione.”

"It was still a *baby*."

"Moving on..." said Harry firmly. "We argue about this every single time it comes up."

The others looked between them in amusement, as Hermione huffed.

"Alright darling, tell us yours then," said Theo, now turning to Hermione.

Hermione took a deep breath. "OK for me, it's really a tie. And I *know* I'm supposed to pick, but truly, I can't."

"We'll give you a pass for that if you tell us both, *leonessa*," said Blaise eagerly.

"Agreed," said Pansy, and Theo and Malfoy nodded too.

"Alright, so in third year I had a time turner for the whole year, so I could take every subject Hogwarts offered and repeat hours."

"Oh Salazar, is *that* how you did it?" asked Theo in amazement. Then he turned to Malfoy and Blaise. "I *told* you it had to be something like that! I *swore* she had to be in multiple places at once!"

Hermione grinned. "Guilty. I used it for the whole year. But it absolutely exhausted me, and there was one night I was so tired I turned back maybe five or six hours so I could sleep again. I broke one of the cardinal rules of time travel about not being seen, and I slept in bed with myself. My future self explained to my past self what I was doing, and my past self was fine with it."

Everyone gaped at her.

"That might be weirder than limbo," Pansy finally said.

"I agree, *leonessa*," said Blaise. "That's the weirdest fucking thing I've ever heard."

"I can't believe you never told me!" said Ginny in amazement. Hermione just smiled a little and shrugged.

"Let me be clear," said Malfoy softly. "There were two of you. In bed. At the same time."

"Erm... yes," said Hermione, now reddening under the look he was giving her.

"Did you... do anything with yourself?" he asked, smirking now.

Hermione's jaw dropped. "I was fourteen!"

"I was doing things to myself at fourteen," said Malfoy seriously.

"Me too," said Blaise, Theo, and Harry at the same time.

"Oh for heaven's sake. I just told you I was so tired I just slept. But it was definitely weird."

"Shame," said Malfoy, as the other Slytherins smirked and Harry grimaced.

Hermione huffed.

"Tell us the other thing then, darling," said Theo, grinning at her. "I must admit I think you've already won this round."

Hermione gave a reluctant smile at this. "I'll tell you, but first... Harry, you should have a drink."

"Why?" he asked curiously.

"Just trust me," she said.

He shrugged and took a shot.

"You might want another," she said, biting her lip. Harry stared at her intently, but slowly poured a second shot and took it as well.

"Merlin, I cannot wait for this..." muttered Ginny.

"Fine," said Hermione, exhaling. "The other thing was when I polyjuiced into Harry."

"Why was that so weird?" asked Luna curiously.

"Well I grew my best friend's... equipment... for one thing," said Hermione, and now the others' eyes got huge, and the boys started chuckling as Harry looked at her in disbelief.

"Oh my God, I never thought about that!"

"It gets worse," muttered Hermione. "I got an erection. So I know what Harry's body feels like when it's turned on. I never ever wanted to know that."

At this they all lost it, and Hermione thought she had never seen Blaise and Malfoy laugh so hard. For his part, Harry poured himself a third shot and took it.

"Please," gasped Malfoy. "Please tell me. Did you wank?"

Harry gave her a horrified look now.

"No!" squealed Hermione. "Absolutely not! It was for a mission, so I was just... very uncomfortable! I have *never* touched Harry like that in real life or in polyjuice form, I swear!"

"Hermione had blue balls!" said Theo, and they all started to laugh again, though Harry looked positively mortified.

"Wait, wait, I have to know," said Ginny, as she finally calmed down. "Why did you get turned on in the first place?"

Everybody quieted to listen, as Harry groaned.

“Well as to that...” now Hermione blushed. “So it was definitely Kingsley Shacklebolt. You know he’s really good-looking, and I had a crush on him at the time.”

“Oh yeah, he’s fit,” said Pansy, and Ginny and Luna both nodded in agreement.

“He is, that’s right. And I had the opportunity to get... very close to him, so that’s what did it. But for a long time I didn’t know if it was *me* who was turned on or *Harry* who was turned on, but –”

Everybody started to laugh again as Harry choked.

Hermione grinned. “The answer is it was me. I actually looked it up, and it’s a known phenomenon.”

“I have an announcement,” said Theo suddenly. “I want to keep playing, but Hermione officially wins this game of Secrets and Truths, regardless of what else we reveal tonight.”

There were agreeable noises to this, and Hermione smiled broadly, though Harry still looked like he was in pain.

“Alright, alright, I win, but let’s keep going, shall we?” Then she reached into the canister and pulled out a piece of paper on top. “Describe one of your sexual fantasies.”

“Oh that’s a good one,” said Luna, as Hermione bit her lip and blushed.

“Spill darling,” said Theo, as he eyed her. “I can tell you have one.”

Hermione exhaled. “Fine. One of my... recurring fantasies is to be instructed and bossed around a bit during sex. I’ve always liked following rules and being told what to do.”

She heard a whispered “fuck,” from the wizard on her left, and Hermione pointedly did *not* look at Malfoy.

Theo and Blaise both smirked at her. "A very swotty answer, *leonessa*, but also an excellent one," said Blaise. Hermione blushed a little.

Now it was Theo's turn. "For *me*, I'd love it if a witch just fucking did it and had her way with me. Lead the way. Use me. Let me be your plaything."

Luna looked at him curiously. "We could try it sometime Theo. One of my fantasies is jumping a wizard and then doing whatever I want with him."

Theo stared at her in utter amazement, and Hermione knew her own eyes were huge. She glanced around at the others, and they were all spellbound watching Theo and Luna.

"When?" he said suddenly.

"Well it's supposed to be a surprise, isn't it?" Luna patted Theo on the knee. "The whole point is you can't see it coming. Don't worry, I won't disappoint."

Theo was looking at her like she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen now.

"Sod it all," muttered Malfoy, as Pansy shot Hermione and Ginny a look that clearly said, *Did that just happen?* and Hermione tried not to laugh.

Blaise exhaled and shook his head a little. "Alright, one of my fantasies is to watch a witch get herself off. I've never seen it before in real life."

Pansy gave him an appraising look at this. "Well one of mine is to be watched," she said lightly before turning back to the group. Hermione saw a muscle in Blaise's jaw twitch, and she smiled a little.

“I’d say a shag in the air,” said Harry. “I’m not sure *how* I would do it exactly, but I’d love to find a way.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at this a little. She did *not* do heights. Ginny seemed interested though.

Then Ginny chimed in. “Well I just thought of one tonight. I really want to polyjuice into Harry and have a wank like that. See if it feels the same.”

Everyone laughed hard, though Harry turned to his girlfriend and gave her an appalled look. She just smiled sweetly back at him.

Then finally it was Malfoy’s turn.

“I also have a brand new fantasy,” he said, and he looked at Hermione now with a smirk. “I think I’d like to time turn myself so there are two of me. I could finally have a threesome without having to share my witch with another bloke.”

There was a stunned silence at this, and then Theo and Blaise started to laugh.

“I’m surprised you want to be the one who’s doubled up though,” said Blaise. “Don’t you want the witch to time turn so there are two of her?”

“Hmmm, I did consider it,” said Malfoy seriously. “But if I’m the one who time turns, then I get to have her twice, don’t I?”

Oh God, don’t think of it Hermione...

Hermione gulped. It was getting *far* too warm in here.

There was some murmuring of agreement at this, as Hermione felt that telltale dampness start in her knickers.

It’s Malfoy. It’s Malfoy. He should NOT be turning you on, Hermione. Not even if there were two of him touching you at the same time...

Hermione couldn't help it. She let out the tiniest groan, and Malfoy leaned over to whisper in her ear. "If I were bossing you around, Granger, I'd tell you to be louder than that."

Hermione gasped, and turned to look at him in shock. He just gave her a teasing smile and then turned his full attention to Luna who plucked a card from the top. "Describe the best oral sex you've ever received."

Hermione cringed a little. She couldn't answer this.

"Hmmm, Terry Boot again of course," said Luna.

"Of course," chimed in Pansy, and Hermione couldn't help but notice that all four wizards grimaced at this.

"Yes, he did this thing with his tongue with rapid flicks. It got me off very quickly," said Luna.

Theo's eyes were narrowed as she said this, but then Blaise chimed in. "Daphne also did this thing with her tongue on the very tip. I have no idea what it was, but it was hot."

"Hmmm, mine was also Terry," said Pansy. "Let's just say his tongue is quite... long."

Blaise wrinkled his nose and frowned at this. Then it was Ginny's turn. "Mine was Harry, and he likes to tease me before he gives it to me."

Hermione made a little noise at this. Not that she wanted to think of Harry and Ginny doing that, but it sounded *lovely*. She sensed Malfoy shifting a bit next to her.

Harry looked inordinately pleased with himself. "Obviously mine is Ginny. And honestly anytime she's willing to do it, I'm into it."

Malfoy now spoke up. "Pansy can open her throat," he said, giving a cordial nod to the witch in question. "The first time you did that was

truly life changing, dear.”

Hermione rolled her eyes at this, but then sighed. “Fine,” she said as she poured herself a shot.

“No!” said Theo, his eyes getting wide. “Darling, tell me you’ve experienced the pleasures of the tongue!”

Hermione bit her lip, but just shook her head.

“Oh thank Merlin,” said Ginny with relief. “It probably would have been my brother if you had...”

Hermione wrinkled her nose. “Yes, well, Ron took it, but he didn’t return the favor. Then again, we didn’t last very long. And the others I got close with never gave it in the end either.”

“That’s criminal,” said Theo. “You should have hexed all of their balls, darling. And for the record, I enjoy a good old shaft lick, starting from the bottom and going to the top. Tracy Davis did that pretty well.”

Hermione laughed a little, relieved they had moved on from her lack of experience. Or so she thought.

Malfoy, of course, had to have the last word, as he leaned over and whispered, “Shame for Weasley, he missed out on one of life’s greatest pleasures.”

Hermione blushed as everyone turned to Blaise, who pushed his hand all the way to the bottom to pick a question. He unfolded it and paused as he read it. He bit his lip for a moment and then his eyes flicked to Malfoy. Hermione sensed Malfoy stiffening next to her as Blaise took a deep breath and read.

“How many people have you killed?”

Jeanine

Chapter 9: Jeanine

AN: This is one of my favorite chapters in the fic. Draco discovers a secret.

TW: Discussions of rape and war crimes in Hermione's section

Hermione

Hermione had really been enjoying the game that night. She was far more comfortable with the Slytherins than the last time she played. But then Blaise asked his question, and the mood shifted abruptly. Every single one of them took a shot, and to Hermione's great relief nobody asked her if it was because she couldn't answer the question or because she didn't want to.

As Malfoy took his shot and Hermione took hers, they glanced at each other, and she went cold.

He knows I did it. He did it too.

She had suspected it. Malfoy had been a Death Eater and was forced to do some truly horrible things. And Hermione had to as well. It was inevitable, really, being so central to a war. But it was something that had damaged her, far more than any curse scars or time spent under the cruciatus.

They played through several more questions, in which Pansy asked about unexpected erogenous zones and Ginny asked about favorite kinds of foreplay. But unlike the previous questions, Hermione just

gave a perfunctory answer, and Malfoy did too with very little other commentary.

Then it was Malfoy's turn again, and when he drew his question he paused and said, "Let's call the game."

"What is it?" asked Theo curiously.

"Describe your worst nightmare."

"Yeah let's call it," said Ginny to Hermione's relief, and the others agreed too. They *all* had nightmares they didn't care to revisit.

The others began to gather their things and floo away, and before long it was just Theo, Malfoy, and Hermione left. Malfoy muttered something to Theo, who nodded. Then Theo walked over to give Hermione a dramatic kiss on the cheek which made Malfoy roll his eyes, before he made his way out of the parlor.

Now she was staring at Malfoy, and Hermione wasn't sure how to feel. She had been alone with him plenty of times by now, but this felt different.

To her surprise, he just said, "Come on, we're getting pissed," and then he gathered a few things from the floor and gestured for her to follow him to a corner of the room with a large window seat with cushions.

Hermione followed a bit cautiously and sat down on one end of the window seat and Malfoy settled himself on the other. He put her shot glass down in front of her and poured her some firewhiskey before pouring himself some too.

"How many was it then?" he asked, and Hermione knew exactly what he was asking.

How many people have you killed?

Hermione took her shot.

“Three,” she said quietly. “Errr... and a half.”

Malfoy raised one eyebrow at this.

“How the fuck do you kill a half a person?”

Hermione shrugged. “I can’t give you details. But I killed something of Voldemort’s that meant he died permanently. It was a piece of him. It was... alive enough that I think it counts as half.”

“Fuck,” muttered Malfoy, and he poured her another drink.

Hermione took it before asking him. “So how about you then? How many?”

He grimaced a bit as he took his own shot. “I really shouldn’t say because of Azkaban and all.”

“I won’t tell,” said Hermione softly.

He gave her a piercing look. “I know you won’t,” he said slowly. “Fine then. I also killed three.”

They drank in silence for a bit longer until Malfoy said, “Were all of yours in the final battle?”

“Only one, actually,” said Hermione. “Well... my half was in the final battle too I suppose. But no, I killed two the night we moved Harry from his aunt and uncle’s house for the last time. We were ambushed by Death Eaters in the air, and I caught a couple with stunners. I didn’t recognize them. They fell a hundred feet through the air.”

Malfoy grimaced again. “Fuck I’m glad I didn’t pick you then.”

Hermione looked at him questioningly, and he shrugged. “I was one of the Death Eaters sent that night. The multiple Potters confused the hell out of us. I assume that’s when you had your erection if you were with Shackbolt?”

Hermione gave a reluctant smile at that. "Yes. It was... very uncomfortable riding a thestral like that. And it was invisible for me until I killed my first."

He gave her a sharp look. "Merlin, Granger. We're going to need more firewhiskey."

"Tell me about it," she muttered. She paused for a moment. "So you were there too?"

He nodded. "I followed one of the older Weasley brothers."

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. "That was probably Bill and Fleur. Did you try to kill them?"

Malfoy shrugged. "No. Flying and aiming at the same time doesn't work too well. Besides, it was so fucking chaotic nobody noticed that my spells were going wide."

"You weren't the only one then," said Hermione quietly. "Snape was there too. He tried to kill one of the other Death Eaters but sliced off George's ear instead."

Malfoy made a face at that. "That's my point. The only one from our side who actually hit anybody was the Dark Lord. He got Mad-Eye Moody the minute you lot appeared. How you got two..."

Hermione shrugged. "I'm a good shot."

"Clearly, especially given your condition at the time." Malfoy smirked as he poured her another drink. "And who was your third?"

Hermione took a deep breath and closed her eyes for a moment as she took another shot. "It was during the final battle. I killed Grayback."

She opened her eyes to find Malfoy giving her an intense look, and there was a long pause for a moment as he topped her up and waited.

“I’ve never told anybody,” she said quietly. “About any of them. Harry refused to stun in the air. And Grayback... well, there was so much going on that everybody assumed it was an accident. But it wasn’t. I... I did it. Intentionally. I incapacitated him, and then when Harry and Ron ran ahead I used *Avada Kedavra* on him and then brought a wall down on top of him. You have to understand, he threatened to rape and eat me that day at the Manor. He turned Remus Lupin and so many others. He permanently maimed Bill Weasley. There were only a few I truly hated, but he was one of them.”

She looked at him a bit nervously, waiting for his judgment, but to her surprise his eyes just gleamed. “Good girl,” he said as he took a shot.

Hermione exhaled and felt something inside of her ease as she sipped more slowly now. “What about yours?”

A muscle in his jaw twitched as he refilled them. “My first was a mercy killing. They caught Maria Davies trying to assassinate Pius Thickness. She was a half blood, but given what she had done they brought her to the Manor. She was Roger Davies’ older sister, you know. And she was just...” he closed his eyes for a moment. “She was brutally tortured. Not just the cruciatus, but Bellatrix’s knife too. It was similar to you. But a few of the more... sexually deviant Death Eaters were also there when she was brought in, and they took turns with her. It went on for ages. I was also there and hadn’t done anything to her yet, and they pushed me to take a turn too. She was almost dead anyway, and she gave me this look like she wanted me to kill her. I don’t think she would have survived one more round with the others, and it gave me some cover. I had never used *Avada Kedavra* before, and the others had started to comment on it. Bellatrix was thrilled when I managed it,” he said bitterly.

Hermione felt her heart break a little. He looked so haunted.

“It was a fucking miracle it didn’t come out during my trial,” he added, as he turned to look out the window, and sipped his firewhiskey a bit lost in thought. “There were four other witnesses that day, but all of

them were dead by the time the final battle was over. Then Potter managed to get himself appointed to me and my mother for our questioning with the aurors under veritaserum. I kept waiting for him to ask if I had killed anybody, but he never did. He only asked about Dumbledore. I've always wondered if it was intentional."

"It was," said Hermione softly. "Harry... well, he knew you were coerced. I did too. And... I may have helped Harry write the questions so you and your mother wouldn't incriminate yourselves."

He suddenly turned to look at her in amazement, and Hermione bit her lip.

"Why?" he asked suddenly.

Hermione sighed. "Like I said, we knew you were coerced. We *knew* it. Harry had this odd connection to Voldemort that let him see some of the stuff you did. He didn't like you back then, but it wouldn't have been right to send you to Azkaban for years because of what you were forced to do, and besides... we felt we owed you for that day at the Manor. We know you recognized us, but you didn't identify us right away. It bought us time."

He looked at her skeptically.

"It *did*," she insisted. "It was one of those situations where seconds mattered, and you made them hesitate. If Lucius had called Voldemort the minute we arrived he might have gotten there before we could be rescued."

Malfoy grimaced at this a bit, but nodded. "He would have. He showed up about thirty seconds after you lot escaped."

She gave him an *I-told-you-so* look.

He gave a deep sigh and had another drink. "Well that explains my trial then. The questions Potter asked me... they were so extensive

the truth got buried. The other aurors with him didn't seem to notice that he never asked exactly the right one."

"No," said Hermione with some dark satisfaction. "I rather thought they wouldn't."

Malfoy gave her a small smile at this. "It all makes sense now. I couldn't believe his questioning was that precise. It didn't feel like Potter at all, but now I know it was you. You could have been a Slytherin, you know."

Hermione was feeling quite warm now from the liquor as she cocked her head. "Theo said the same thing on our first day camping together. I just need Blaise to agree, and then I'll have the trifecta."

He chuckled a little before his face darkened and took another sip of his drink.

"My next two were together," he said slowly. "Jugson and another junior Death Eater who was one of his special buddies. They were... well, let's just say they were two of the three who raped Maria until she was barely alive. And I caught them in the Manor one day planning to do the same thing to Lovegood because they heard she was a prisoner in our cellar. I was listening at the door, and they were talking about how to get into the cellar to find her. I just... walked into the room and *Avada'd* them both on the spot so they couldn't do it. Florrie dumped their bodies for me near a skirmish with the Order to make it look like the other side had killed them."

Hermione felt her heart constrict, and she grabbed his hand suddenly. "Thank you."

He gave her a tight nod as he took another shot. "Fuck I'm pissed now."

She gave him a small smile. "Same. But I thought that was the point."

He nodded a bit and leaned his head back and closed his eyes. "That's all I could see when you were caught, you know," he said softly. "That day with Maria just ran through my mind the whole time. Jugson was dead by then, but he wasn't the only one who liked to do it. And I just knew that the same thing was going to happen to you if the Dark Lord let you live long enough. He occasionally gave away prisoners for revels, and you would have been the biggest prize of all. I don't think he would have just given you to Greyback. Greyback would have participated, but you were valuable enough that it would have been a group — a large group. And since I was there I would have had to take my turn because I knew you. I was trying to decide if I would have the balls to kill you in front of the others like I killed Maria when Potter and Weasley showed up to rescue you."

"God Malfoy," she said.

"I know, I'm fucked up."

Hermione was feeling far too loose now, and she was sure the alcohol was the reason she scooted a bit closer and grabbed his left hand and turned it over. She shoved his sleeve up so she could see his Dark Mark. He opened his eyes and watched her trace his scar with her finger.

"If that had happened to me, you would have found a way to kill me. And I would have wanted you to do it," she said softly. "I'm certain Maria wanted you to do it to her."

She raised her eyes to find him studying her as intently as he could under the influence of all the firewhiskey he had consumed.

"You were right to lose your virginity the way you did," he said suddenly. "If you had been caught, and they discovered you were a virgin..." he just shook his head.

"That's what I figured," she said wryly.

“I never did that, nor my Father,” said Malfoy quickly. “Neither of us ever had a taste for it. I absolutely loathe those who do. It was just...” he grimaced.

Hermione was feeling distinctly light-headed now as she said, “I told you Malfoy, you were never that evil. Not really.”

He gave her a wry look. “No. But back to this virginity thing...” he was waving his hand vaguely in the air, and Hermione mentally groaned. He really was pissed. Then again, so was she.

“Why the muggle and not the Weasel? I mean, maybe you two weren’t together yet, but he would have done it for you. Hell, Harry probably would have too if you had explained it to him....”

Hermione raised her eyebrows at his use of Harry’s first name, but he wasn’t done talking yet and didn’t seem to notice.

“...or Longbottom or even me. You *did* say you had a crush on me in sixth year.”

She was still sober enough to wince a little at this, but he was *still* talking.

“And while we’re on the topic, how the *fuck* is it possible you didn’t do it with Weasley after the war? The papers all said you two were together.”

Hermione sighed. “For my first time... it was utilitarian in a way. It was just a task I had to complete before I was in the thick of it with the war, and I needed comfort that specific night. I didn’t want to put that burden on Ron or anybody else I knew. I didn’t tell the muggle I slept with that I was a virgin. It was just a one-night stand to him, which was perfect. And after the war... well, Ron and I have a fraught romantic history. It became clear that we weren’t suited pretty quickly. We did some things, but we didn’t get as far as I thought we would.”

“Like the fact he never went down on you,” pointed out Malfoy.

“Don’t remind me,” she said, rolling her eyes. “I’m still slightly bitter about that.”

He just smirked. “So your muggle didn’t do it either?”

Hermione smiled a bit, remembering Mark. “No. He’s actually the only person who has ever asked me if he could do it, but we talked so long in the bar that I was in a hurry by the time we started.”

Malfoy was staring at her curiously now. “Tell me more about him.”

“Who, Mark?”

Malfoy nodded.

Hermione shrugged. “He was... surprisingly nice. He told me he had a really shit day too and just needed to forget. It was funny because he didn’t have any money with him, so I bought him a drink. And then we talked about books for a while before he kissed me.”

“What books?” he said softly.

“*A Winter’s Tale*. It’s a muggle play. He actually quoted one of the lines to me, but he said it was the only Shakespeare play he had ever read. It was a bit odd because out of all of Shakespeare’s plays it’s definitely not the most famous, nor the best. I thought it was impossible to get through primary school in England without reading half of his plays, but apparently Mark managed to do it. I recommended a few others to him.”

Malfoy was giving her a very odd look now. “And what else did you talk about?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. We talked about our families a bit I suppose. I had sent my parents into hiding that day and stripped their house, though I obviously couldn’t tell him that. I think I said I was staying in England for university, but my parents were moving

abroad. I told him that saying goodbye to them was really hard, and that's why I was in such a foul mood. He told me his father wanted him to go into the family business, but he didn't want to. He was having a sort of breakdown about it."

"And then what... He kissed you in the bar and dragged you to an alleyway for a public shag?"

She rolled her eyes. "It wasn't *that* bad. He kissed me, and I suggested the alleyway. The bar was on the other side of the block from my parents' house, and the alley backed up to their garden. Nobody ever went back there after midnight."

Malfoy had gone very still as she said this, and she couldn't identify the expression on his face.

"You fell for him then," he said.

She nodded. "I told you, I go for the broody types. I always have. I certainly didn't *mean* to fall for him. I mean, I lost my virginity intentionally because it was something I had to do. There was no room to be sentimental about that sort of thing during the war, but I fell for him anyway. He was kind, and even though he was a bit melancholy he was actually really funny. He made me feel good and... I don't know. It took a few months before I stopped thinking about him."

"Did you ever go back and look for him?" he asked in an odd voice.

Hermione shook her head. "Not right away. I wanted to, but as soon as I left that alleyway I went to the Weasleys and prepared to go into hiding myself. I did go back to the bar a few times after Ron and I broke up, but I never saw him again."

He was watching her intently. "And you didn't shag Weasley because you two were incompatible?"

She nodded. "Yes. We've been friends for so long, and I didn't think our friendship would survive it if we shagged and broke up. It became clear to me pretty quickly that we weren't going to get married and live happily ever after so I never took that step with him."

"Do you feel like you have to be able to marry a bloke before you shag him then?"

"No, not at all. Ron was just a special case because of our prior friendship. With him I did feel that way, and I probably would have felt the same way about Harry if I had ever been interested in him like that. But otherwise, no. I just need to care about somebody first, and he needs to care about me too."

"And he needs to be better than your vibrator," Malfoy reminded her.

She laughed. "Yes, we can't forget that."

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. "Was Mark better than your vibrator?"

Hermione snorted and bit her lip. "It was very different than a vibrator, let's put it that way. Maybe not *better*, but just as good. He was really very good..."

Malfoy was nodding a bit sagely. "Do you think Terry Boot would be as good as your vibrator?"

"Oh *God*," moaned Hermione. "You're going to make me vomit, Malfoy. First the firewhiskey, and then you bring up that *wretched* date. He was terrible. Truly, I don't care how good his hands and tongue supposedly are. He spent half the date talking about how smart he was and the other half insulting Theo and you once I told him we were friendly now. I almost stabbed him with my fork a couple times."

He was chuckling at this. "You're as dramatic as Theo."

"Nobody is as dramatic as Theo."

He started chuckling again before his laughter died, and he opened his eyes to look at her. Hermione was surprised by how lucid he suddenly appeared.

"We're never talking about this shit again."

"Not ever," agreed Hermione.

He looked relieved and then leaned back against the wall again.

"You can just leave me here," he said. "There's no way I'm making it to the Manor like this."

Hermione nodded and rose. She stumbled a bit, and immediately sat back down.

"Merlin, I'm more drunk than I realized," she said.

He shrugged. "You can stay too."

She knew she probably shouldn't, but she was too far gone to object. She settled into her corner of the window seat, while he settled into his, and then she called her wand from her holster and conjured a blanket for both of them.

"Goddammit, you're so wasted you can't walk, and yet you're conjuring shit we never even learned at Hogwarts," he muttered. "You were always the best example of why my dad and his mates were fucking mental to believe that blood has anything to do with magic."

Even in her drunken haze Hermione paused. She couldn't believe he just said that.

"So you don't think you're better than me anymore?" she asked.

He opened one eye. "Oh I'm better than you, Granger." Her heart started to sink again until he added, "and I'm better than Pansy and

Blaise, and I'm *definitely* better than Theo, that dramatic sod. I'm a Malfoy, don't you know. I'm better than everybody."

Hermione snorted and then flicked her wand to cast a silencing charm around them.

"I might wake you up with my screaming since we talked about the war and all," she muttered.

"I'll bet you ten galleons I wake you up first," he retorted.

"At least we won't wake Theo," she said.

"Fuck Theo."

"I actually think Luna's going to be the one fucking Theo," she pointed out.

"Lucky bastard," muttered Malfoy.

"Don't tell me you want Luna to fuck you instead?"

Some distant part of Hermione's brain couldn't believe she was saying this to him. But she was too drunk to care.

"No, but I don't think I'd mind it if somebody else did," and to her surprise she felt him reach for her feet under the blanket and pulled them into his lap as he settled in a bit more.

"Then again," he added, "she might kill me if I tried. She's certainly capable of it."

Hermione couldn't help but smile at this. "Cheers Malfoy."

"Night Granger."

A moment later, Hermione fell asleep.

Draco

Draco woke up the next morning with a slight groan. His head was pounding. His stomach was rolling. He realized he hadn't had any water to drink the night before.

Today was going to be terrible.

Only now did he realize somebody else's legs were in his lap. His hands were gripping a pair of rather shapely calves, and he instinctively moved one hand up to find the back of a knee.

He opened one eye to find Hermione Granger's curls in a cloud around her head at the other end of the window seat. Her eyes were closed, and she was breathing deeply and evenly. He suddenly remembered that they had fallen asleep together the night before, which would explain his aching back. He was still leaning upright against the wall, but she had slumped down to hug one of the window seat cushions in her sleep and nestled herself under the covers a bit, hence the reason her lower legs had ended up on top of him.

"Fuck," he muttered, as his stomach turned again.

"Oh is that what happened?" asked a quiet voice.

Draco whipped his head around and immediately groaned as it gave a sharp twinge. To his horror he found Theo, Blaise, and Pansy, all sitting on a sofa that one of them had evidently moved to face the window seat. They were calmly sipping some tea and munching on breakfast as they watched him.

Their three identical smirks told Draco he was utterly fucked.

"We just got drunk," he said softly. He *had* to find some way out of this before she woke up. "Nothing happened."

“Uh huh,” said Pansy, her dark eyes glittering as she roved over both of them. “Remind me. When was the last time you spent the night with a witch?”

Draco opened his mouth to respond, but then closed it again when he remembered that the answer was Ella Vanity. “I don’t know. Look, I feel like shit. Can we do this later? I need water. Or a potion. Or...”

Now Theo held up a familiar potion and dangled it a little. It was one of the best hangover potions on the market. Draco looked at it eagerly.

“You have to answer our questions first,” said Theo. “And you and I both know you’re so hung over you won’t be getting off that window seat without waking her up unless you have our help.”

Draco just shut his eyes and prayed for patience. And a miracle.

“So there was no fucking?” asked Blaise.

“No.”

“Kissing?” asked Pansy.

“No.”

“Hands?” asked Theo.

“I....” started Draco, and then he paused.

“Yes?” asked Theo eagerly.

“I hate all of you,” muttered Draco.

“Your hatred is noted,” said Blaise. “Now tell us.”

“Nothing really. Her legs are in my lap.”

“And you’re feeling her up?” asked Pansy.

“Nothing past the knee.”

Pansy looked faintly disappointed.

“Well have you at least admitted your very obvious feelings to yourself?” asked Blaise.

Draco looked at him in disbelief.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

They all narrowed their eyes at him and gave him speculative looks.

“He’s still in denial then,” muttered Theo.

“That’s OK, I’m working on it,” said Pansy thoughtfully. “Her hair has definitely improved.”

Draco’s jaw dropped, and they all smirked at him again.

Now Theo stood and walked over to him and gave him the potion. Draco took it gratefully, and he felt his hangover start to clear.

“And here’s one for Hermione,” said Theo. “Leave it behind for her.”

Draco scowled. “Why aren’t you making her answer twenty questions then?”

“Because I like her more than you,” said Theo, without missing a beat.

“Clear out then,” muttered Draco. “In case this wakes her up.”

His friends gave him amused smiles, but they rose and made their way out of the room. He was in trouble. They would be able to hold this over him for Salazar knows how long. But at least they were gone now so they couldn’t see this part.

He was completely clear headed now, and he took a moment to revisit the night before. He remembered all of it, for better or for worse.

There were a hundred things he had to sort through in his head: the fact that he had confessed murder to her, the fact that she had confessed murder to *him* , the fact that she had manipulated the Ministry of Magic to keep him and his mother out of prison...

Yes, there were many things he needed to think about, but right now he could only think about one thing: Jeanine.

Jeanine was his one and only muggle shag. Draco shagged her the same night he was sent by the Dark Lord to torture and capture Hermione Granger's parents. When Draco failed to kill Dumbledore, the Dark Lord sent him to capture the Grangers instead.

"They're muggles, Draco. Surely even you can manage that."

He was terrified and sick with the thought of what would happen to them if he managed it. He dallied by spending a great deal of time transfiguring his hair and face so he would be unrecognizable, and he was in the middle of cooking up some wild scheme to warn them or even hide them, when he arrived to find that they were already gone. The house was empty and stripped bare, and he was incredibly relieved despite the fact that he knew he would be tortured for it later.

Realizing he needed to kill some time so he could convincingly say he had looked for them, he wandered around the surprisingly nice house that was devoid of any pictures, documents, or indication of where they might have gone. The only marginally personal things he found were in a small bedroom painted a bright blue that had a completely full bookcase, filled with books he didn't recognize. He scanned the titles and quickly realized they were all muggle books. He was sure this had to be Granger's room.

He glanced at the nightstand and saw a very thin book laying there. It was called *A Winter's Tale*. The book said it was a comedy, and Draco thought he could use some laughs after the day he had, so he opened it and began to read, quickly realizing it was a play instead of a book.

It wasn't that funny. It wasn't even that *good*. But the writing was different, striking, and Draco was stunned to see that the queen in the play was named Hermione. In the play she was pregnant, and she was cast out of her kingdom by her husband Leontes, who believed she had an affair and had gotten pregnant by her lover. But Hermione was pure, innocent, and wrongly persecuted for sins she didn't commit. The whole play was uncomfortably close to what was happening to the *real* Hermione. Like the Hermione in the play, the real Hermione was in the process of being cast out of her world. Like the Hermione in the play, the real Hermione hadn't done anything wrong except have muggle parents.

Draco didn't like the similarities, but he couldn't ignore them. His stomach churned with guilt as he thought about the things that would happen to her and the other muggleborns if the Dark Lord got his way. Draco had never really grasped what a purging of the muggleborns would be like when he was younger and parroting all of his father's blood purity bullshit. But now he was Marked, and he knew. Thank Merlin Granger was smart enough to know too and act before the Death Eaters did - before *he* did.

He read the whole thing in a couple hours, studying some of the more elegant lines as he did it. When he finally checked his watch he decided he needed to head back to the Manor to face the Dark Lord, and he quietly let himself out of the house. He walked around the block and passed a friendly-looking bar and hesitated. He had no muggle money with him of course, but he could always confound the bartender. Salazar knew he could use a drink, and he really didn't want to go back and face what was coming.

He made his way into the bar, and his eyes were immediately drawn to a girl who looked to be about his age. She had wild, curly hair that

reminded him of Granger, except it was the wrong color. Her curls were a light blonde, as opposed to Granger's brown. She turned and met his eyes, and he sighed in relief.

Not Granger, then. Her eyes were very green, and her nose was a bit long. She was very pretty, though her eyes were rimmed red as though she had been crying. Without knowing why he would approach such an obviously muggle girl, he walked up to her.

"Hi, I'm... Mark," he said, hesitating a moment as he tripped over the name he invented on the spot.

She sniffed. "I'm Jeanine."

"Nice to meet you. Rough day?"

"Shit day."

"Same, actually."

They talked for a couple of hours. She asked him about something called movies and muggle music, and Draco had nothing to say about either of these topics because he didn't know a thing about them. In a fit of desperation he asked her about the most recent book she had read, and she told him it was something called *The Gift of Fear*. She read it because she was moving to London to attend university and wanted to be able to assess dangerous situations for herself. Then she asked him about *his* most recent book, and he said *A Winter's Tale*. She had an odd look on her face, but she asked him if he had any favorite lines.

"A few stuck out. How about, 'I care not: It is an heretic that makes the fire, not she which burns in't. I'll not call you tyrant; But this most cruel usage of your queen, not able to produce more accusation than your own weak-hinged fancy, something savours of tyranny and will ignoble make you, yea, scandalous to the world.'"

"Hmmm, Paulina said that, yes? She was warning Leontes that he would become infamous for the things he was doing to Hermione."

"You know it too then?"

"Yes, of course. It's not my favorite Shakespeare play, but I've read it a few times."

"What's your favorite then?"

"I like the tragedies. Othello is probably my favorite. But Hamlet is quite good too. I think that play is the very definition of complex family issues and sons who would do anything their fathers ask of them. Have you read much Shakespeare?"

"No, just A Winter's Tale."

It wasn't long after that that Draco leaned forward and kissed her. Her lips were soft, and she practically melted against him. He knew he shouldn't be doing this in public with a muggle, but he couldn't help it. She was thoughtful, witty, and amazingly kind even though she was so sad. He had nothing in common with her at all, but he was drawn to her for some reason.

So when she tugged on his hand and whispered, *"I know a place we can go where we won't be seen,"* he followed her without a second thought. She pulled him out of the bar, part way around the block and to a back alley that was deserted. Draco glanced up and realized with a jolt that the Grangers' back yard was just on the other side of it, fenced off from view, but he knew it was vacant. Nobody would see them from the windows.

He caught her lips, and it became heated as he pushed her against a wall. In the darkness he couldn't see her very well, but he could feel her breasts, fuller than Pansy's though she was shorter and more petite. Her arse was pert and firm. Her scent was driving him wild, and he found himself sucking on her neck in an effort to get closer. He slipped his hands under her dress and a finger into her

knickers and discovered that she was slick with want. The sounds she was starting to make were threatening his self-control.

"Mark, please... I want to..."

"You're sure?"

"Yes."

"Can I taste you?"

"No time. I just want..."

"You want me to fuck you?"

"Oh God, please... I want that so much."

And so he did. He lifted the sundress she was wearing and pulled her knickers off, placing them in his pocket for later. He very subtly cast a contraceptive charm on her with his hand – the only piece of wandless magic his father had ever taught him. He sincerely hoped that it would work on a muggle, but he wasn't certain. He saw the faintest glow of it under her dress, but her eyes were closed, and she didn't notice. And then he released his pants and pulled one leg up to open her before slowly slotting inside of her. He was stunned by how tight she was.

"Fuck you feel amazing..."

"Please... I need you to..."

"I will, I promise."

There was something about her tightness that was odd, and when Draco felt the barrier he realized what it was: Jeanine was a virgin. She hadn't told him.

"You're certain this is what you want?"

"More certain than anything in my life."

And so he took it. He took her virginity even though he knew he shouldn't. She might just be a muggle, but she was a nice girl, and for once he didn't want to be an arse. But she begged him, pleaded with him, and he wanted her so much. How could he not take what she was giving him?

To her credit, she barely flinched, and it wasn't long before she was starting to gasp and shake.

"I want you to come for me... come on sweetheart..."

"I will... I'm close... and you can come inside of me. I'm on birth control."

Draco felt her snap a moment later with a gasp, and then he spilled himself a moment after that, trusting that a combination of her muggle birth control and the spell he had cast would be enough to protect them both. Then he pulled back and kissed her deeply.

"I need to see you again."

"I can't."

"Jeanine, please..."

"I'm sorry, Mark. I really am. But I'm moving soon, and I can't."

"Is there any way to find you when you're settled?"

"No, you'll never find me."

And she was right, he never did find her. He went back to that bar every single night for a month, and she was never there. He looked everywhere. He involved the muggle authorities, but she had vanished. He even checked a few more times right after the war was over, but eventually he had to let her go. He started going to the magical sex club because he couldn't get Jeanine out of his head.

He needed sex without the conversation beforehand, without the feelings that she had drawn out of him in just a couple of short hours.

By the end of eighth year, he didn't think about her very much except to wank. And eventually he tried to stop doing that too, though he wasn't always successful. His parents wanted him to begin courting, and he decided that Astoria Greengrass would make a perfectly decent wife. She was pretty. She was nice. She was expected. He shouldn't be wanking to memories of a one night stand with a muggle girl while courting another witch.

Over time Jeanine faded, but he never forgot her. She tended to emerge in his dreams or on the nights when he was alone and feeling emotional or overwhelmed, just as he had when he first met her. On those nights he would settle a hand inside of his pants and remember her quick wit, her wild curls, her sweet scent, and the inexplicable gift she had given to him when she allowed him to take her virginity. He always felt a little empty afterwards, but it was never enough to make him stop doing it. He idly wondered what he would do if he ever found her again.

Draco was shocked that he finally had.

He had discovered that he wasn't the only person lying about his name that night. He wasn't the only magical being in the bar. No, Jeanine wasn't Jeanine. She was Hermione Granger.

Of course she was Granger. Some part of him had known it when he learned she had a one-night stand with a muggle named Mark. But Mark wasn't such an unusual name. He told himself that the odds were too small to allow himself to hope, and he tried to put it firmly out of his mind. He did such a good job of convincing himself it wasn't possible that he even came to loathe Granger's Mark because he had been with Granger and Draco hadn't. But after the conversation from the night before, he was now sure.

As he thought about it rationally, he realized he should have guessed years ago. Or maybe he *had* guessed, somewhere in the deepest

parts of his subconscious, and he just never let himself consider it. After all, if Jeanine had been Granger, the situation would have been even more impossible than if she were a muggle. If Jeanine was a muggle he might be able to find her someday. She might want him again. The Granger of seven years ago, however, would rather kill him than shag him. Maybe that's why he had ignored the obvious clues — the wild hair, the proximity to the Granger home, her knowledge of that specific play, and the way she just vanished into thin air — and made himself believe that she was the muggle who got away. He made himself believe it so deeply that it took the conversation from the night before to convince him of the truth.

Merlin, he had been an idiot.

Now, finally armed with the truth, Draco had to decide what he was going to do about it. Draco had started falling for Hermione, before he knew she was Jeanine. After that first day in the Library he made himself really examine his feelings about her, and he was forced to conclude he wanted her. And of course he had fallen for Jeanine years ago. He fell hard. Theo wasn't entirely wrong when he said that Draco always pined for her a little bit. And now that he knew they were one and the same person, Draco was sure he had to make her his. But how?

He had no plans yet, but he knew he would have to come up with something. He wanted her too badly to let the chips fall where they may. All of his previous thoughts about Hermione being too difficult to attract or too much work had left him. He had wanted her for years, and here she was: back in his life and working in his home and wishing for companionship. With a jolt, he remembered once again that he had taken Jeanine's — *no, Hermione's* — virginity. He was the only bloke who had ever touched her that way.

I want to be the only one who ever does.

He had to make her his now, there was no other alternative. She was so pure and innocent, untouched by anyone except for him. The realization ignited something darkly possessive inside of him. He

was never one who liked to share the things that were his. That was why his reaction to Terry Boot was so severe. And while he knew it was terribly hypocritical of him, he had despised the thought of sharing Hermione with her muggle shag, even if it had been just one time and years ago. As he examined his feelings about her over the last couple of weeks he realized he was jealous of a muggle she would never see again. He wasn't proud of it, he didn't like it, and he knew it wasn't right. But he felt the way he felt. Draco tried to put Mark out of his mind, but he couldn't always do it. Whenever he imagined the muggle taking Hermione against a wall, he wanted to murder something.

But now that he knew the muggle was really him, the jealousy eased and a sense of rightness settled into him. She was his. She had always been his. She just didn't know it yet, and he wasn't sure what his next move needed to be.

He found himself stroking her leg, just behind the knee a little more firmly, and soon she was stirring. He had abandoned the idea of sneaking out as soon as his friends left. He sensed that if he did that she might think he had second thoughts about talking to her the night before. He might not know what he was going to do to convince her to give him a chance, but he knew he wanted her to trust him. He didn't want her to think he was second guessing anything.

Her eyes fluttered open, and he couldn't help but smile a little as she groaned too.

"Rise and shine," he said.

She furrowed her brow a bit as she looked around, and she pulled her legs off of Draco as she sat up. "What time is it?" she muttered.

Draco checked his watch. "Ten."

Her eyes widened, and then she groaned again. "I feel like death."

"Here," he said, handing her the potion.

She didn't even look at it, she just downed it, much to Draco's amusement. After several seconds she perked up and looked around.

"Ten? Really? I don't think I've ever slept that late in my life."

Draco considered how much to tell her.

"It means we were... seen."

Her eyes widened. "Theo?"

"All the Slytherins, actually. I think Theo invited them over to view the spectacle."

"Ugh, Pansy is going to be impossible," she moaned.

Draco knew this was true, but he couldn't help himself. "Why's that?"

"She's on some crusade to get me laid. She keeps telling me it will make me less uptight. I've tried to reason with her, but it's no use."

She looked so exasperated by this that Draco couldn't help but laugh.

"Well best prepare yourself," he said. "She looked pretty determined."

Hermione gave a resigned nod, as she pulled her knees up to her chest. "At least we got some sleep. I don't know about you, but I never sleep that well after I talk about the war. That was... not exactly comfortable, but I think it was the longest stretch I've gotten after a conversation like that."

He looked at her a bit curiously now. "No nightmares then?"

She frowned a bit and shook her head. "No, and it was odd. I still dream about the war quite often, but last night... well I barely

remember it, but I think I dreamed about Pansy decorating my flat. It was something totally innocuous.”

He gave her a small smile. “Same actually. Well, not the flat decorating, but something innocuous.”

I dreamed about Jeanine, meaning I dreamed about you.

She frowned. “It was probably the alcohol. If so, that’s not a great solution is it? Bathe our livers in firewhiskey to sleep whenever the war comes up.”

He gave her a wry smile at this. “No, I don’t think that’s wise. I like getting wasted as much as the next bloke, but there’s a time and place for it.”

She nodded a little. “You’re right of course. Alright then, I had better get up and face the music with Pansy. She asked me to provide moral support for this wedding...”

She looked so grim Draco struggled not to laugh as she rose.

“I’ll see you later Draco,” she said. They both froze at the use of his first name. She started to stutter. “I mean...”

Draco recovered first and cut her off. “Sure, Hermione.”

She blinked, but then a small smile crossed her face. She said nothing more as she walked to the fireplace, but she did cast one last look back at him before she disappeared.

Theo's Advice

Chapter 10: Theo's Advice

AN: What should Draco do now? Listen to his best friend of course.

Hermione

“Honestly, you have a dozen pairs of jeans. Why do you always wear the same ones?” demanded Pansy with a huff.

Pansy, Ginny, and Luna were in Hermione’s small flat, purportedly to give Pansy moral support before her sister’s wedding. Whereas Theo’s house had become the natural gathering place for the larger group, Hermione’s flat served the same purpose when it was just the girls. Out of the four of them, she was the only one who lived alone. Her flat was small and admittedly quite a stretch on her income, but she loved it. Her bedroom and bath were set off from the living areas, and she was in a very safe part of London. Her flat was bright, filled with color, and it was set above a small muggle bookstore with a cafe next door. She was the only residential tenant, and it gave her a great deal of privacy and the ability to cast light wards without interfering with surrounding units.

Hermione had been nervous to show Pansy her place the first time. Like Theo, Pansy lived in a handsome home they called a manor, though she swore it was nothing like Malfoy Manor. Hermione’s flat was modest by comparison, but the first time Pansy saw it she declared it to be delightfully Bohemian and inspirational. In that moment Pansy decided to turn the wizarding fashion world on its head by dressing Hermione in real colors — not just the blacks, navies, and maroons that were so prevalent and popular. Apparently she was inspired by the art and textures Hermione favored herself.

Pansy had been over a few times, and now here she was again with the others, all in pursuit of moral support.

Pansy said the best distraction they could give her was to allow her to finally sort through all of Hermione's clothes. So here she was, digging through Hermione's dresser, while Ginny and Luna sat on the bed and watched.

"I wear them because they're comfortable?" said Hermione wearily. Pansy had taken it upon herself to look at every piece of clothing Hermione owned with a critical eye. She was utterly relentless.

"They are not flattering. Here, put these on and let me see."

Hermione sighed, but did as she was told. She struggled a bit to get them over her bum, but eventually managed. Pansy made a gesture that told Hermione she was supposed to turn around, so she did a slow twirl.

"Those look amazing," said Ginny appreciatively.

"Yes, *these* are the jeans you're supposed to wear," said Pansy approvingly.

"But they're tight! How am I supposed to sit...?" said Hermione in dismay. They were at least two years old, and Hermione had filled out a bit in the hips and arse during those two years.

"Details," said Pansy airily. "You'll figure it out. They fit perfectly."

"Pansy, *why* do you care so much?"

"I've told you a hundred times, we need to get you laid."

"I'm not interested in just getting laid," insisted Hermione.

"Perhaps not, but if you would just listen to me and play up your best assets – emphasis on the ass – you might find that you can attract

the total package. And his package is quite nice. I've been there, done that, remember?"

Hermione felt herself redden, as Pansy gave her a knowing look.

"You're delusional," she said.

"He likes you," said Pansy.

"Yes, in the same way Theo likes me, or perhaps a bit less," said Hermione.

"Do I have to remind you that out of the four of us, I'm the only one who has actually climbed that tree? I've known that man for more than half my life and far more intimately than you. He's into you. I can tell."

Hermione's stomach swooped at this. The night before had been eye-opening for her, having finally learned the darkest sides of Draco. Just as she sensed all those years ago, he wasn't evil. She could see that the things he had done weighed on him, and her heart went out to him for it. She had to admit she liked him. She was starting to really like him. But he seemed so out of her league: he was handsome, ridiculously wealthy, and far more sexually advanced than she was. He was surely becoming a friend, and that was a wonderful thing. But the notion that he might be interested in much more than that seemed far-fetched when she really allowed herself to think about it. Sure, she had caught him looking at her quite a bit. But he wouldn't want anything more than casual sex from her at most, and she couldn't allow herself to do that. It would break her heart if she slept with him and then went back to being nothing more than friends.

"I don't know, Pans. He's just so... *Draco*."

Pansy shot her a curious look. "You're calling him Draco now?"

"Shit," she muttered as a look of glee crossed Pansy's face.

“I knew it! You like him!”

Hermione groaned. “OK fine! Maybe I like him! But there is literally no chance he would ever reciprocate like that.”

“He slept with you last night.”

“Only because we were both too drunk to walk. Trust me, we tried and couldn’t do it. We had no choice.”

Pansy harrumphed.

“What about you and Blaise then?” asked Hermione, determined to turn it back on her.

“What about us? He has a date tonight.”

Hermione looked at her incredulously. “What? Why?”

“Because that’s what he does,” she said shortly. “He goes on a hundred first dates. Occasionally he snogs them. And it’s never me.”

“He’s so into you though,” said Ginny.

Pansy glanced at her. “That may be true, but until he’s ready to commit I’m not interested.”

“Well do you have a date tonight?” asked Luna.

Pansy sighed and shook her head. “No point, since Blaise is going with somebody else, and I’m a bridesmaid. I’d just make some poor sod sit on the sidelines waiting for me all night.”

The others gave a murmur of understanding at that.

“What about you Gin?” asked Hermione suddenly. “Has Harry gotten off of his arse and started looking at rings yet?”

Ginny looked thoughtful. "I don't know about that, but we finally talked about it seriously. I think he's into it. He's not afraid of getting married, he's afraid of having kids."

"You don't have to have kids," said Hermione reasonably.

"No, but I want them, and he knows that. He wants them too, but they intimidate him."

"He's so good with Teddy though."

Ginny nodded. "He is, that's true. But he says he doesn't really parent Teddy. He's more like the fun uncle. Anyway, I promised him that if we got married I would give it a full year before I brought up kids. I think he's coming around."

"Good," said Pansy, nodding firmly. "And Luna?"

"Oh Theo is very into me. One day I'm going to jump him and see what it's like," she said serenely.

The others blinked. "Well that's one of us sorted at any rate," muttered Pansy.

"True," said Ginny. "We need Blaise and Draco to make their moves. And Merlin, I need to find Ron a wife."

"Don't you mean a girlfriend?" asked Pansy in amusement.

"No, Ron needs to skip straight to wife. Preferably a carbon copy of my mother," said Ginny as Hermione laughed.

"It's true," chimed in Hermione. "There's a reason we didn't last long. I love Molly, but we are nothing alike. That's what Ron wants in a witch. I'm not sure he needs romance if he can find somebody who cooks."

Pansy laughed at this, and then they settled back in as Pansy started chatting about the wedding and complaining about her

mother.

Hermione had to admit, as she listened to Pansy bitch about the cut of the bridesmaid dress she had to wear that night, she had really become fond of Pansy Parkinson.

Hermione was sitting on the sofa with Crookshanks, enjoying a cup of tea while reviewing some books Florrie sent home with her from the Manor earlier in the week. She glanced up at the clock and realized the bride was walking down the aisle at that very moment.

It suddenly occurred to her that the Manor was empty, just like the night before. Draco and Narcissa were both at the wedding tonight. She had a sudden urge to visit the Library and wander the shelves while she had the place to herself, and before she could second guess it she nudged Crookshanks off her lap and floo'd over.

She stepped out into the Study and looked around. The sun was setting, the lamps were dim, and she suddenly wondered if this was a mistake.

"Florrie?" she said tentatively.

The little elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Miss Hermy!" said Florrie. To Hermione's relief, she didn't seem upset to see Hermione there.

"Hi Florrie. I know Draco wasn't expecting me, but I was hoping to browse the Library again while nobody was using it?"

Florrie bobbed. "Of course Miss," she said. "Please let Florrie know if you is needing anything."

Hermione thanked her and then slipped out the door and down the hall to the Library. Again, the lamps were dim, and Hermione turned them up just enough so she could see the titles.

She walked around the Library slowly and then paused. Something felt different tonight. She closed her eyes for a moment and breathed. She felt Draco's magic tonight, just like she had that very first day when he showed her the tiny ritual room.

She wasn't exactly sure why she was here. She simply wanted to enjoy the moment of peace in her new favorite place. But now that she was here and felt the magic, something told her she would be able to find something important tonight. She just had to let the magic guide her.

She said nothing, but opened her own magic and let it connect with his.

Show me your secrets. Show me what I need to find in here.

There was a thrum, a vibration like a string had been plucked, leading her directly to the place she needed to go. She slowly maneuvered around the tables into a dark corner of the stacks and kneeled down to search the shelf that she sensed had answers for her.

She ran her fingers across the spines of the books and there, sitting on the shelf slightly apart from the other books around it was a book called *The Art of Shibari*. She tentatively opened the cover and her eyes widened at the slowly moving pictures.

Instinctively she slammed it shut, feeling almost voyeuristic. She looked around quickly before shaking herself out of it. She was alone. She was being ridiculous. Slowly she opened the book again and made herself look at the pictures of the naked women bound in ropes.

It was beautiful in its own way, and she thought the book was right to call it art. But it was so unusual, so far from anything she had ever even thought to try that she didn't know how to feel as she looked at it.

It was something that interested Draco, she knew that much. It was something he had never done before, but wanted to try. As her finger traced over the ropes she shuddered as she imagined it. And then taking a deep breath, Hermione picked up the book and took it to the nearest table. She flipped to the very first page and began to read.

Draco

Draco was hunched over a table in the very back of the ballroom, watching Violet Parkinson Avery dance with her new husband Matthew. They looked happy enough, Draco supposed. He knew theirs was a traditional pureblood match, largely arranged by the parents and consented to by the children. Nobody really *forced* their children to get married these days – magical marriages were far too difficult to escape and the existence of magic itself gave both sides the ability to do real damage if they didn't like each other – but plenty of pureblood families like the Malfoys and the Parkinsons played a heavy hand in it.

Draco knew that was what his mother was preparing to do. She and Lucius had been pleasantly surprised when Draco informed them that he was in the process of doing it himself just after Hogwarts. By then he had been forced to conclude he would never find Jeanine again, and he had to move on. Besides, even if he *did* find her, the notion of marrying a muggle was too foreign to even consider it. Draco's prejudices had largely fallen by the wayside at that point, but it was still too complex, too *hard* to be with somebody who had no magic at all. Eventually he gave her up and picked Astoria instead, convinced that if he went through the years of arranged meetings, carefully controlled interactions, and eventually an engagement where it would be socially acceptable to bed his fiancée, he would purge that night with Jeanine from his mind forever.

It hadn't worked of course, not really. The memories of Jeanine had dulled but never fully left him. And now that he knew she was Hermione everything he suppressed came rushing back. He learned that not only was she magical, but he had started to fall for her

again. Hermione was the first woman he had any real feelings for since Jeanine. It almost felt like fate. But staring around at the trappings of a traditional pureblood wedding, Draco wondered how on earth he was going to manage this. He wasn't interested in anybody else. That much was clear. But Narcissa had expectations. His entire social circle had expectations. And Hermione surely had her own plans and expectations that would be very different from these.

"Hiding mate?" came Theo's voice, as he slid into a chair near Draco.

Draco just grunted, and Theo grinned. "That bad?"

"It's just... look around you, Theo. Is this really our future?"

Theo gave him a sharp look. "Your future can be whatever you want it to be. Your father's dead and can't control you any longer by dangling the fortune in front of you. And mine's gone as well."

Draco bit his lip. "But Mother..."

"Your mother just wants you settled. I'd wager she would go along with just about anybody if you would just do it."

Draco shot him a look. "You're giving her far too much credit."

Theo shrugged. "Maybe. But you should just introduce Hermione to her and see what comes of it. It's bound to happen at some point, and don't you want to control it a little bit that first time?"

Draco nodded slowly, knowing his friend was right. Hermione had been working at Malfoy Manor for three weeks and still had not seen Narcissa. His mother was starting to ask questions. So far Draco had excused it by saying that she was going back and forth with the Ministry. That was true, but only to an extent. Hermione was hiding from her, and Draco suspected he knew why. Hermione thought Narcissa was prejudiced.

“So are you finally going to admit it? You can keep lying to Blaise and Pansy, but don’t lie to me, mate.”

Draco glanced at Theo and sighed. “Fine, you’re right. I like her. In fact...”

He trailed off, wondering if he could tell Theo this.

“In fact what?” prodded Theo.

Draco steeled himself for it. Out of all of his friends Theo was the only one who had any idea how much the loss of Jeanine had fucked up Draco. And even he didn’t know the full extent of it.

“I found Jeanine,” said Draco quietly.

Theo looked at him sharply, suddenly very worried. “But Hermione –”

“Jeanine *is* Hermione,” said Draco. “I figured it out last night.”

Draco turned to find Theo staring at him with wide eyes. “You’re certain?”

Draco nodded slowly. “I never told you, but I shagged her right after I was sent to capture Hermione’s parents. Nothing happened!” he added quickly, seeing the look on Theo’s face. “Hermione sent them into hiding earlier that day. But the bar I picked was very close to their home. Hermione had transfigured her face just like I did so that’s why we didn’t recognize each other.”

“Mate...” Theo whispered.

“I know,” said Draco, taking a sip of his drink. “I figured it out, but I’m pretty sure she doesn’t know yet. I have to find a way to tell her, but I’m afraid it might scare her off. We’re still getting to know each other. I’ve just... I’ve been thinking about it all day. But I have no idea what the fuck to do about it. I know I want her, but all this....” he made a gesture toward the wedding.

Theo shot him a look. "Before I say anything else, tell me one thing. Have you visited your club recently?"

Draco shook his head. "No, actually. Not at all since I met her again. I didn't have any interest. And now that I know who she is... of course not. If I can convince her to give me even the smallest chance I'll give up my membership, unless she wants to go to the parties and such with me. I don't need random sex if I can have her."

Theo gave a satisfied nod at this, before turning speculative. "Do you want my thoughts on it then?"

Draco looked sharply at him. "As long as you promise to keep it between us for now, sure. I don't want Pansy to know yet because she'll drive me fucking insane."

Theo waved him off. "You know I won't tell the others. No, I think you need to court her."

Draco gave him a skeptical look. "I courted Astoria."

Theo snorted. "No you didn't, not really. I know you technically followed all the rules with her, but you know as well as I do that there are degrees of courting. You were as hands-off and distant with Astoria as you could possibly be. I'm saying you should do it for real with Hermione."

"There's no way she'll agree to that."

Theo shrugged. "Look, you are both adults. You could just marry her without any of this. It's not like anybody could stop you. But Hermione's the type to get into her own head about things. We both know that some of the courting traditions you could use are very persuasive. That's the entire reason they exist."

"So what? You're saying I should —"

“Take the best parts of it and use them on Hermione to get her out of her own head so she’ll give you a chance. Then ignore all the bullshit parts of it. Do it your own way. But it will give you a place to start with her.”

Draco’s breath caught, as he thought about this. He realized Theo was right. He had never been tempted to use the more romantic gestures or traditions with Astoria because he didn’t care that much. But with Hermione...

“You really think that would work?”

Theo cocked an eyebrow at him. “She’s sentimental, mate. That became very clear when I lived in that damn tent with her for a month.”

“Sentimental how?”

Theo shrugged. “Small things. Like she always used the same coffee mug each morning because it’s the one that Harry gave to her when she started her job at the Ministry. There’s a thin ring she always wears on her right hand that was her grandmother’s wedding band. She wears it on the wrong finger because it doesn’t fit her, and she’s never been able to bring herself to have it resized. She pressed flowers from a field near our work site, and she told me she collects pressings from each new place she visits. She has a scrapbook of them. Things like that.”

Draco nodded slowly. “So I take the sentimental traditions and use them to persuade her?”

Theo nodded. “Yes. And if you do it right, the other purebloods will respect what you’re doing once they find out about it. Maybe you’re putting your own spin on things, but you’re a Malfoy, and we both know the Malfoys are allowed to do things a bit differently. It would still be known that you are courting her. And we all know what that means.”

“That I’m off the market and so is she.”

Theo nodded. “She’s perfect for you, mate, especially now that you know she’s the woman you’ve been thinking about for years.”

Draco nodded slowly. “Speaking of reasons why she’s perfect, do you think it’s time we finally brought her in on your thing?”

Theo sighed and nodded. “I hoped it wouldn’t come to that, but you haven’t been able to figure it out.”

Draco nodded. “I’ll tell her we all need to meet the next time I see her then.”

“Harry too,” said Theo. Draco raised an eyebrow at this, but nodded.

Suddenly he saw Narcissa marching toward them with a determined look on her face, and Draco gulped. “Don’t say anything yet,” he hissed to Theo. His friend cast him a quick look but nodded.

“Draco, I need to know if you have found any witches to add to my list,” she said as she set a drink down next to them.

“Mother... why...?”

“*Because* Draco, I was just forced to listen to Lorna Parkinson go on and on for twenty minutes about how she has married off three of her four children, all girls. And I’ve been vetting my list, but it’s been discouraging, Draco. Very discouraging. The Parkinson’s have done a fantastic job, and we need a match that’s at least as good as Violet’s. Lorna is about to work on Pansy, and she *cannot* have the matter arranged before you, Draco. It’s positively mortifying.”

“Mother, I’ve told you I don’t want —”

“And I told *you* that you have no choice in the matter. You’ve had plenty of time to arrange things yourself. Now then, I want names.”

“*Mother.*”

“Draco, I really must insist that —”

“*DRAKEY!*” came a screech from across the ballroom.

Draco felt the blood drain from his face as he looked up to see Ella Vanity hurrying across the room to meet him.

“Draco, please tell me you haven’t —” started Narcissa.

“No!” he insisted. “Not since that night we buried Father!”

He caught Theo’s surprised look out of the corner of his eye, but he didn’t have time to explain.

“Please, *please* help me...” he begged, turning a pleading face to his mother.

She pursed her lips but said, “Fine. But we do this my way. Run, Draco. I’ll make your excuses. And the next time I see you, I want names.”

Knowing his mother had truly backed him into a corner with no other escape, Draco stood and did exactly as his mother suggested: he ran.

Draco prayed the press wasn’t watching him, but he couldn’t do anything about it if they were. He hurried to the large fireplace and grabbed some floo powder. “Malfoy Manor, Master’s Study!” he shouted, as he felt himself spinning away.

He breathed a sigh of relief as he stepped out onto the rug at the other end, but then he paused. He closed his eyes for a moment and felt the wards, and then he was certain of it: somebody was here.

“Florrie,” he whispered. Florrie appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Yes Master?”

“Florrie, who is here? The Manor is supposed to be empty tonight.”

Florrie got a worried look. "Tis Miss Hermy, Sir. Florrie is telling her she is welcome in the Library. Is Florrie wrong Sir?"

Draco felt a surge of excitement rush through him. "No, of course not. Hermione is welcome at any time. I just wasn't expecting her."

Florrie looked relieved. "Does Master wish for me to fetch her?"

"No need, I'll go find her myself in a few minutes."

Florrie bobbed and then apparated away while Draco took a deep breath and strode out of the Study and took the stairs two at a time to head to his room to change. He was quickly putting together a plan — some excuse he could use for his early departure from the wedding along with a reason to convince her to spend time with him tonight. He had been thinking about her all day, and he wasn't going to let this opportunity go.

The plan he came up with was half-baked, but really not bad considering the fact that he was coming up with it on the fly. And he thought it fit Theo's suggestion rather well. It might not be sentimental, exactly, but it could be romantic if he played his cards right.

Dressed much more casually now, Draco hurried back down the stairs and down the long corridor to the Library at the very end. He opened the doors silently and crept in. It didn't take long before he spotted the back of a familiar curly head bent down, presumably reading a book.

Play it cool.

"Good evening," he said.

She jumped violently and turned around with a gasp.

"Sorry!" he said, with a smile. "Didn't mean to scare you."

She was breathing hard, and her face was crimson as she shut the book she was reading with a snap and stood in front of it so he couldn't see what it was.

Curious.

"Oh, no – I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have come over when the Manor was empty, I just thought..."

He held up a hand. "You're welcome at any time, you know that. Besides, I was coming to find you, and this saved me a trip through the floo."

This made her pause. "Oh?"

Draco nodded. "Yes, I had a brainwave at the wedding just now about a place my father might have stashed some objects. The party was getting boring, and I thought you might want to check it out. I floo'd home to change first, and Florrie said you were already here."

She blinked and suddenly looked a bit shy. "Oh! Alright then. Of course. Let me just..."

She turned and picked up the book, careful to make sure the title was covered, and she walked toward the nearest bookshelf. Draco's eyes involuntarily dipped to her arse. Her jeans were tight and outlined it to perfection. He was sure he had never seen them before and thanked Pansy for what he was certain was her contribution to Hermione's wardrobe. Fuck she looked good. Draco felt himself start to harden and forced it back down.

Not now. Control yourself.

He saw her stuff the small book on one of the shelves haphazardly, before turning back to him, blushing furiously. He made a mental note to find it later, very curious about the thing Hermione had been studying that had made her react like that.

“Come on then, I’ll show you,” he said as she walked toward him.

“What is it then?”

He just grinned. “Patience, angel.”

“Angel?” she asked, smiling a little as he led her out of the library.

He cocked an eyebrow. “What do you think about that one?”

“Hmmm, better than ‘buttercup,’ but I’m not sure if that’s the one.”

Draco knew what he *really* wanted to call her, but he couldn’t yet – not until she knew that he was Mark.

“We’ll test drive it,” he said as he led her down the foyer and toward a side hall. She looked around curiously as she followed him. “I probably would have chosen ‘darling,’ you know, but Theo got there first. Blaise has dibs on all things Italian. And Pansy has always been ‘dear.’”

“I thought Theo called Pansy ‘dear’ too?”

“He does,” said Draco.

“So you’ll call her the same thing as Theo, but not me?”

Draco almost tripped as he realized he had backed himself into that one. He scrambled to come up with a reason.

“Hmmm, I suppose. Pansy’s nickname has been around for so long I never thought to come up with something different for her. With you though, I’m starting afresh.”

“Ah,” she said. She sounded suspicious, but mercifully she dropped it as he pushed open a door to a flagstone patio at the end of the hall. Immediately light flooded the large patch of grass on the other side of the patio.

“Is this your quidditch pitch?” she asked curiously, looking at the tall rings that Draco had installed the week before.

Draco nodded. “The antiapparition wards that cover the Manor and the grounds immediately surrounding it end just on the other side. There are wards that cover the whole perimeter of the property that prevent apparating from outside of the property to the inside. But once you are inside the boundaries you can apparate around the outer grounds. They’re too large to walk.”

“So we’re apparating to an outer building then?”

“Hmmm, in a manner of speaking,” he replied, giving her a secretive smile.

She narrowed her eyes but followed him to the other side of the quidditch pitch, where he stopped and turned to her while holding out his hand.

“Ready?”

She took a deep breath but placed her hand in his. It was small and warm, and his heart started to pound a little. He tried to slow it down so she wouldn’t sense what she was doing to him, and he made himself close his hand firmly around hers.

“Let’s go then,” he said as he turned and pulled them both into the night.

The Blood Curse

Chapter 11: The Blood Curse

AN: Hermione finally meets Mrs. Malfoy.

Hermione

Hermione thought her heart was going to beat out of her chest. She had felt scattered since the moment Draco appeared in the Library and nearly caught her red-handed with *The Art of Shibari*.

It had been a fascinating read, to state it lightly. Once she started, she couldn't put it down, and she had spent the last hour or more imagining *things*. Of course all of those things involved Draco and very specific rope patterns that she might have memorized. She had even dog-eared a couple pages to revisit them later when he wandered in. Bloody hell, her knickers were completely soaked, and she was more than a little distracted.

She resolved to go back to the Library as soon as possible and keep reading or else look for other books like it. She couldn't ask Florrie to help her with it, but maybe if she called the Library's magic again it would lead her to the right place. Surely that book about shibari wasn't the only book like it in the Library. Hermione suddenly found she had a whole mountain of research she wanted to do. Who knew there was more to sex than just penetration and vibrators? To say her curiosity was officially piqued would be an understatement.

She forced herself to set it aside and focus on Draco now that he was here. She certainly wanted to spend time with him. She saw him frequently of course, but he was usually so busy she rarely got time

with him that was uninterrupted and totally private. Twice in a twenty-four hour period was totally unprecedented.

He led her through the Manor and called her “angel” tonight. Her heart thudded at the term of endearment, but something about it still wasn’t perfect. Still, she rather liked that he was trying it out, and she decided to give it a chance for now.

They eventually crossed the mad quidditch pitch – she still couldn’t believe the Manor had given him *that* – and he held out a hand and gave her a determined look.

She placed her hand in his, and a moment later she felt herself being pulled through the darkness, landing in a part of the estate that was pitch black. To her surprise she landed on something that felt hard, almost like a patio or a stone path.

He didn’t release her hand, and Hermione felt herself blushing a little, though it was too dark for him to see.

“We’re here,” he said, and his voice was low, almost a whisper. Hermione shuddered a bit, the night breeze giving a distinct chill and the noises of nocturnal animals a bit too close for comfort. Draco must have sensed it, because he gave her hand a little squeeze and moved closer to her. Then a moment later he lit his wand and aimed it at the structure in front of them.

“Ooohhh...” she breathed in amazement. “Is that really...?”

“An observatory,” confirmed Draco. “This part of the estate is very remote, with acres of nothing but woods around us. Nobody ever comes here, and I doubt the Ministry knows it exists.”

“Why?” she asked, as she studied the glass structure with the hole in the ceiling and something gold glinting from it.

Draco shrugged. “Father built it for Mother as a wedding gift. He was never the type to file for permits when he made changes to the

estate.”

Hermione blinked in surprise and turned to look at him. “Really?”

He chuckled. “Yes. She told him it was a Black family tradition to study the stars. He decided to take her words literally.”

“Does she come here often then?”

Draco shook his head. “No. Not since the Dark Lord rose again. Mother supported Father when he joined the Death Eaters, but it really strained my parents’ marriage. She used to visit it though and would bring me here quite a bit when I was a child. I did all of my summer astronomy homework here. Come along.”

Draco lowered his wand so they could see where they were walking. Hermione glanced up at the sky and had to admit it was the perfect spot for an observatory. The night sky was pristine out here in the middle of the forest. There was no light pollution whatsoever, except for Draco’s wand. And if he was right that Narcissa had stopped visiting after Voldemort rose again and the Ministry was unaware of it, then he was also right that this could be a perfect hiding spot. The odds of anybody stumbling across it were virtually nonexistent.

As soon as he opened the glass door, he doused the light from his wand. Instead, a low glow, barely visible emitted from the floor of the observatory. It was just enough light so they could see where they were going, but not enough to disrupt stargazing.

Hermione gasped as she looked at the telescope. It was enormous, like something out of a professional muggle observatory, though it also looked a bit old fashioned, like so many things in the wizarding world. “Draco...” she murmured as she walked up to it. She couldn’t help herself, she ran a hand over the cool gold metal. “This is extraordinary.”

She turned to find him studying her, with a small smile on his face. “Did you like astronomy in school?”

She nodded. "Yes. Harry and Ron never cared for it, but I did. It was..." she trailed off.

"It was what?"

She shrugged. "It was the only thing we studied that was muggle."

He gave her a skeptical look. "Astronomy's not muggle."

She chuckled. "Sure it is. The star names and constellation names are the same in both worlds. Believe me, I looked it up. Astronomy isn't a standard subject for muggles to study, I'll grant you that. But it's the only thing we learned at Hogwarts that crossed both worlds perfectly. Arithmancy was close as well, but muggles do far more advanced mathematics than wizards do. Arithmancy was fairly basic by comparison, and of course the numbers in the magical world are predictive. Astronomy though... it was a perfect crossover."

He was silent as he contemplated this. Hermione approached the eyepiece and hesitated.

"Take a look," he said softly.

She smiled at him and settled down on the stool as she looked through it and gasped. It was easily the best telescope she had ever used, and she could see things clearly through it she had never observed before.

"There's Draco," she murmured. "Eltanin and Edasich are both looking particularly bright tonight. And there's Lyra. I've never seen the Ring Nebula so clearly before. And there's Saggitarius of course. Isn't it odd that Saggitarius can be seen during the correct time of year, but Virgo can't? Though I suppose I'm being biased by only considering the Northern Hemisphere."

She realized she was rambling and pulled away to turn and look at him. He was studying her with an intent look on his face. "You do

remember your astronomy. Though I confess I'm not sure what you mean about Virgo."

She shrugged. "Signs of the zodiac. I suppose it's a muggle thing. They ascribe personality traits that are tied to constellations based on the time of year you're born. But Virgos are born in late August and early September, even though their constellation is best viewed during the spring – in the Northern Hemisphere I mean. It's different in the Southern Hemisphere of course."

He cocked his head a little at this. "What are Virgos like then?"

"Virgo is the virgin of course. They are supposed to be logical, practical, and systematic. They are organized and meticulous. They tend to be perfectionists and try to fix and improve the things that are broken."

He smiled a little. "That sounds very much like you."

She shrugged and gave him an impish smile. "Maybe that's because I *am* one. My birthday's in September."

He got a thoughtful look on his face as he nodded slowly. "What about me then? I'm the fifth of June."

She thought about it. "Gemini, I believe. That means you're intelligent, analytical, and funny. You're the life of the party and a social butterfly."

He wrinkled his nose. "I don't think so, based on the fact that I was practically hiding at Violet's wedding not even an hour ago."

She laughed. "Well I'll admit it's fairly imprecise."

She stood up and wandered over to him. "This place is really incredible."

He said nothing, but just nodded as he stared at her. Hermione bit her lip, and she couldn't help but notice his eyes dipped as she did it.

That's not why he brought you here, Hermione. Be professional.

"Where do you think Lucius might have hidden something then?"

Draco blinked, as though he had forgotten the reason they came here. "Oh..." he said. "Ummm..."

She narrowed her eyes, but said, "Let me try something. It worked earlier in the Manor..."

She closed her eyes and opened her magic. She heard Draco inhale next to her, but she ignored him, trying to connect to the Malfoy magic she sensed all around her.

I need the hiding place, she thought. I need you to show me your secrets.

She felt it then, another thrum, and she opened her eyes again to find Draco staring at her in amazement. "Over here," she whispered, and without allowing herself to think about it, she grabbed Draco's hand and tugged. He instantly gripped her hand back and allowed himself to be pulled back outside and toward an odd cluster of trees just on the other side of the small patio surrounding the observatory.

"It's here..." whispered Hermione, as she lit her wand. Draco came to a halt next to her and lit his wand too to take a better look.

Sure enough, there was the slightest shimmer of magic.

"I can't feel it," he said in confusion. "You're right there's some sort of magical barrier there, but..."

"I think it's because it's Malfoy magic," she said. "It's something Lucius must have tied into the ritual. It transferred to you."

"Do you think I can cross it then?" he asked curiously.

Hermione hesitated. "I don't know. Let's get closer."

They approached cautiously, and Hermione started casting spells toward the barrier. Most of them were deflected or absorbed, but one passed through it and illuminated the tree behind it.

“Whatever it is, it’s inside that tree,” she said. “I’ll need to break the barrier first.”

“Let me try crossing it,” said Draco as he released her hand and walked toward it.

“No, Draco, I –” she called, but it was too late.

He reached out a hand to touch it, and there was an enormous crack as it glowed green and hurled him through the air and back against the glass walls of the observatory behind him. She heard a sickening crunch as his body made contact.

“Draco!” she cried as she rushed toward him. It was terribly dark, but his wand was still lit, though it had been flung to the other side of the patio.

“Accio Draco’s wand!” she called frantically, and it flew to her hand. She placed it on the ground near her so she could see while she worked quickly, checking his vital signs.

“Shit...” she muttered, as she stared up at it. He had a concussion, he had cracked a couple ribs, a dislocated shoulder, and even a broken jaw as he hit the patio. There was also something else. Something...

She muttered spell after spell as she began to locate the source. There was some type of dark magic that was in his left hand, which he had used to touch the barrier. And based on her diagnostic spell it was slowly creeping up his left arm toward his heart.

Hermione swore as she turned his arm over and ripped the fabric of his sleeve open so she could see it. There were tendrils of a dark something, perhaps purple or a deep blue, moving up from his hand.

It was already nearly to his elbow and was moving quickly. She sensed if it reached his heart it would stop, and she couldn't allow that to happen.

Her hands were shaking as she started muttering strings of countercurses, every single thing she could think of. She hated working on people she knew. It was terrifying, personal, and very distracting. But she had nobody else. She was here, and she was trained. She just had to calm herself down and focus.

It's in his veins. It must be a blood curse.

There. That was something she could focus on. Blood curses were a bit obscure, but they were also fairly easy to reverse once identified. She simply had to stop it from spreading and then get him to St. Mungo's to treat it.

She muttered a few spells over him, and to her relief the creeping purple slowed and then came to a halt. It was pulsating a bit, but it wasn't spreading, and that was enough. She would have a few hours to get him treatment before it started to corrode his veins.

She turned to the rest of him and gently severed his shirt to peel it back. She swallowed as she saw the scarring there. It was worse than she had imagined, though she knew curses like *sectumsempra* always left their mark. What was more disconcerting was how attractive he was like this, but she forced herself to put it out of her mind. She was a healer and had a job to do. She couldn't, *wouldn't* allow herself to oggle him like this.

Concussions, broken ribs, and dislocated shoulders were standard fare for aurors, and Hermione had plenty of practice healing those in the field. She muttered several spells over him, and they resolved themselves quickly enough, though she knew he would be very sore when he woke up.

The broken jaw was more complex, but Hermione cast an X-ray charm, and she studied it a moment.

I can do this, she thought.

It was a delicate spell, but she had healed more than one jaw at the Weasley household when the brothers got into fights with one another over the years. She exhaled and focused, and she worked slowly, carefully, as she made sure his bite lined up just right.

There. Done.

Hermione sat back on her heels and wiped her brow. She thought about what she needed to do next and then called, "Florrie!"

Florrie appeared with a *CRACK!* and then squeaked in surprise and dismay when she saw Draco.

"Shhh, Florrie, he'll be alright. I need to take him to St. Mungo's though. Can you apparate us to the healer's entry there? I don't think I can apparate out of the boundary ward myself."

Florrie nodded quickly and placed a hand on Hermione and Draco, and a moment later Hermione felt herself being pulled through the darkness, before opening her eyes and finding herself at the familiar entry.

"Thanks, Florrie, I'll take it from here. Can you or Nonnie let Narcissa know? He'll be OK, and there's no need to cause a scene at the wedding for it. But she should be informed."

"Yes Miss," squeaked Florrie, and she apparated away.

Hermione sighed and looked down at Draco, exhaustion from the stress of the last few minutes washing over her. She wanted nothing more than to lay down and sleep, but she couldn't. There was still more she needed to do for Draco.

She stood up, summoned one of the hospital elves to check Draco in and get him settled into a room. She told the elf that he was stable

for now, but she asked him to mark her down as his lead healer and told him she would be back shortly to continue his treatment.

Then she hurried to the floo to run home and change before heading to her lab at the Ministry. She needed a few ingredients that St. Mungo's didn't regularly keep in stock, and she had to grab her badge and robes if she was going to be allowed to treat him. The director of St. Mungo's was a stickler for protocol, and the healer robes were the only ones she ever wore these days.

Within twenty minutes she had returned, lime green healer's robes billowing and her identification badge around her neck. She called an elf to take her to Draco's room, and he led her down a long corridor. As she approached it she heard a familiar voice shouting, "I want to know what happened to my son! Where are the healers? What is going on here? I demand an answer!"

Hermione took a deep breath and prayed for an intervention, but none came. Knowing she had no other choice now, she pushed open the doors. There she found Narcissa Malfoy, dressed in a floor-length gown and a rather astonishing diamond necklace, shouting at one of the trainee healers, who was cowering before her.

"Good evening, Mrs. Malfoy," said Hermione. Narcissa whipped around when she heard her voice. "Please allow me to introduce myself. I'm Hermione Granger."

It took nearly twenty minutes and a calming draught before Narcissa Malfoy's anxiety had subsided enough to ask real questions. Hermione did her best to answer them while preparing an experimental potion that would help break down the curse in his blood.

"So you say it's a blood curse? Is it inheritable? I've heard they're inheritable."

"Blood curses aren't inheritable," said Hermione calmly.

“But they *must* be,” insisted Narcissa. “I know a pureblood witch who has one, and she says it’s inheritable.”

“Ah,” said Hermione calmly. “It’s probably not a curse, but an inherited condition. There are some genetic conditions and diseases that pass down through families. You see it in muggle populations far more often than wizarding ones. For instance, hemophilia was passed down through some of the muggle royal families in Europe, but it’s not a magical curse. It’s possible that your acquaintance has a condition like that and calls it a blood curse as a colloquialism when she really means it’s a genetic condition that can be passed down. But Draco’s is a true blood curse. They are all fast-acting, and they affect the patient’s bloodstream. They can be fatal if they aren’t treated quickly.”

“But his...”

“Won’t be fatal. Just give me a moment,” she said as she poured out the dragon’s blood from her private stores and stirred her potion. To her relief, Narcissa fell silent until fifteen minutes later the potion was done, and Hermione scooped some of it in a cup for him to drink.

“Alright, I’ll wake him up. He’s going to be in a lot of pain, but he needs to take this potion before I can give him any pain relief.”

Narcissa looked worried, but she nodded as Hermione moved to Draco and pointed her wand to him. “*Ennervate*,” she whispered, and a moment later he groaned.

His eyelids fluttered open, and a moment later his gray eyes found hers. “Hermione...” he rasped.

“Shhh. Take this,” she said, and to her relief he didn’t question it but opened his mouth, and she poured it down his throat.

He grimaced at the taste and then winced. “What happened? Why are you dressed like that? Are we in St. Mungo’s?”

“You touched the cursed barrier, and it started a blood curse in your left hand, which made its way up your arm before I was able to halt it. You also cracked a couple ribs and your jaw, and you dislocated your shoulder and got a concussion.”

“Fuck,” he muttered.

“Quite.”

“And what? You healed me?”

“Well yes. I am a healer. And a doctor, actually.”

Only now did he seem to take in her green robes. “You’re a cursebreaker.”

“I’m a healer who specialized in cursebreaking,” she said. “I work for the Ministry, but I have healing privileges at St. Mungo’s too, and they call me in for special cases like yours.”

“Great Salazar,” he muttered, as he stared at her in amazement. Then he looked around and saw Narcissa.

“Mother?”

“Draco Lucius Malfoy, don’t you ever frighten me like that again!” she said, and Draco winced a bit at the sound of her voice.

“Look,” Hermione interjected quickly. “You’re bound to be in a lot of pain.”

He nodded gingerly.

“Let me give you a pain potion, and you need to stay here and rest for at least twenty-four hours. The first potion I gave you will break down the curse so you can secrete it, but you need to be monitored.”

He sighed and sank back, but just nodded again.

“Alright, here you are,” she said, as she handed him the potion. “Fair warning, it’s going to make you high as a kite. Neither of us will hold you responsible for anything you say while under the influence.”

She smiled at him a little, but he just looked at it nervously. “Alright,” he said slowly. “But I expect you to keep your word about that.”

“Don’t worry,” she said lightly. “I’m expecting a marriage proposal at minimum. Virtually the entire auror department has proposed to me while on this potion, and it would be a bit disappointing if you were the odd man out.”

He shot her a look. “You’re not serious?”

“I’m entirely serious. Harry’s done it so many times I’ve memorized it. His always starts out, ‘Hermione, we’ve been together forever. Through thick and through thin, through war and through love...’ and then it deviates a bit from there. I’ve never told Ginny of course.”

“Merlin help me,” he muttered. But he was smiling a bit now and didn’t object further as he took the potion and drank it. A few moments later his muscles relaxed, and he got a slow, lazy smile on his face as he looked at her.

“There she is,” he said with satisfaction. “My beautiful little swot.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow and looked at Narcissa’s amazed face. “I’ll admit, that’s a new one.”

“You’re sure he doesn’t mean it?” she said curiously.

Hermione shook her head. “No. It shares some of the same ingredients as amortentia. The patient is temporarily attracted to the person who dosed them. I don’t love to use it, but when you’re talking about that many broken bones it’s really the best thing for pain. This side effect won’t last that long. It wears off after an hour or so.”

“I do mean it,” interjected Draco. “You’re a vision in lime green, angel.”

“See?” muttered Hermione. “Pansy says lime green makes me look sickly. Now you know it’s just the potion talking.”

Narcissa’s lip twitched at this. “Well I suppose if it wears off soon there’s no great harm in it. He clearly feels much better, and Merlin knows I could use a laugh after the fright he gave me.”

“Mother,” said Draco suddenly.

“Yes dear?”

“I have a name for your list. The whole list should be Hermione Granger. Just her and nobody else.”

Hermione didn’t know what Draco meant by a list, but she exchanged a look with Narcissa and rolled her eyes.

“Alright dear, I’ll make a note of it,” said Narcissa, giving a conspiratorial wink at Hermione who smiled to herself.

“Hermione, my sweet,” he said, now looking at her with sincere eyes.

“Hmmm?” she said, trying to ignore the warmth in her stomach.

“When are you going to kiss me again? I’ve been waiting so long, angel.”

Hermione grimaced and refused to make eye contact with Narcissa.

“I don’t know what you mean, Draco,” she said quietly. “I’ve never kissed you.”

“You have! Surely you remember. That night when –”

“I’m sorry Draco, but I don’t think we’ve ever kissed. Why don’t you rest now? It’s very late.”

She had to get out of here and think. And she needed to get Narcissa out before Draco said something else ridiculously embarrassing, even if it was all untrue.

“I’m going to go rest. I’ll be back to check on him in the morning. You should get some rest too. The night staff will monitor him.”

Narcissa nodded and rose before heading to Draco and giving him a peck on the cheek. “I’ll be back first thing in the morning dear, and we’re going to have a nice long chat.”

Draco said nothing. He was staring at Hermione with a mixture of longing and heartbreak.

“I’ll see you in the morning too, Draco. You should be feeling much better by then.”

“Please angel, stay with me. Don’t run away from me again.”

Hermione’s heart squeezed at this, but she knew it was just the drugs. He would be mortified by this tomorrow, and she needed to end this before he said anything else.

“I’m afraid my cat is expecting me,” she said kindly. “But I’ll be back first thing in the morning, don’t you worry about that.”

“Is it because you don’t like ‘angel?’ I can call you ‘princess’ instead.”

Hermione gave him a small smile. “Draco, I have to go. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“But –”

She forced herself to ignore the pleading look on his face as she turned and marched out of the room. She leaned against the wall and closed her eyes as she sighed. A moment later she heard the door open and Narcissa exited. Hermione straightened up.

“Like I said, he’s high as a kite,” she said quickly, trying to get out in front of it.

Narcissa studied her for a moment. “Did something happen between you and Draco?”

Hermione just grimaced. “No. We’re just friends. Now then, I really must be going. I just need a few hours, and then I’ll be back to check on him.”

Narcissa nodded, but said nothing else as Hermione slipped away. She had the most curious expression on her face.

As Hermione strode to the floo to head back to her flat, she forced it out of her mind. He was high. He didn’t mean any of it.

A List of One

Chapter 12: A List of One

AN: Let's get Narcissa's thoughts, shall we?

Draco

Draco woke up to the smell of coffee and his mother's voice chatting with somebody who sounded like Nonnie, her elf. Draco started to stir, but then stilled, giving himself some time to think about the previous night before she ambushed him.

Unfortunately, he remembered every mortifying thing he had said to Hermione. Despite her insistence that it was just the potion talking, Draco actually meant all of it. But his filter and inhibitions had totally evaporated, and he just started spewing dark secrets in front of his mother of all people.

When Hermione walked out of the room, she had nearly broken his heart. But now that he was outside of the potion's grip, Draco was grateful for it. He wasn't sure if he had tipped his hand when he insisted that they had kissed before, but she seemed to dismiss it as a side effect of the potion. Draco decided he would assume that was the case until he discovered evidence to the contrary.

His mother, however, would be a different matter. He had certainly shown far too much in front of her, and Draco knew he was about to be in for it.

He stirred, and immediately he heard the light clank of a spoon being placed on a saucer.

“Draco!” said Narcissa. “You’re awake!”

Draco opened his eyes and nodded as he sat up.

“How are you feeling dear?”

“Better,” he said. “Where’s Hermione? I thought she was going to be here this morning.”

His mother gave him a sharp look. “She’s already been by to check on you. She said she would be back around lunch. She returned to the Manor to finish breaking that horrible curse that caught you and —”

“She’s doing *what?*” said Draco in disbelief as he started to pull the hospital sheets off of him so he could stand up.

“Draco!” said his mother. “Lie down! You’re supposed to be resting!”

“She’s going to get herself killed!” he said. “I can’t believe you let her do that!”

“Stop it right now!” said his mother, so sharply that Draco instinctively halted.

“Now then,” she said in a calmer voice. “Lie down, and I will tell you what I know.”

Draco looked at her suspiciously, but at her fierce stare he slowly laid back down.

“Tell me, then. Why is she back at the Manor this morning?”

“She said she’s pretty sure she’s seen the curse before. She knew what to do with it. She thought it might take a couple hours to break it and examine whatever objects your father hid in that tree. I cannot *believe* he used the observatory.”

Draco breathed a sigh of relief. If she had seen it before it wouldn't be as dangerous.

"Technically it was the woods right around the observatory."

"But still. That was *my* wedding gift," she sniffed. "I thought I might start using it again now that he's gone."

Draco inclined his head. "You should. It doesn't do anybody any use just sitting there."

Narcissa raised an eyebrow. "Speaking of which, it begs the question of what *you* were doing there late last night with Miss Granger?"

Draco forced his face to remain impassive. "I floo'd back to the Manor and discovered she was doing some research in the Library. I thought it would be a good night to check it out. And I was right, wasn't I?"

Narcissa gave him a long look, but he refused to break her gaze. Finally, to his surprise, she let it go.

"Very well. Now then, I must ask: do you have any names to add to my list other than Miss Granger's?"

Draco blinked and thought about objecting to the list again, but then decided there was no point. He only wanted one name on the fucking list, and Salazar knew his mother would never give it up.

"No," he said.

"Very well," said Narcissa. "Then you should know that I have started vetting Miss Granger, and I doubt we will do much better than her. However, I will need to take tea with her a few times to be certain about it. In the interest of time, it would really be best to make her fall in love with you. Gryffindors always seem to care about that sort of thing."

Draco just gaped, as he struggled to think of something to say. He finally landed on, "I'm pleased you like her so much. But can you tell me why?"

His mother looked at him like he was dense. "I would think it's obvious. For one thing she's far more intelligent than any other witch I've interviewed. She told me she received eleven O.W.L.s and eleven N.E.W.T.s. She received outstandings across the board, except for a single exceeds expectations in her Defense O.W.L. She received top marks in her healer training too of course, and she graduated from muggle medical school last May. She's obviously quite bright and magically powerful, and these are qualities you will want to breed into your children."

Draco listened in amazement at the list of accomplishments his mother just rattled off. None of them alone were that surprising given who she was, but it was still a remarkable list for somebody who wasn't quite twenty-five. Draco wondered if his mother had actually asked her for a resume while he was asleep.

"She's also well connected. You are very well-connected too, but Miss Granger is connected to influential people outside of your circle. I was asking around and apparently she trained as a curse-breaker while training as a healer. She's one of only a few witches or wizards in the world who can curse-break on both people and objects. I had no idea there was a distinction, but according to the night healer on duty, she's the only one in England trained that way. Minister Shacklebolt created the position at the Ministry just for her, and they send her out with the aurors to curse-break for them and stabilize them in the field when they get injured because she's a talented trauma healer too. She has a flexible contract with St. Mungo's, and she works here exclusively as a specialist, though she spends a great deal of time volunteering in their low-income clinic. She reports directly to Hestia Jones at the Ministry, and she's practically a department unto herself. Rumor has it Shacklebolt loves her so much he would do almost anything for her. Can you imagine? That is

the type of influence your father always wished he had. She could ask anything of anybody at the Ministry.”

Draco blinked. He knew she was well-connected, but he had never asked her very much about her job outside of the project at the Manor. He didn't love the idea of Hermione on auror raids, but it sounded like she stayed back to help the wounded. Compared to the things Draco did all day — which consisted entirely of meetings about his family's fortune — Hermione was practically saving the damn world.

“Further,” continued Narcissa, “she is obviously willing to hold a demanding job outside of the home, which is not common among the witches of your acquaintance. I get the impression that she loves her job, and she would not be tempted to quit once she's married and financially secure. It strikes me that the Malfoys may need to modernize to stay relevant, and she would bring our family into the modern age.”

Fucking hell, Mother is talking about the modern age?

Draco pinched himself to see if he was dreaming. Surprisingly, he was awake. He said nothing as his mother continued to speak.

“She also has a ruthlessness about her that I find compelling. She strikes me as somebody who would do almost anything for the people who earn her loyalty. You will want that quality in a spouse. She needs to be willing to protect you, your children, and your secrets at all costs. The thing she did to her parents was truly shocking, but it tells me she will go to the ends of the earth for those who are hers. Mr. Potter is another excellent example of that of course.”

This drew Draco's attention.

“What did she do to her parents?”

Narcissa looked surprised. “She hasn't told you?”

“I know she sent them into hiding during the war, but that’s all.”

Narcissa weighed this. “If she hasn’t told you then I won’t either.”

“Mother!” he said in shock.

“I’m serious Draco. The thing she did protected them, but it shattered her heart. I won’t betray her confidence.”

Draco just shook his head in amazement. He remembered the devastated look on Jeanine’s face that night. It had been the thing that initially drew him to her. But how on earth could his mother get details like that out of her in less than twenty-four hours when Draco had been seeing her regularly for two months?

“And finally, she’s rather pretty, and her manners are good enough to be going with, though some time with an etiquette and deportment tutor would not go amiss. She stirs her tea the wrong way.”

Draco realized his mouth was hanging open now. He had about a thousand questions running through his mind.

“You don’t mind she’s muggleborn?” he finally asked.

Narcissa raised an eyebrow. “I’ll admit it would be easier if she were a pureblood, but no woman is perfect. However, what she lacks in blood she makes up for in intelligence. I’m sure she will be able to learn our ways and traditions quickly enough. Besides, I said I’m interested in modernization. The Malfoys would appear to be very modern indeed if you look outside the normal pureblood circles for a match. The old ways began dying the moment Harry Potter defeated the Dark Lord, and we can’t afford to fall behind.”

Draco couldn’t believe he was having this conversation.

“So you want me to...”

“Make her fall in love with you while I continue to evaluate her. If I determine she is suitable, we want there to be no delay to begin

courting. You are already woefully behind where you ought to be, and now that your father is gone the matter has become urgent.”

Draco rubbed the back of his neck uncomfortably.

“Wouldn’t it be more modern if we didn’t worry about courting at all, and I just dated her until we decided to get married or not?”

His mother looked at him askance. “I said I want to be modern, not barbaric. There’s no reason to dispense with our traditions, Draco. We will be quite modern enough if the Malfoys turn half-blood in the next generation.”

Draco struggled not to roll his eyes, but he made himself really think about it. Theo had suggested the very same thing, but said Draco should put his own spin on it. Draco knew he would get a pass to be a little different. His position ensured it, and some of those differences were a family tradition anyway. He could court her, but his mother’s point about love made him pause. It was a dragon or egg problem: which came first, courting or love?

He knew for most purebloods the answer was courting. That was surely why Theo suggested it. But his mother seemed to think love would have to come first in Hermione’s case.

“And how am I supposed to make her fall in love with me?” he finally asked.

“How should I know? My match with your father was strategic, and my fondness for him developed after he began courting me. But I’m sure Miss Granger will be the type who will want that sort of romantic nonsense arranged in advance. Gryffindors always do. Figure it out, Draco, and don’t delay. We can’t afford to waste any time with it.”

Fucking hell.

Draco didn’t know if he should be thrilled or frustrated. Her support of Hermione was entirely unexpected, and he was pleased he wouldn’t

have to convince her. But she made the whole experience sound so *transactional*. It reminded him of his relationship with Astoria: boring, predictable, and simply the fulfillment of duty. But Hermione wasn't like that, and Draco didn't want her to be. Hermione would never go along with all of the stuffy traditions of formal courting. But again, Draco didn't want her to. He wanted to use Theo's idea and make it his, make it hers, make it theirs.

Draco realized his mother was right, but not for the reasons she believed. Hermione had to fall in love with him, but it wasn't so Draco could fulfill pureblood traditions and formally court her. No, Hermione had to fall in love or she would never really be Draco's. And sex wasn't enough for him anymore.

"*Draco*," his mother insisted, and Draco snapped out of it.

"Fine. Yes. I'll do my best to make her fall in love with me," he said. "Her birthday is coming up soon."

"That's a good opportunity, but you need to work faster than that Draco. Time is of the essence, and if she doesn't suit then we will need to keep looking."

Draco had no intention of looking for anybody else. Some part of him had been discontented with his choice of partners — whether romantic or just sexual — for the last seven years. Now that he had found her, he knew he wouldn't be satisfied until he had her.

Draco exhaled. He had to make Hermione Granger fall in love with him.

Fuck.

Hermione did return a couple of hours later, and by the time she arrived Draco was going spare. He loved his mother, he truly did, but those one hundred and twenty-seven rooms in Malfoy Manor usually

gave them plenty of space from each other. The private room at St. Mungo's wasn't nearly large enough.

She was just discussing the fabric samples she had ordered for the curtains at the Dower House when Hermione walked in, green robes open and billowing around jeans and a T-shirt. Draco couldn't help but grin at the sight of her. These jeans were also tantalizingly tight, and the T-shirt was refreshingly casual with a deep V-neck. She had stopped wearing T-shirts around the Manor, and Draco was pleased to see her in one again. She looked more like herself this way. Her curls were pulled back into a high ponytail on top of her head, and she was wearing sneakers. Three trainee healers followed in behind her, two witches and a tall brunette wizard who was trying to peer down her shirt.

Draco immediately decided he didn't like him.

"You're awake!" she said.

Draco gave her a look that clearly said, *save me please*, and Hermione laughed a little.

"Tell me, how much do you remember?"

"All of it, unfortunately."

She smiled a little as she flicked her wand and checked his vitals.

"Trainee Healer Burns, please report."

The brunette wizard stepped forward and said, "Draco Malfoy, male, aged twenty-four, presented last night with a fast acting blood curse. Healer Granger reported that she was with him when he touched a cursed barrier, which threw him fifteen feet into the air, before hitting the side of a building and then a stone patio. He had several cracked ribs, a broken jaw, a concussion, and a dislocated shoulder along with the blood curse. She healed his injuries on site and halted the progression of the curse before bringing him here for further treatment. He took an experimental potion last night to break down

the curse, along with a high threshold pain potion for his other injuries. His stats suggest that the blood curse has been seventy percent metabolized.”

She nodded.

“An experimental potion?” Draco asked curiously.

She shrugged. “I invented it. It’s technically in clinical trials and will be for a long time. We don’t see that many blood curses. But the data we do have has been uniformly positive, and it’s the only complete treatment. Your mother agreed to it last night as your healthcare proxy.”

He nodded. He had no issues taking an experimental potion she had developed, but he was intrigued. It had always been his favorite subject in school.

“Healer Granger,” asked one of the women. “What was in the potion?”

She started listing off ingredients, and Draco listened closely. When she mentioned dragon’s blood, the trainee healer said, “But St. Mungo’s doesn’t stock that.”

“No,” she said. “I stock it myself.”

“Where do you get it?” she asked. “The apothecaries never have it.”

Hermione raised an eyebrow. “I have a friend who works on a dragon reserve. He keeps me well-stocked with dragon’s blood. It has twelve uses, you know. Well, thirteen once I get around to publishing my findings.”

The trainees all gaped at her, and Draco couldn’t help but grin.

“Alright,” she said. “I’m going to do a physical exam of our patient here. Draco, these trainees are all on their curse-breaking rotation.

Do you mind if I explain some of the other curse scars they will see? It's entirely up to you."

He cocked his head at her, and she met his eyes. "No, I don't mind."

"Thank you."

Then she turned to the others. "I'm going to check his ribs, jaw, and shoulder first, but then we'll discuss curses, yes?"

They all nodded and watched as Draco's hospital gown fell forward, revealing his chest to them. He watched Hermione's face, and he saw she turned a bit pink as she sat on the edge of his bed and began pressing her hands gently against his ribcage. He started to get goosebumps and shuddered a bit.

"How does that feel?" she asked quietly.

"Fan-fucking-tastic," he said.

She gave him a wry look. "I'm serious," she whispered.

"So am I, angel," he whispered back. "Or is it princess now?"

A smile flashed across her face. "You tell me. Am I a minor deity or royalty?"

"You're better than both," he said.

She blushed prettily at this before saying in a normal voice, "Lean forward."

He did, and as she moved toward him to check his shoulder he glanced down and got an incredible view down her shirt. He hated Trainee Healer Burns more than ever.

She pushed him back gently and then her hands were on his face, gently checking his jaw. "I corrected his overbite when I healed it,"

she told the others. "That's always something to consider when your patient gives you the opportunity."

Draco looked at her in consternation. "I did not have an overbite!"

"You did," she said calmly. "I've wanted to fix it for years, and you finally gave me my chance."

She released him and said, "You're healing well, but you have quite a bit of bruising. Use this, it's a miracle product."

She pulled out a jar of something and handed it to him.

"Healer Granger," said one of the trainees. "That's not one of the approved bruise pastes in our stores."

Draco got the impression that Hermione wanted to roll her eyes. "Bruise paste can be found over the counter. This product is the best one on the market, and I've told our buyers for years they should stock it. They won't do it because they're cheap."

"I think I need you to put it on for me, princess," said Draco in a perfectly normal voice that made Trainee Healer Burns scowl. His mother just raised her eyebrows. "I'm still pretty sore."

She glanced around and saw their expressions. "Residual effects from his pain potion, no doubt," she said lightly, as she shot him a warning look.

He grinned unapologetically, and to his delight she opened the jar and began rubbing the product into his bruises. "You're very good at that," he whispered.

"And you're incorrigible," she hissed, though Draco couldn't help but notice her hands were lingering on his chest just a bit.

Finally she was done and had no further excuse for public touching.

“Now to discuss some curses,” she said, as she called the trainee healers closer.

She pulled his left arm forward, though his forearm was facing down. “Here you can see the remnants of the blood curse,” she said, pointing to the lavender streaks running up his arm. “Last night it was a deep purple. As the potion helps his body metabolize the curse, his kidneys are filtering it out of his blood stream. It takes about twenty-four hours, and we’ll know it’s done when his skin is back to normal. He received treatment quickly enough that it shouldn’t scar.”

“Wait, am I literally pissing this curse out of me?”

Narcissa made an offended sound in the corner of the room while Hermione cracked a grin. “Yes Draco, that’s exactly what you’re doing. The potion I invented breaks it down and binds it to the water and salt that your kidneys filter out of your blood anyway.”

“Gods you’re fucking brilliant,” he said.

She rolled her eyes at him, but he thought she looked pleased.

“Now then,” she said, as she looked at the trainees, “Draco is being very generous by allowing you to see some of his other scars. There are very few people who have been on the wrong end of this many curses and survived. Please pay attention.”

Draco felt the mood in the room suddenly shift, but his vision seemed to narrow as he stared at Hermione. First she pointed to some burn scars on his right bicep. “These are from fiendfyre, which is cured fire. It was cast by Vincent Crabbe during the Battle of Hogwarts. Burns like this indicate that the victim was within fifteen feet of it. The fire is so hot it can burn from a distance.”

Next she pointed to a purple scar that circled Draco’s right wrist. “This is from a crushing curse. This specific curse was invented by Antonin Dolohov and crushes the victim’s bones. Based on the coloring and the source, I would say it was cast sometime between

1997 and May 1998. His wrist healed well, which tells me he saw a healer quickly. The wrist is delicate, especially when it's the victim's wand hand, as in Draco's case."

Draco was spellbound as he watched her trace it thoughtfully.

"This one," she said, pointing to some claw marks near his hips, "are scars from a werewolf who was not transformed at the time. Based on the history of known scars like this, I would say the werewolf was Fenrir Grayback. If the werewolf isn't transformed it doesn't pass the full curse on to its victim, but the victim does usually feel mood swings around the full moon, and he often develops a preference for very rare meat."

Draco blinked. He had no idea that his encounter with Grayback was responsible for his sudden liking for rare steaks and mood swings. He had never put it together.

"Again, these look old," she added, "probably from the second war."

"Easter Sunday 1998," he said quietly. "He... wasn't thrilled you escaped."

She stared at him, and they exchanged knowing looks.

"These," she said, pointing to a web of white scars around his shoulders, "are from a cursed knife. I assume the owner was Bellatrix Lestrange, and if I had to guess, I would say it was also around Easter Sunday 1998."

Draco stared at her and nodded slowly. She was exactly right. Bellatrix turned her knife on Draco after Hermione and the others escaped. Then Grayback took his turn once Bellatrix was done.

"I'll add that her knife was the first dark object I ever decommissioned." Now Draco looked at her in amazement. "Or rather, it was the first one that wasn't classified." Then she gave a

small smile at the memory. "It was bloody satisfying too, I'll tell you that much."

Finally, she traced his *sectumsempra* scar. "This is from a rare curse known as *sectumsempra*. It causes the victim to be cut open and experience sudden and severe blood loss. It was invented by Severus Snape during the first war and was a favorite of some of the Death Eaters. This particular example was cast by Harry Potter on the fifth of May, 1997. Severus saved his life. It requires a very fast reversal before the victim bleeds out and dies."

"How on earth do you remember the date?" he asked softly.

She gave him a hard stare. "Because I nearly took a leaf out of Voldemort's book and murdered Harry myself when I heard about it."

The trainee healers were looking at both of them with slightly intimidated expressions on their faces. Draco was steeling himself for the last scar, when to his surprise she said, "And that's all there is to see. Please go check on the next patient, and I'll be there shortly."

The trainees murmured their thanks and then shuffled out. Only now could Draco see Narcissa again, and he saw she had tears in her eyes. He gave her an encouraging smile. He was surprisingly OK with letting Hermione show off his scars. She was clinical, but respectful. There was no judgment in it. And she was right, he was a survivor. But he did have one question.

"Why didn't you show them the last one?" he asked.

She gave him a serious look. "Because they're young and wouldn't have understood it. There's no need to resurrect stories about you for the sake of educating some trainee healers. Besides, the Dark Mark is irrelevant now. The caster is dead, and the magic is broken."

He realized she was protecting him again. His heart swelled a bit, and he shot a glance at his mother to see if she realized this too. Based on the expression on her face, he was sure she did.

She started to stand, and he caught her hand. “Wait, I have to ask – did you break the barrier?”

“Oh!” she said, her expression lightening. “I almost forgot! Yes, I did break it. I found four poisons, and one cursed ring. The curse on the ring is a new one for me, so I’m going to work on it in my safe room at the Ministry. It should keep any explosions to a minimum.”

“Fucking hell...” he muttered, and she just grinned.

“Don’t worry, it will be fun. Kingsley had it build just for me in the Department of Mysteries. He calls it ‘Hermione’s Playground.’ There’s a viewing gallery and everything. He likes to watch when he can. Harry usually comes too.”

Involuntarily, he felt himself start to harden.

You would be front and center of Draco’s playground...

“Can I come watch too, princess?”

She gave him an amused smile. “I don’t see why not seeing as how the ring is yours, but it may take me a few days to crack it. I can let you know when I think I’m reaching the finale if you want.”

“I do want that, very much.”

“Alright,” she said. “We can do that then. In any event, I’d like to finish it before I look for anything else. Now that we’ve found one cache, the Ministry will know you aren’t hiding anything. They will be very pleased.”

He nodded. “Sure. And come by the Manor whenever. You don’t need to give us any warning.”

She smiled. “I will. Keep using that bruise paste, OK? I’ll come back later this evening to check on your blood curse. With any luck we’ll be able to discharge you tonight, though it might be in the morning.”

He nodded. "And the last thing," he said quietly so his mother couldn't hear. "Theo and I need to meet with you and Harry about something. Privately."

She furrowed her brow. "You can't say —"

He just shook his head. "Alright," she said slowly. "I'm sure we can meet some evening this week. Maybe my place? It's nothing like Theo's or yours, but it's private and large enough for four people and..." she trailed off and blushed.

"Yes," said Draco eagerly. He had been dying to see Hermione's flat. Pansy went on about how charming it was, and Draco was incredibly curious.

She gave him a shy smile. "I'll be in touch then."

She pulled away and bid his mother farewell. "I'll be back in a few hours." Then she slipped away, and Draco stared at the empty door behind her.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by his mother's voice.

"If you aren't already aware, the only reason Hermione Granger is single is because she's been furthering her education and building her career since graduating from Hogwarts. But she's established now, and the moment she decides she wants a man, the wizards will be lining up for her. You need to work quickly, Draco. I expect you to be first in line."

Draco felt an unpleasant lurch, but he nodded. He knew his mother was right. And now that Hermione was ready for companionship, the clock was ticking.

The Ring

Chapter 13: The Ring

AN: I just love a BAMF Hermione. Draco thinks it's hot too.

Hermione

Hermione sent Draco home that evening after another round of bruise paste that he insisted he needed help with. It was unexpectedly sexy rubbing it into his chest, which was more sculpted than Hermione had ever imagined before that weekend.

Why did he have to be so bloody hot? Especially with all of those scars?

Her scars had always marred her appearance. It took some time for her to accept what they had done to her body, but eventually she knew she had no choice. They were what they were, and there was nothing she could do about it. On *him* though... they made him look practically dangerous. It turned her on in ways that really shouldn't be allowed.

Some part of her knew that she shouldn't have treated him after she got him to St. Mungo's and dosed him with her potion. It was usually against medical ethics to treat family members and close friends when other healers were equipped to help. But Hermione couldn't resist. She had always broken that rule for Harry, but he had a medical waiver on file at both the Ministry and St. Mungo's that explicitly permitted it. They had gone through the St. Mungo's ethics board for it, and they ultimately granted the waiver due to Harry's medical history and job and Hermione's specialties. Now she had

broken that rule for Draco too, but for very different reasons and without any kind of ethical review beforehand.

Hermione knew she needed a little space from Draco to think about everything and process the events from the previous weekend. That was the real reason she decided to finish breaking the curse on the ring before returning to the Manor. Decommissioning dark objects had always given her plenty of time to think, and it was blissfully private in the bowels of the Department of Mysteries. Even the unspeakables weren't allowed into her lab.

Draco Malfoy was handsome, he was wealthy, he was kind, he was funny. He was moody in ways that drew her in, and she had been thinking about him on and off since they reconnected. Pansy insisted he was into her, and Hermione didn't really believe it until the previous weekend. Something about their confessional on Theo's window seat, followed by the trip to the observatory, and then healing him after the accident finally opened her eyes to it. When she caught him staring at her the previous weeks, he usually looked like he was working out some puzzle. But ever since that night on Theo's window seat something had shifted, and he no longer looked at her with any confusion on his face.

There was no question she had a crush on him, but contemplating something more than that intimidated her more than she cared to admit. He had responsibilities, duties, burdens that she could scarcely imagine, though she was getting a taste of it through her work at the Manor. If he actually liked her – and it wasn't just for sex – was she prepared for all of *that*? Hermione was famous enough in her own right. She didn't particularly want or need any more attention, and it was a major reason she had shied away from dating seriously after she and Ron broke up. A date or two could fly under the radar of the media. A relationship, however, would be smeared across the front pages of *The Sunday Prophet* for weeks. And a relationship with somebody like Draco Malfoy would probably make Rita Skeeter's entire collection of Quick-Quotes Quills explode with excitement.

Yes, she had quite a bit to think about, and spending a few days tinkering with this ring was just the ticket to clear her head.

It was old and surprisingly beautiful, with a well-cut diamond center and an intricate pattern of filigree and smaller diamonds surrounding it. The curse on it, however, made Hermione feel so cold it was like facing a dementor every time she approached it. It was odd, and she spent more time than she cared to admit browsing her collection of dark arts books to see if she could find any description that fit that feeling.

It took several days, but she finally narrowed it down to a few curses, all of which were very obscure and dangerous to break. Hermione was prepared for the challenge though, and she sent owls to Draco, Harry, and Kingsley to let them know she would be attempting to break the curse on the ring that Friday if they wanted to come watch.

Now, however, it was time to face Draco again. She had given herself nearly four days off, and they were due to meet that night with Harry and Theo to discuss whatever it was that Draco and Theo wanted to talk about. She took a deep breath as she looked around her flat. It was cheerful, welcoming, and she had pulled out the firewhiskey that she knew the boys all favored.

Her few days away from him had put her in a better headspace to meet with Draco. She finally admitted that she liked him, and if he made it clear he wanted to date her she would give him a chance. But she was still a little guarded. There was a lot she still needed to unpack, not to mention the fact that his father's estate was her main project at the Ministry right now.

Still, this decision settled something inside of her and made her excited to see him tonight, though a bit nervous too. Her flat and Hermione's Playground were the two places that really reflected *her*. Only a few people had ever seen them, and it made her feel oddly vulnerable anytime somebody new visited either one. Her flat was filled with color and texture and things she had collected from her childhood and trips curse breaking around England. It was filled with

far more personal things than she had seen at Malfoy Manor or even Theo's house. And in many respects it was far more low-brow. The flat was the top floor of an old Georgian townhouse, and though it was in a posh part of London it had a few cracks in the plaster, and the antique wood floors squeaked violently in several places. The windows were old and leaked in the winter, and the pipes groaned every time the plumbing was activated. It was a far cry from the classical proportions and truly lush finishes of the Manor or Theo's house. That was true even after the Manor decided that Draco needed portraits of unicorns and house elves, rather than dead ancestors on its walls.

In short, it felt like she was taking a rather big step tonight to let Theo and Draco see her flat. But she reassured herself that Pansy had liked it, despite its flaws. Theo surely would too, and Draco... well, Draco was the ponciest of all of them, but there wasn't anything she could do about that. She didn't command an ancient family fortune like he did.

She was pulled out of her thoughts by the floo turning green, and a few moments later Theo came through the fireplace, with Draco following on his heels.

"Darling!" said Theo, looking around in delight. "Oh this is lovely."

She smiled, relief washing over her. "Come on in, I have firewhiskey."

"You've said the magic words," he said.

Draco said nothing at first, but she watched him walk in slowly and look around with a small smile on his face. He approached one of her paintings, which was an explosion of reds, yellows, and purples. It was fairly abstract, but there was the bare outline of a chalice that could be seen if you knew what you were looking for.

"Where did you get this?" he asked curiously.

She shrugged. "Luna painted it."

Both Theo and Draco turned to look at her in surprise.

"Luna paints?" asked Theo curiously.

She nodded. "Yes. You know she works at *The Quibbler* but she paints too, and she's sold a few pieces. She painted that for me after the war."

"I like it," said Draco quietly. "What is it called?"

Hermione smiled a bit. "*Helga's Sacrifice*."

They looked at her in confusion, and she said, "It's classified."

"Does Luna know?"

"Hmmm, she knows enough," twinkled Hermione.

"Why does she know and not us?" asked Theo with consternation.

Hermione shrugged. "Luna's always had a way of knowing things."

"Well can you tell us any of it?" asked Draco.

Hermione smiled and shook her head. "Take it up with Kingsley. If he'll give you the clearance for it, I'll tell you everything."

She got the impression that Theo and Draco both took her words as a challenge, and she smiled to herself a bit. But then she was pulled out of her thoughts as the floo turned green, and Harry stepped out.

"Harry," she said, grinning broadly, as she walked over to give him a big hug and peck on the cheek.

"Hey!" said Theo.

"What?" asked Hermione, turning back around.

“Why did you kiss him and not me? We’re supposed to be besties!” To Hermione’s slight disbelief, he was actually pouting.

“Oh *honestly*,” she said, rolling her eyes, but she couldn’t help but smile a little. She walked over and pecked him on the cheek too. As she pulled away she saw Draco giving her an expectant look. “Not you too?”

“Pucker up, princess,” was all he said, with a smirk.

Hermione felt herself flush, but she forced herself to roll her eyes. She leaned in and brushed her lips against his cheek as well. It didn’t come as any great surprise to her that this one felt different than the others. His scent made her slightly lightheaded, and Hermione thought her lips might be burning a little as she pulled away. She had to take a minute to clear her head, and she saw that he was doing the same thing.

She turned to find Harry staring at her a bit curiously, but to her relief he didn’t press her about it. “Alright. Why don’t you three tell me why we’re all here.”

Hermione looked questioningly at the boys. To her surprise it was Draco who spoke.

“There’s something fishy happening at the Ministry,” he said.

Harry’s eyes widened a bit, but he gestured for Draco to go on.

“A couple months ago Theo came to me and told me he saw something odd at work. It was just before he took that assignment with Hermione, and he spent that month in the tent thinking about what he should do.”

Theo jumped in. “I went to Draco first because I saw some statements of accounts on Alan Estes’s desk. You know he’s the head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures and my boss. The numbers I saw were way out of line

with the public budget for the Department. There was also a list of spells next to it.”

“Spells?” asked Hermione curiously.

Theo nodded. “Curses. All kinds of curses. Some I recognized, some I didn’t.”

Hermione and Harry were listening intently now.

“That’s all I saw before Estes himself came back in the office, and I had to feign ignorance. I didn’t even have a chance to copy everything, so that’s why I went to Draco.”

“Pardon?” asked Harry, nonplussed.

Draco shrugged and picked up the story. “I’m a moderately proficient legilimens. I watched Theo’s memory of it and agreed it looked suspicious. I’ve done some research in the Library, and every single spell on his list that we’ve been able to identify is dark, but I haven’t found all of them. A few are truly obscure. And the money... well it looks like somebody is skimming funds from external accounts and depositing them directly with the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.”

“That’s impossible,” said Harry.

Theo shook his head. “No, it could be possible for Department Heads.”

Hermione nodded slowly. “They’re right, Harry. Department Heads have their own budgets and access to the accounts. They also finalize their financial reports before sending them up the chain.”

“So he could be laundering money through the Department’s account, and nobody would know,” said Harry slowly. “He controls the reports, and nobody would ever dream that somebody was using a governmental account for laundering.”

“Yes,” said Theo. “The report I saw indicated that money was coming in from external sources and staying in the Department’s slush fund. It wasn’t coming from the annual budget allocation like usual. The money could certainly have been removed by now too, but I’m not certain.”

“And the other thing,” added Draco, “is that Theo’s memory of that statement shows the first four digits of the account numbers from the source of funds. And *all* of those accounts belong to Blaise’s firm.”

Hermione and Harry’s eyes widened.

“You’re certain?” asked Harry.

“I’m positive,” said Draco. “I’ve been thinking of moving my own money there, and Blaise told me the identifying digits the last time I talked to him about it. All wizarding financial firms give their clients account numbers that start with the same four digits as a way to let Gringotts know that a client account belongs to a specific firm when they are settling funds on the back end.”

Hermione had never heard about this, but she could see why it would be done this way. She saw Theo and Harry nodding in agreement. Evidently they were aware of it.

“So money was being moved from Blaise’s firm to the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures,” said Harry slowly. “Theo saw the report and also a list of dark spells, not all of which you have been able to identify.”

“Right,” said Theo. “And I’ve wanted to report it, but I have no real proof that anything illegal is going on. It’s just fishy as hell. That’s one reason I told Hestia Jones that I would only accept that mad assignment with the manticore if Hermione was also assigned to curse break for me. I thought we would work well together, but I also hoped we would become friendly enough for an extracurricular project if I couldn’t find more proof after coming home. Bonus points

if she and Draco didn't kill each other while we worked on it." He rolled his eyes as he said this last bit.

Hermione's eyes widened, and she saw Harry's did too.

"And darling, I am *thrilled* that we have found each other, and all is right in the world now," he said, turning to her with a wink. "I admit it's been a lovely byproduct of all my scheming that I wasn't expecting. I was really just after cordial tolerance so you and maybe Harry would be willing to work with us on it, but as usual you exceeded expectations."

Hermione gave Theo a slightly exasperated smile before looking thoughtful again.

"So you want me to do a deeper dive on these obscure curses," she said slowly.

"Yes," said Draco. "And somebody needs to investigate the Department's accounts while Theo keeps his ears open in the Department itself. Estes is careful and very well-connected. I've known him my whole life – he was one of Father's old friends. As for the DMLE investigation at Blaise's firm, I've heard it's not going very well. You know his firm is fairly large, and the missing money was only discovered because one of the victims still balances her own books for fun. It sounds like whoever did it covered their tracks really well, and the DMLE is about to give up and just fine the firm for a general client security breach so they can close the case. They're not going to take the time to find the person who actually did it, nor have they traced where it all ended up. The clients can all be made whole with insurance, so nobody is that fussed about involving the goblins to get real answers. You know how difficult they can be."

Harry nodded thoughtfully. "You're right the DMLE is spread too thin. They rarely turn financial crimes cases over to the aurors because it's outside of our jurisdiction unless there's some other violent crime tied to it. That being said, if you're pretty sure Estes is involved too, I think I could make a case to investigate it. The auror department is

supposed to have jurisdiction over fraud and corruption within the Ministry itself.”

Theo and Draco both nodded.

“Thank you,” said Theo. “I was hoping Draco and I could find some real proof without bringing you two into it, but we’ve hit a dead end, and we need you. And we need to keep it very, very quiet.”

Draco

Draco left the most recent meeting with his lawyers, his mind swirling about the building that was leased to Brown’s Rare Books in Mayfair. The reason Draco was suddenly a bit fixated on this specific building was simple: Hermione leased the top floor.

He had been utterly taken in and charmed by her small flat the previous night. It was friendly, bright, and whimsical, and of *course* it was located in the same building as a rare bookstore. It was so utterly Hermione that Draco couldn’t help but fall in love with it just a little bit.

Theo and Harry — for Draco now called him Harry too — had both dropped enough nuggets of information over the last couple of months for Draco to learn that Hermione stretched herself to live where she did. It was a bit out of character for cautious Hermione Granger to splurge on herself in that way, but the moment Draco saw the flat he could see why she did it. It was safe, it was muggle, there was a delightful cafe and sandwich place just next door, and she spoke fondly of the bookstore owners who had become her friends over the years that she lived above their shop.

Draco had been turning it over in his head and had requested a last-minute meeting with his lawyers to consider what he might do to make sure Hermione wouldn’t be priced out of her flat going forward. He hoped the bookstore owners could stay as well. After all, Hermione said they were lovely people, and evidently bookstores

were starting to go out of business in the muggle world thanks to the growing cost of living and something she called "digitization," though Draco wasn't exactly sure what this meant.

Most of his lawyers had looked at him like he was mad for wanting to discuss a rare book shop in muggle London, but they knew better than to say anything about it. Draco Malfoy generated quite a bit of legal work.

And now, meeting complete, was heading to the Ministry of Magic for the next thing he was excited to see: Hermione's Playground.

After Draco told Hermione and Harry all about the suspicious activities the previous night, Hermione had left for a few minutes to get take-out for the four of them to eat. While she was gone, Draco questioned Harry about Hermione's Playground, and Theo listened curiously too.

Draco learned that Shacklebolt had built it especially for her, and the list of people she allowed inside of it was extremely small. Harry told him that none of the unspeakables were allowed to go in there, and he was the only auror with permission to watch. It made the unspeakables annoyed and the other aurors jealous because her work had a tendency to produce explosions, and they enjoyed watching her work in the field. But she was intensely private and very careful about whom she allowed into her sanctuary.

"It's an incredible place," said Harry. "She has a magical and a muggle lab in there, along with a small library that's full of the darkest books you could imagine. It puts the Restricted Section of the Hogwarts library to shame. There's also a large safe room where she breaks her curses and an extra office down there that's separately warded where she keeps her research. Hermione's Playground is the only place in the Ministry of Magic where muggle electronics work. I'm still not sure how she did it."

"And Shacklebolt just gave it to her?" asked Theo in amazement.

Harry nodded. “She’s one of his all-time favorites, and he would give her anything she wants. That lab of hers has all sorts of rare and restricted ingredients in it, and many of the books are rare too. She doesn’t even have a budget – all of her expenses go through the special defense fund for the Ministry, which I’m sure you know is enormous and classified. Kingsley arranged it that way so she could purchase whatever she wanted and no supervisor had to approve it.”

“Holy shit,” muttered Theo.

Harry grinned. “If she wasn’t my best friend, I would investigate her for what I’m sure are numerous questionable activities and experiments happening down there. But she *is* my best friend, and you know Hermione – she covers her bases. Hermione’s Playground is technically attached to the Department of Mysteries, even if the unspeakables can’t get into it. They’re all doing experimental shit down there that would be illegal anywhere else. And I’m sure that every single expense report has been properly filed, even if they just disappear into the classified archives because they go straight to Kingsley’s desk.”

Draco couldn’t help but smile at this. “My brilliant little swot,” he said fondly.

He wasn’t sure why he was so pleased to hear that Hermione had the Minister of Magic so wrapped around her little finger that she could command an unlimited budget and do whatever the hell she wanted. But something about it made him inordinately satisfied and really turned him on.

Harry gave him a sharp look. “You’re going to tell me then? Because Ginny refuses, and Hermione never will.”

Draco bit his lip. “Let’s just say I’m putting together a plan. She’s going to be a challenge though.”

Harry narrowed his eyes. “If you hurt her...”

“Yes, yes, I know. You’ll finish the *sectumsempra* job and do it some place where Hermione can’t save me.”

Harry didn’t look remotely abashed by this, but just inclined his head. Then he seemed to consider it. “It could work, you know. You two. But you’re right, she’s going to be challenging. If I can give you a few pieces of advice?”

Draco nodded, both surprised and a bit eager. Harry knew her better than anybody.

“Don’t interrupt her work. Whatever you want from her, Hermione’s career has to fit into it or it will fail before it ever gets off the ground.”

Draco nodded. He knew this already.

“She’s also pretty sensitive about the media, though she hides it well,” added Harry. Draco paid attention now, because this was news to him.

“She knows she can’t get away from it, but she’s a private person. The rest of us try to protect her from it as much as we can, but any relationship she has will become front page news. Expect it to be rough on her, and be prepared to let her know you don’t believe any of the bullshit they write about her. Do your best to insulate her from it, but don’t hide any press from her unless she asks you to screen things.”

“That’s... really good advice, Harry,” Draco admitted. “Thanks.”

Harry nodded. “Last thing: Hermione always needs a place she can escape to where she can think. Ron never really understood this about her, but she has always had her best ideas and her biggest emotional leaps after processing things alone. If she says she needs space, give her space, and whatever you do, don’t intrude on it. Let her come to you when she’s ready.”

Draco nodded slowly. "You know, I hadn't really thought of it that way, but I think you're right."

Harry nodded. "She's my best friend. I'm positive I'm right. And if you can support her work, protect her heart from the media, and give her space to think when she needs it, she'll be yours."

Draco turned Harry's words over and over in his mind as he checked in at the Ministry and made his way down to the Department of Mysteries. Theo, naturally, had thrown a man-tantrum at being left out so Hermione had invited him to watch her break the curse as well, after she returned with chicken shawarma the night before.

Draco had to admit that after talking to Harry he now believed that Hermione decided to stay away from the Manor that week so she could think. Draco didn't believe that she was aware that he was Mark, but things had still shifted between them over the previous weekend. He decided to take Harry at his word and view it as a stroke of luck that he didn't push her to see him. And she *had* come back around to him after a few days of thinking, Harry was right about that.

It would take a lot of self-control on Draco's part, but he sensed Harry knew what he was about when it came to giving Hermione space. Hermione had to come around on her own schedule, at her own pace, and of her own volition. Draco could lay the world at her feet to persuade her, but ultimately the decision would have to be hers.

Draco turned the corner to find himself in a long hallway that only had a couple doors interrupting it. The plaque next to one of them read "Experimental Curse Breaking Division." Draco smirked at the title, knowing that Hermione was the only employee in this so-called 'division.' He pushed open the door and felt some wards around him vibrate as he passed through them. He realized Hermione must have a way of warding out all but her chosen few.

He found himself in a small vestibule. One door on the left said, "Hermione Granger and Invited Guests Only," and the door on the right said, "Viewing Room." Draco smirked again as he pushed open the door to the Viewing Room, and there he found Harry, Theo, and Kingsley Shacklebolt.

"Minister," he said, walking forward and shaking his hand. Draco had to admit he was surprised. She said that Shacklebolt liked to watch, but he was here with no security whatsoever, except for Harry. Then again, Draco supposed he was a former auror himself.

"Mr. Malfoy," said Shacklebolt in an assessing voice. "Hermione says you've been most cooperative. And she assures me that ring of yours is going to give us quite a show today."

Draco gave him a tight smile. "The ring was my father's or some Malfoy heirloom he befouled. That old bastard hid it in the trunk of a tree on the very edge of the estate. It was sheer dumb luck we found it."

At this Shacklebolt relaxed into a grin. "Lucius really was a bastard, wasn't he? He used to write to me from prison, promising all sorts of favors if I would put my pure blood to good use and purge the Ministry of those less worthy."

Draco inclined his head. "I'd say you did do that for the most part. And those who were particularly worthy got their own play space."

Shacklebolt's eyes twinkled. "Hermione has always been my favorite."

"We know," said Harry in a wry voice and Theo chuckled.

Shacklebolt turned to smirk at him now too. "You're not so bad yourself. But there's not a single employee in this place who has even half of her brilliance, no offense to you and Mr. Nott of course. Besides, the Playground is wildly entertaining. My favorite thing to do around here is watch her work."

At that, suddenly the lights in the Viewing Room went dark, and the lights on the other side of the glass turned on. Draco and Theo looked at it in surprise. It was a large open space with a column of light in the middle of it, almost like a spotlight. Floating in mid air inside of the spotlight was something that glittered brilliantly, and Draco realized it must be the ring.

Behind it were several other rooms, all with glass walls. Draco could see a potions lab with a cauldron of something bubbling away and a wall of rare ingredients. In another room was something that looked a bit like a potions lab, but it was more elaborate. There were beakers and glass vials of all sorts, and something that looked like a black box that had numbers automatically appearing on it.

“That’s her muggle lab,” muttered Harry, noticing the direction of his gaze.

The next room was clearly a library, filled with books, most of which had black bindings and cracked spines.

“Hermione could probably melt the planet with some of the things that are in those books,” Harry muttered. Draco couldn’t help but notice that Shacklebolt grinned broadly at this.

Finally, at the end was an office that was very Hermione. It also had some colorful artwork on the wall, and Draco saw something that looked like a trophy case. He squinted his eyes and thought he saw a gold chalice with a hole at the bottom of the bowl, along with something that looked like...

“Is that a basilisk fang?” he asked incredulously, pointing at the trophy case.

Harry just grinned. “That’s classified.”

“For fuck’s sake, why is all of it classified?”

Harry and Shacklebolt just gave him amused smiles.

“Because Hermione helped save the world once,” said Harry.

Draco’s eyes continued roving over her trophy case until they finally landed on a familiar knife at the very bottom.

“Bellatrix’s knife,” he whispered.

Harry nodded. “I wondered if you would recognize it.”

“It carved me to pieces, of course I recognize it. And she told me she decommissioned it. I had no idea she kept it though.”

“Our Hermione likes trophies,” said Shacklebolt. “She gets first dibs on anything she decommissions.”

“How is that legal?” asked Theo in amazement.

Kingsley shrugged, but had a satisfied smile. “Last minute addendum to the omnibus budget bill that we passed just as she was onboarding. If you check closely you’ll find there is a proviso that permits the acting Minister of Magic to designate any Ministry employee with appropriate security clearances to take custody of artifacts collected by the Ministry. Those same employees may determine what happens to the artifacts from that point forward with no other internal reviews required. You will also find that there is a Ministry decree providing that employees with a Level 12 security clearance are allowed to take custody of decommissioned artifacts. Of course, since Hermione is the only Ministry employee with a Level 12 clearance, our lawyer who looked into it for me - specifically, Percy Weasley - has advised us that she is to receive everything, and she can do whatever the hell she wants with it.”

“Great Salazar,” muttered Draco, grinning broadly. “So her trophy case is filled with things she’s decommissioned?”

“For the most part,” said Harry. “Kingsley’s right. Hermione has always liked to mark milestones with mementos. That trophy case is

filled with her professional achievements. She's particular though and doesn't keep everything."

So she likes to mark milestones. Noted.

Draco was smiling broadly now, as an idea started to materialize in his mind. He had been plotting and scheming about ways to attract her interest and attention. The more he was learning about Hermione, the more he realized Theo was correct that she was sentimental. Even when it came to professional accomplishments, she was a person who saved things and kept souvenirs. Draco knew that he was a little sentimental too when it came to something or someone he actually cared about. A plan was starting to form in his head, and as he turned it over he thought it just might work.

But before he could think about it for too long Hermione walked in. She was in something deliciously tight and casual that looked like muggle exercise clothes. Her hair was tied back, and she was wearing her trainers again.

"This one was tricky," came her voice, magically amplified in the viewing room. "It took me several days to determine what it might be, but I suspect we are looking at a soul-suck hex."

Draco stilled, and he felt the others around him do the same thing.

"It's quite obscure, but it creates a similar effect to a dementor. In fact, it's theorized that the soul-suck hex is derived from the same part of non-being that creates dementors."

Shacklebolt leaned forward and pressed a button, which Draco realized must allow him to speak to her. "Hermione, should I send Harry in there with you?"

"No need," she said lightly. "I can kill dementors if one manifests. I just need permission from you to do it."

"Granted," said Shacklebolt instantly.

“Alright then, here we go.”

Draco’s stomach clenched as he watched her approach the ring that was still suspended in the spotlight. She waved her wand, and it started to circle as she examined it one last time. Then she nodded to herself and stepped back as she started to mutter a string of incantations. Suddenly something ghostly began to emit from it. It started out as silver and soon turned black as it grew.

“Holy fuck,” muttered Theo, and Draco had to agree. Before long a fully-formed dementor was standing in front of her, and Draco felt the viewing room go cold as terrible memories from the war resurfaced.

Harry started to stand, gripping his wand, but Hermione raised hers and shouted, “*Expecto patronum maximus!*”

A great something burst out her wand, and Draco was expecting it to be silver, but instead it was gold. It condensed to form a large dragon.

“What the fuck?” muttered Harry. “Her patronus is an otter.”

But none of them had a chance to respond to this, because the gold dragon started to attack the dementor, shredding it to pieces. “*Expulso!*” she cried, aiming her wand toward it, and a jet of white light came out of it, and suddenly the dementor exploded.

Draco and the others flinched as Hermione dropped to her stomach, with pieces of gray, slimy skin from the dementor flying through the air.

“Urgh,” she said, as she stood up and looked at herself. “That was messier than I thought it would be.”

Shacklebolt pressed the button again. “Hermione, are you alright?”

“Perfectly fine, Kingsley, just in desperate need of a bath.”

He nodded and sat back as they all watched her approach the ring one more time. She muttered a variety of spells over it, and at long last she nodded. "Curse free. It's just a normal ring now."

She reached out and plucked it from the air, holding it up for them to see.

A moment later she walked out and appeared in the visitation room. "I'm a mess, but we're good to go here."

"Fantastic work, as usual," said Shacklebolt as he stood up. "Now then, why don't you take the rest of the day off? Get cleaned up and enjoy an early weekend."

She smiled at this and stepped back so Shacklebolt, Harry, and Theo could walk past her.

"I'd hug you darling, but there are bits of dementor in your hair," said Theo.

"I'll give you a pass this time," she said with a grin, as he winked at her and scooted out.

Draco approached her with a small smile on his face.

"I do believe this is yours," she said, holding the ring out to him.

Draco bit his lip as he debated this with himself. "I thought it was yours."

She raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

"Sure," he said, shrugging casually. "According to Shacklebolt, everything you decommission is yours."

She smiled a little at this. "Everything I decommission is mine to disperse how I like. And this is *yours*, Draco. It's a stunning piece and very unique. It should stay with your family. I'm pleased it wasn't

destroyed during the decommissioning process. We're not always that lucky."

She held it out for him, and he took it from her, turning it over in his fingers as he studied it. He had to admit she was right. It was surprisingly beautiful. "You like it?" he asked.

He glanced at her and saw her nodding. "Yes. It's gorgeous. You should keep it."

Draco closed his fist around it. "Alright. If you insist."

She smiled. "I do. And I'd best be going. Apparently I have dementor bits I have to wash out of my hair before Theo's tonight. Merlin knows how long that's going to take..."

She wrinkled her nose, and he smiled a little. She turned to leave but before she closed the door, Draco said, "Hermione."

She turned back to him. "Your patronus," he said quietly. "It surprised Harry. He said it was an otter."

She furrowed her brow for a moment. "My regular patronus is an otter, he's right. But a couple years ago I found the variation of the spell that actually destroys dementors and doesn't just drive them away. The feelings you have to produce are different. It's not just happiness, but you have to think of vengeance and a need to protect. It's almost like righteous anger in a way. My regular patronus is still an otter, but my patronus that can destroy dementors has always been a dragon. I'm not entirely sure why. I suppose it surprised Harry because he's never seen me do it before."

Draco caught her eye and studied her for a moment.

"Maybe you have an affinity for dragons."

Her cheeks turned slightly pink, but she didn't look away. "You may be right. I think I do."

With that, she gave him a small smile and turned to leave. As soon as the door shut, Draco found himself grinning broadly as he stared down at the ring. He narrowed his eyes and brought it closer so he could see the details. The diamond in the middle was the most captivating part, but the filigree around it was beautiful too. In fact, it reminded him of the gates of the Manor and the way they had changed when Draco performed the ritual.

It also reminded him of something else, something that had been left in the Heir's Vault for him when he was born. He had never pulled it out, but he had started thinking about it after talking to his mother and Theo. After the things he had learned about Hermione today, he was almost certain it was the best way to open her heart to him. And if he managed *that*...

Draco sighed as he gripped the ring hard and felt the stone bite into the palm of its hand. He would have to keep this one safe.

Remain Anonymous

Chapter 14: Remain Anonymous

AN: I don't know which part is my favorite: our introduction to Rosie, Theo's new party game, or Draco coming in real hot with a gesture she can't ignore.

Hermione

It had been two weeks since Hermione decommissioned the ring, and she had returned to Malfoy Manor. She started to work through bedroom after bedroom, which had amusing names like “*Wingardium Leviosa Suite*” and “*Lumos Suite*.” There was even a particularly handsome room right next door to Draco’s bedroom called “*Capacious Extremis Suite*.” This one made Hermione laugh because it was the same charm she used on her beaded bag, and it was definitely illegal.

As she marched through the guest bedrooms she found nothing, which was really no great surprise. In fact, she could hardly tell them apart. Draco informed her that his mother preferred consistent decor, and Hermione could tell he was right.

Not just consistent, but perfectly identical.

It was only now that the room names really made sense to her. Guests would have no idea which room was theirs if there wasn’t some other way to distinguish them.

Up to this point Hermione had avoided searching Narcissa’s room or Draco’s room. Draco informed her that his mother was still in the Master Suite and would be there until further notice. Draco told her

his own room was larger than the others, though it was in the same wing with most of the guest bedrooms. She knew she would have to search both of them eventually, but she was putting the matter off until things with Draco were more settled. It felt too invasive, too intimate to go in there just yet.

Hermione also took a day to explore the kitchens, though again she knew she wouldn't find anything. The elves would have told her if there was anything suspicious in there, but they pitched in happily to help her search so she could honestly tell the Ministry she had looked everywhere. One elf in particular, Rosie, seemed especially thrilled that Hermione had dropped by, and she attached herself to Hermione for most of the day.

"Miss Hermy is looking for bad bad things! But Rosie is helping. Is Miss Hermy wanting to see Rosie's room too?"

Hermione *did* want to see Rosie's room, and Rosie held her hand and led her through a narrow door attached to the kitchens down a cheerful hallway filled with elf portraits.

"They is the Manor elves, Miss!" said Rosie excitedly. "The elves for the Masters and Mistresses is having portraits in the main house, but we is having Manor elves here!"

As Rosie jabbered on, Hermione peeked into the various bedrooms, all of which had elf-sized furniture, which reminded Hermione a bit of a nursery school. The rooms were personalized, decorated with cheerful quilts and pillows, and even a few Malfoy family mementos they had been given over the years. Rosie proudly showed Hermione a rose-patterned tea cup and told her with misty eyes that Mistress Cissy had given it to her after Rosie cared for Master Draco when he was sick as a young child.

"Tis before Master Draco is bonding with Florrie, Miss."

Florrie's room, Hermione noticed, was twice as large as the others. There was another equally large room across the small hall from

hers that was empty, and Nonnie — who was Narcissa's elf — was next door to Florrie with a room that was bigger than any of the Manor elves commanded, but not as large as Florrie's.

Hermione was getting the distinct impression that there was a social hierarchy among the elves, with Florrie now on top since she was bound to the Master personally.

Draco found her late that afternoon investigating the elves' own lounge where they took their meals and breaks as Rosie excitedly gave her a tour. Hermione was just admiring the miniature tables and chairs when he walked in.

"Hermione?" he asked, looking around in confusion. Florrie was next to him, looking deeply uncomfortable.

"Oh Rosie was just helping me search the elves' rooms and their lounge. We do have one hundred and twenty-seven rooms to get through after all."

"Oh the elves's rooms is not counting Miss Hermy," said Rosie.

Hermione turned to look sharply at Rosie. "Pardon?"

"Elves's rooms is not counting," she said like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"Why on earth not?" asked Hermione in confusion.

"Because humans is not coming in here, Miss. You is the first."

Only now did Hermione notice that Draco was peering into the lounge with great curiosity as though he had never seen it before. When he caught Hermione's glare, however, he had the grace to look abashed.

"These rooms should certainly count, Rosie! And I would be honored if I could take lunch or tea with you in the Elves' Lounge now and then. It is charming."

Rosie and Florrie both looked at her with wide eyes.

“What?” asked Hermione.

“You is calling the elves’s lounge the Elves’ Lounge, Miss Hermy,” whispered Rosie. “Tis like it is part of the Manor.”

“Well of course it’s part of the Manor! If the library is the Library then there is no reason why the elves’ lounge shouldn’t be the Elves’ Lounge!”

And that was how Hermione learned that the Manor did not have one hundred and twenty-seven rooms, but one hundred and forty. There were the rooms previously acknowledged by the humans in residence plus a dozen elf bedrooms — eight of which were currently occupied — and the Elves’ Lounge.

Draco had been around more often, usually making sure he joined her for lunch and sometimes joining her in the search as they chatted about everything and nothing. A couple times he even took lunch with her in the Elves’ Lounge, grimacing a bit as his long legs were bent uncomfortably to sit at the tiny table. Hermione felt no sympathy for him whatsoever - after all, he had grown up here and had never once thought to visit the elves in their own section of the Manor. So as he crammed his legs under the table, she just smiled sweetly at him and munched on her sandwich as Rosie looked on with tears in her eyes. Hermione rather thought she would make visits to the Elves' Lounge a regular thing and drag Draco along with her whenever she could manage it.

Despite his more frequent appearances, Draco was surprisingly good about giving her space too. Most afternoons she snuck back to the Library to pull books off the shelf where she left *The Art of Shibari*. Surprisingly, she found several more interesting books right around it – evidently she had put it back exactly where it belonged. There was a book called *Sex and Power Plays* and another one called *Wax Me*. She nearly groaned when she flipped through *Take Me to the Edge*, which described any number of ways one partner

could drive the other one mad. It was fascinating, eye-opening, and she was discovering a whole sexual world that she didn't know existed.

It also made the close proximity to Draco even more tortuous than usual.

She had brought up the sex club in casual conversation a couple more times. He told her it was called The Ruby Slipper, much to Hermione's amusement.

"I suppose the Wizard of Oz is in charge then?" she asked. "Or is it the Wicked Witch of the West, since it's a sex club?"

Draco just looked at her blankly, and she laughed. The next day she brought a copy of *The Wizard of Oz* for him to read, though she explained that in the book the slippers were silver. The movie producers took some creative license by turning them red.

Muggle references aside, Hermione learned that Draco hadn't been to The Ruby Slipper recently, but he used to go quite a bit. He said he enjoyed it when he did, and it let him experiment in a safe way to discover what he liked. It was all very light and casual, but she sensed an eagerness in his voice whenever the topic came up. And now that Hermione was learning about it, she couldn't turn her imagination off.

His flirting was becoming more frequent. He occasionally found excuses to touch her. He hadn't actually *done* anything yet, but his attentions were starting to send Hermione home with ruined knickers night after night as she wished for something more direct. She was still a bit shy when it came to this sort of thing, especially opposite somebody who seemed as self-assured and experienced as Draco. She couldn't bring herself to make the first move and desperately wished he would.

And so she waited, and as she did she fell for him a bit more each day. The Manor too became more familiar, more comfortable, as she

slowly, but surely worked through the rooms.

As Hermione's birthday approached she decided to get out in front of it and plead with Theo that they forgo the tradition of Secrets and Truths. After the previous game and her murder confessional to Draco, Hermione wasn't in the right headspace for it. Besides, her friends were celebrating her birthday a couple days early, and it fell the night before the kick-off to gala season. The first gala of the year was always the annual fundraiser for St. Mungo's, and this year the organizers had inexplicably asked Hermione to join them at the head table on stage. She wasn't sure what they were playing at, but she couldn't tell them no. So she told Theo she didn't want drinking games because she needed a full night of sleep if she was going to be glad-handing donors the following evening.

Theo outdid himself and instead of Secrets and Truths he produced several muggle board games, much to Hermione and Harry's delight. They burned through Scrabble and Pictionary before ending with Theo's *pièce de résistance*: Clue.

Theo's version of Clue was a bit different because prior to their arrival that night Theo had thought through some changes he wanted to make. He decided that all the rooms in Clue needed to be renamed to match rooms at Malfoy Manor. The murder suspects should all be renamed to become former Death Eaters. The murder weapons were modified to resemble various things that could be found around the Manor. And finally, Theo declared that the person who was killed must be Harry Potter, over the real Harry's objections of course.

Theo had taken quite a bit of time enchanting the cards to fit the new version of Clue, even going so far as to find the mugshots of every Death Eater who made it into the game.

"Do I really have to be the one who dies?" asked Harry with some consternation, as he wrinkled his nose at Dolohov's card.

“Well you *are* the only one of us who has died before,” pointed out Ginny. “Historical accuracy aside, you’re the only one who would bother coming back for another game after you’ve been murdered.”

“Gingersnap is right,” added Theo. “Besides, I didn’t make a card for *Avada Kedavra*. That one never seems to kill you.”

Hermione was deeply amused, while Harry huffed a bit. But even he had to admit by the end of it that something about it worked.

“Fucking fine,” he finally said. “I suppose I can envision Bellatrix strangling me with the silk bed sheets in the Master Suite... though honestly Draco, the fact that you all sleep on silk sheets is ridiculously poncy.”

They played several rounds, and the final game ended when Hermione concluded that Harry Potter was killed by Thorfinn Rowle in the Cellar using the marble bust of Cygnus Malfoy.

Everyone but Harry decided that the Malfoy Manor version of Clue was the best board game they had ever played. Theo gave it the place of honor in the parlor closet so they could always pull it out with a moments’ notice.

The evening ended with a discussion of the latest *Witch Weekly* issue in which Neville Longbottom was named the most shaggable bachelor of 2004, with nine other runner-ups.

“How in the actual fuck did *none* of us make it on this list?” asked Blaise, as the girls listened in. “And Longbottom came in first fucking place? He’s a bloody herbology professor, and you know he’s probably a virgin! What world are we living in here? I mean, Theo’s handsome, smart, and by far the nicest out of all of us. Then there’s me. I’m like the very definition of a sexy Italian who will sweep you off your feet. Then Harry of course is the fucking Chosen One and all that bullshit. Then there’s Draco who’s a goddamned Adonis and who has enough money that he could buy all of wizarding Britain if he wanted to. How has *nobody* noticed this?”

The girls were struggling not to laugh, but then Ginny chimed in.

“First, Neville is a war hero. He’s sweet, and he killed that snake in front of everyone, so I’m not surprised the ladies are interested. And as for the rest of you, Harry is *not* a bachelor because he’s dating me. That should disqualify him. Theo is always off doing Merlin knows what with his magical creatures, so nobody sees him very much except for us. You, Blaise, are a playboy. And Draco has turned into a social recluse.”

Blaise and Draco both opened their mouths to object at the same time.

“She’s right,” chimed in Pansy. “She’s right about all four of you.”

“Well I’m just playing the field. I’m very polite while I do it,” said Blaise. They all rolled their eyes at this, Pansy in particular.

“And I only hang out with you lot because you’re the only tolerable witches around,” said Draco, frowning a bit at this. “The rest of them scheme whenever I show up to something.”

“That could be why you aren’t topping the shaggable list then,” said Hermione fairly. “If you won’t even *talk* to anybody else you’re bound to get a reputation of being cold and standoffish.”

“Besides, if we’re the only tolerable witches, then I’m not sure why you care,” said Pansy. “It doesn’t matter what the rest of the world thinks, only what we think, yes?”

“But there’s still a reputation to uphold, *fiore*. It’s a point of pride,” insisted Blaise.

“And it makes me feel less shaggable than ever. Self-esteem is important,” added Theo, in a slightly forlorn voice.

“Self-esteem is very important, that’s true,” said Luna. “In fact...” and then to everyone’s shock she walked over to Theo, pushed him

against the wall and kissed him. When she released him Theo was looking down at her in amazement. "Bedroom, now," said Luna.

"Yes ma'am," said Theo quickly, as she tugged his hand and made their exit. A moment later they heard a door slam down the hall.

The rest of them stared at each other. "Did that really just happen?" asked Blaise in disbelief. "Theo is getting shagged as we speak, all because he *didn't* make the shaggable list?"

"I really didn't think she would have it in her," said Pansy, looking a bit impressed.

Hermione shrugged and laughed a little. "Well you know Luna. She's not afraid of anything. And she's rather committed to her decisions."

"What did he do, huh?" asked Blaise. "I mean really, what did Theo do except answer a sodding question in Secrets and Truths that let us all know he just wanted to be used a little bit?"

"Theo's sweet," said Pansy.

"And he has a way of making a witch feel like she's the only person in the room," added Hermione. "Whether it's as a friend or more than friends, he is generous with his attention. It's lovely, really."

She pointedly did not look at Draco, who was staring at her with a small smile as she said this.

"And he got lucky," said Ginny simply. "And I mean that literally. His sexual preferences meshed with Luna's, and she's not shy."

"True," said Hermione. "I'm certain we will get all the details tomorrow."

The party broke up soon after that, Draco and Blaise still looking a bit put out by the fact that their best friend was getting some action without any work whatsoever.

The following day Pansy installed herself in Hermione's bedroom to make sure her dress for the gala that night was just right. Ginny and Luna were there too as they all began to get ready. After they received a report from Luna, who said that ordering Theo about in bed was really very lovely, Pansy assumed a militant stance as she began the final preparations.

"Remember, everybody's going to want to know where you got your dress. The reporters are going to ask too. Play up my name, Hermione."

"You know I will," said Hermione for the hundredth time.

Pansy was driving her mad, but she had to admit she had done an outstanding job. The dress was something Hermione never would have picked herself, but when Pansy produced it and ordered Hermione to wear it, Hermione had been stunned. It hugged her curves and slimmed her waist. There was only one thing about it that made Hermione a bit nervous.

"Did it really have to be red, Pans? You know I like blue..."

"You look amazing in it," said Ginny. Pansy had designed something in emerald green for her to match Harry's eyes. "You're the quintessential Gryffindor, and you're going to be on stage tonight. It's bold, but you can pull it off."

"Yes," said Pansy. "I know you like to be a wallflower, but you're going to be front and center tonight. All eyes will be on you at the head table, and that means you need to go bold. Besides, wizarding fashion *really* needs to move on from black, navy, and other dark colors for these things. We all like color when it comes to robes, and I have never understood why formal dresses aren't the same."

"Just as long as Ginny and I aren't photographed together. It will look like Christmas," said Hermione.

“Just pull me or Luna into the picture with you. She’s in sapphire blue.”

“And you?” asked Hermione.

“The best fucking shade of purple you’ve ever seen,” said Pansy.

Hermione had to admit that while she would stand out more than she cared for, Pansy had a point. The red did look amazing with her sun-kissed skin. She just had to have the confidence to pull it off.

Pansy was taking her role as dress designer seriously, especially when it came to Ginny and Hermione. She had never had two witches as notable as them wear her clothing before, and Hermione could tell she was both thrilled and very nervous about it. She wanted everything to be perfect.

“Even Narcissa won’t wear my things until I become fashionable. I help her shop sometimes, but I can’t seem to break in!”

Yes, Hermione knew this was a huge night for Pansy, perhaps even more so than the rest of them. And that was why she allowed Pansy to sit her down in front of a mirror with a determined glint in her eye as she began the arduous process of taming Hermione’s hair.

“I’m telling you, Pans, it takes an entire bottle of Sleakeazy’s,” said Hermione. “There’s really no point.”

“Bollocks,” said Pansy. “You’ve been conditioning. It won’t be that bad this time.”

Hermione just sighed and tried not to wince as Pansy dumped a shocking amount of Sleakeazy’s into her palm and began to work it through Hermione’s hair.

“We could just leave it down,” said Hermione.

“Not good enough. I’m going to play up the nostalgia angle. We’re going to do your hair exactly like the Yule Ball in fourth year.”

“Please don’t tell me you’re trying to make Draco notice me? You’ve been trying to set us up for weeks, and he still hasn’t made a move.”

Now Pansy looked at her squarely in the mirror. “I can have multiple motives. If you show up looking like a million galleons, it will serve all of them.”

Hermione bit her lip. “Will he even be there?”

Pansy smirked. “I expect so.”

“But I’ve never seen him at this one before. And I didn’t ask him as my date.”

“Maybe not, but he’s always invited. I don’t think he’ll be able to resist staying away this year.”

Hermione felt her cheeks heat, but she finally nodded. She hadn’t spoken to Draco about this event at all. But if Pansy thought he would be there, then Hermione knew she wanted to look good.

“Thank Merlin,” said Pansy in relief. “Now you just leave it to me and do not fight me on it.”

Hermione fell silent as she watched the transformation take place. Her hair was smoothed out and pulled back into a complicated knot at the base of her neck. Her eyes turned smokey, her cheeks were blushed, and then Pansy finished it all with red lipstick that was precisely the same shade as Hermione’s dress.

“Bloody hell,” Hermione muttered, as she stared in the mirror. She hardly recognized herself.

“And for the finishing touch,” said Pansy, “wear these.”

She shoved a box into Hermione’s hand, and Hermione opened it to find ruby drop earrings. They were large and pear-shaped, surrounded by small diamonds.

Hermione looked at Pansy in horror. "These aren't real are they?"

Pansy gave her an offended look. "Of *course* they're real. Do I look like somebody who would *ever* consider paste jewelry to be an acceptable option?"

"But then I can't wear them!" insisted Hermione.

"Why not?" asked Pansy. "They will look fab with your dress."

"They're not mine!"

"So?" said Pansy, rolling her eyes. "You're in my dress, on stage, and you need to be accessorized the right way. Besides, you've been to this thing before. Half the purebloods will be wearing something similar."

"But I'm not a pureblood."

"No, but you need to look better than all of them to prove that my designs are the next hot thing. And when the most wanted bachelor in the room can't take his eyes off of you, they are going to hate you for it. You need to have confidence and shove it in their damn faces. Show all of them that you can own a dress like this. You can own jewelry like this. You can own Draco Malfoy. And you're worthy of all of it."

Hermione was nearly breathless by the time Pansy was done with her little speech.

"Shit Pans... I want to... but everybody will know they aren't mine."

"Sure, but everybody will assume they are Harry's. Ginny's wearing some emeralds that are his, and he's your best friend. Everybody knows he's loaded, and the Potters are an old family. They don't have to be yours for you to pull them off. You just have to look confident in them."

“Pansy’s right,” chimed Ginny, who had been listening quietly. Hermione saw Luna was nodding too. “If Draco shows up and gives you any attention tonight, it’s going to make the other pureblood girls insanely jealous. You know he didn’t win that *Witch Weekly* thing because he maintains a low profile – but whenever he does show up to something it’s like all the girls lose their shit. If you don’t look the part, they’ll say such nasty things about you it doesn’t bear repeating. But that dress? That jewelry? It’s fantastic. Merlin, I’d wager you’ll look even better than Narcissa if she shows up tonight, and that’s saying something.”

“You know they’re right, Hermione,” said Luna softly. “Other women can be so cruel.”

Hermione sighed as she touched the earrings. “They look...”

“Goblin made, probably centuries old, blah, blah, blah,” said Pansy, rolling her eyes. “The usual.”

“Good God,” said Hermione.

“For fuck’s sake, stop talking to God, and just wear them already,” insisted Pansy.

Hermione grimaced a bit and then secured them in her ears. They felt heavy.

“Shit I’m not going to be able to wear these all –”

She cut herself off as Pansy cast a spell that suddenly made them feather light.

“Useful little charm,” said Pansy. “It’s one of the first spells young pureblood girls learn.”

“Again, I say good God,” said Hermione.

Pansy just smirked and then pushed Hermione to her feet. “Now get dressed,” she said. “And don’t wear any knickers. We can’t ruin the

line of the dress.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but grabbed her dress and started to change.

Pansy Parkinson is a colossal pain in my arse.

Draco

Draco slipped into the enormous lobby of St. Mungo's, which was dimmed and decorated for their annual gala. He had been invited to this event for years, but usually his mother attended in his stead. This year, however, Draco was here for a special reason. And he rather hoped he would be attending for a similar reason going forward.

He knew that Hermione was being featured tonight, and she was sure to be here. She hadn't asked him to go as her date, but he refused to be disappointed by it. He was going slow. He had been watching her, studying her, making notes and plans and preparations. He was easing her into things. He had even eaten lunch with her a couple times in the Elves' Lounge, despite the fact that every time he did it his legs and back cramped up from sitting on the too-small furniture. He was absolutely determined to win her over, but he knew he had to be strategic about it and patient. So no, he wasn't let down when she didn't ask him out tonight. He planned to start something with her soon, but a date to a charity gala wasn't really how he wanted to do it, even if tonight was going to be very important and might draw her attention to him.

Still, he knew the day he came clean to her was approaching, and he was glad for it. She had been driving him mad the last couple of weeks as she worked through the Manor's bedrooms. Every time he walked in on her and saw her near a bed he wanted to run his hands over her body and ravage her. That was especially true now that he knew she was at least curious about the kinds of sex he wanted to explore with her. It was all he could think about.

After his accident, it had taken him a full week to remember that odd book Hermione hid from him when he found her that night in the Library. Once he remembered to go looking for it, he discovered a very special book that was turned sideways and shoved haphazardly on a shelf, surrounded by other books that had nothing at all in common with it.

It was a book about shibari. She was researching shibari. And she had even marked pages that were her favorites. Draco had lost count of how many times he wanked every time he thought about it.

He replaced the book exactly where he found it and decided a little reorganization was in order. He swapped the books around it – all of which were about merpeople – with the books he had discovered on a high shelf as a teenager when he asked the Library to teach him all about sex.

Each day after Hermione left he went to the Library and called it to give him the most recent book she had read. It was something he just decided to try one night and was shocked to find that it actually worked. But sure enough, the Library pulled book after book from that same shelf, and Draco was in agony as he realized she was devouring them. Fuck but he wanted to try some of it with her.

She was still Hermione though. She still had her standards, and he knew he would never get to do any of those things if he jumped too fast. So he simply filled the shelf with special books and trusted her natural curiosity to do the job of seducing her body. Draco then took on the monumental task of seducing her heart.

He knew she was softening toward him. She flirted more often, and her cheeks turned pink on a hair trigger these days, which was nothing short of delightful. Tomorrow was her twenty-fifth birthday, and Draco had some big plans for it. But tonight Draco wanted to enjoy the sights of Hermione Granger in a Pansy Parkinson gown and do what he could to stake a soft claim on her in public. That meant he had to find her. Once he did, he planned to stay with her all night.

Draco glanced around, eager to see if he could find her in the crowd. It took him some time before he finally noticed her, talking seriously to one of the event coordinators as she gestured toward the stage. Draco suppressed a grin. He suspected she was complaining about having to eat at the head table tonight. He couldn't wait until she discovered who her tablemates were.

Draco found himself moving closer to her, almost as if in a dream. She was in a shocking red dress that was fitted all the way through her arse and hips until it flared out from her upper thighs to hit the floor. He felt his eyes roving over her figure, and he could hardly believe how good it looked on her. It fit her like a glove. The neckline seemed to mold to her breasts, and it had sleeves that were off of her shoulders. Her hair was elegant, and her makeup dark. Her neck was bare, but her *ears*.

Draco inhaled and felt his cock twinge when he saw her earrings.

Pansy Parkinson, you clever little sneak.

Pansy had come to him earlier in the week begging him for some ruby earrings to wear to the gala. He thought it was a bit odd because rubies were red, and red was such a Gryffindor color. He couldn't remember Pansy ever wearing anything red before. But Draco knew his family had several sets of nice rubies, so he had just shrugged and sent the elves to Gringotts to find something for her.

It wasn't the first time Pansy had begged Draco for jewelry. She was always asking him and Theo to borrow their jewelry whenever she had to dress up for something, and neither of them minded it. Theo had inherited a decent collection from his mother when she died. And Draco had inherited quite a bit from Bellatrix when she was killed in the Battle of Hogwarts, as the next male Black. The actual Malfoy collection hadn't become his until very recently, but Pansy had rather liked the things Bellatrix left to Draco. Pansy always said that Bellatrix might be a colossal bitch, but she was a bitch who knew diamonds.

The Parkinsons themselves were well-situated, but of course Pansy had three older sisters, and her father was the only boy of five. Many of their family gems had been dispersed with marriage settlements over the years, so she often leaned on Draco and Theo when she needed something.

She hadn't told Draco she was going to give the earrings to Hermione to wear, but Great Salazar he was glad she did it. His heart sped up as he watched them glint in the low light. They were stunning on her and made her neck look long and elegant. It affected him to see her wearing them even more than her gorgeous dress and figure did. Draco wondered if Pansy told Hermione the truth about them.

Probably not, he thought. She never would have worn them if she knew.

Then he wondered if *he* should tell her the truth about them. He decided to table the decision until he had a chance to speak with her.

He snagged a drink from a floating tray nearby and continued to watch as the event coordinator moved off and Hermione turned to hurry off to a different part of the room. Draco's eyes tracked her, and he watched as she dipped out into the courtyard for a few minutes before reappearing, with Seamus Finnegan following behind her.

Draco could see her shaking her head at Finnegan, who scowled at her, but Draco was pleased to see she shook him off and then moved to a different part of the room, getting closer to Draco though she still had not noticed him. She kept walking until she was suddenly stopped by the form of Cormac McLaggen, who grabbed her hand and started to pull.

Draco's jaw clenched at the touch, but he saw her yank her hand out of his and start to turn to walk away, when he grabbed her arm. She turned around and gave him a fierce look, but he was not leaving her alone. Draco was angry now, and he gave himself a moment to drain

his drink in order to tamp down on his temper so he wouldn't hex McLaggen into smithereens.

"Hermione," he said as he strode over to her. Both Hermione and McLaggen turned to stare at him. "I'm sorry I lost you in the crowd. We were just discussing that special project of ours."

They had done no such thing of course, but he could see the look of utter relief on her face.

"Thanks for finding me again, Draco. Cormac, I'm sure your date is missing you."

McLaggen was so surprised that he didn't even resist when Hermione yanked her arm out of his grip and placed her hand in Draco's instead. Draco felt a rush of pleasure as he held her hand and led her away from McLaggen. He caught Finnegan glaring at him, and he just sent a satisfied smirk his way too as they made their way toward a quiet corner near the bar. The cocktail hour would be ending soon, and then she would be heading for the stage.

He looked down at her and saw she was blushing profusely. "Thanks for that," she muttered.

"It's no problem. I planned to find you anyway. Seemed like an opportune time to intervene."

She bit her lip and looked down a little. She was looking shy, and Draco thought it was adorable.

"You're lovely," he said. "I'm not surprised I have to beat the wizards off of you."

She gave him a reluctant smile at this. "Well thank you, but I really think they're all mad. I've tried to shake them all off."

"Except me," he said.

She dipped her head in acknowledgment, causing her earrings to sparkle. Draco debated with himself and then finally decided to just say something to her about them.

“Those earrings are perfect too.”

She gave him a wry smile. “Pansy insisted.”

“I surmised as much.”

She gave him a confused look. “She said everybody would assume they’re from Harry.”

He raised one eyebrow. “I’m sure most people think that, but I know they aren’t Harry’s.”

Her expression cleared a bit. “Oh then you must have seen Pansy wear them before.”

“She’s never worn them.”

Now Hermione narrowed her eyes and studied him. He just gave her a teasing look, wondering if she would figure it out. He reached out and touched one fondly. “I was pleased to see them on you.”

Suddenly her eyes widened. “Oh surely not...”

“They suit you.”

“I had no idea, I’m so sorry, oh my God...”

“Hey, relax princess,” said Draco. “Didn’t I just say I’m happy to see you wear them?”

“I’m going to kill Pansy,” she muttered.

Draco just laughed. “Don’t kill her. Thank her. I know I will be.”

She looked at him nervously. “You really don’t mind?”

“Not at all. In fact, I think you should keep them.”

The words just slipped out, but it was true. They looked so good on her, he couldn't envision them on anybody else now. Besides, if he got his way they would become hers eventually.

Her eyes widened again. “Oh I couldn't possibly...”

“Keep them. I'm serious. Gryffindors should wear rubies. You've earned them.”

She looked slightly overwhelmed.

“You can't give me something this nice for my birthday, Draco,” she said. “You can't, I...”

“It's not your birthday gift,” he said. “I just want you to have them. And if you give them back to me, I'll send Rosie to your flat to sneak them into your room over and over again until you give up.”

Her jaw dropped. “You wouldn't.”

“Of course I would. And you know she absolutely adores you. She will do it as many times as it takes until you accept them. So you might as well keep them or you'll be creating more work for Rosie.”

“Oh you are impossible,” she huffed, but he could see she was trying not to smile.

“So you agree then?” he asked.

“I don't suppose you have given me much choice.”

“Good. Now you can thank me by escorting me to my table.”

“Oh? And where is that?”

“Up on stage next to you.”

Her eyes got huge, as she stared at him in confusion.

“Draco... what...?”

Draco pulled her a bit closer and whispered into her ear.

“Always so impatient. Just see what happens, yes?”

She blushed again, but she just nodded, and he made sure he was holding her hand as they moved up toward the stage together. As they walked Draco looked around and could see cameras flashing, guests watching curiously, and Ella Vanity in the back of the room looking like she had just eaten a lemon. Draco grinned broadly. He couldn't help it. By the next morning the news that Draco Malfoy was interested in Hermione Granger would be spreading like wildfire, and he couldn't wait.

Draco and Hermione settled in at the head table, and a few minutes later Narcissa came on stage as well. “Hermione dear, it's so lovely to see you again,” she said, as she pulled Hermione to stand. Narcissa kissed her lightly on the cheek, and again the cameras flashed.

“Likewise, Mrs. Malfoy. Though I have to admit, I'm surprised to see you and Draco up here. Then again I'm surprised to be up here myself. Do you have any idea what's going on? Nobody will tell me a thing.”

Narcissa's eyes just sparkled. “Oh I'm sure it's nothing. Maybe it's a birthday surprise!”

Hermione looked bemused, but smiled as Narcissa moved to sit on the other side of Draco. Before long the rest of the guests were seated. Draco saw the rest of his friends were all sitting at the same table on the floor, along with Ron Weasley and Lavender Brown, who both looked shocked to be sitting with a bunch of Slytherins. Draco suppressed a laugh as Harry caught his eye and smirked.

The preliminary introductory speeches were made. A healer stood up to talk about St. Mungo's newest research. And then finally it was time for the thing Draco had been waiting for.

The director of St. Mungo's approached the podium and beamed as he looked out into the crowd. "As you all know, our annual fundraiser is one of the most important events we host each year to raise money for our hospital in order to provide exceptional patient care to witches and wizards in our community. I'm pleased to report that this year we hit our fundraising goal of one million galleons!"

The crowd cheered, and he smiled again.

"Indeed, I cannot thank you all enough for your support. And while I am saying thank you I also want to acknowledge a very special person who is with us tonight. Part of St. Mungo's mission is providing exceptional care to those who can least afford it. Our indigent care clinic is a critical component of the work that we do here, and it holds a special place in the heart of one of our most accomplished healers. Healer Granger, if you could please stand?"

Draco glanced at Hermione and smiled a bit at the look of utter confusion on her face, but she did as the director requested, and she stood. The cameras started flashing, and Draco saw Pansy looking thrilled that Hermione was being photographed like this.

"Healer Granger needs no introduction. You all know her as the brightest member of the Golden Trio, the young woman who helped defeat one of the darkest wizards of our time. But what you may not know about her is that she is also a very talented trauma healer and a curse-breaker who is so skilled that we at St. Mungo's share her with the Ministry of Magic. Additionally, she recently finished her education to become a muggle doctor. Healer Granger has shown over and over again that she can be relied upon in a crisis, and she will heal anybody at any time and in any place. That includes indigent populations, muggles, and even magical creatures, and over the last three years she has donated more pro bono hours to our indigent clinic than any other healer on staff. Her talents and

convictions have been noticed, and I am thrilled to announce that tonight an anonymous donor has given the hospital a special gift of five million galleons. This gift has been earmarked for the indigent clinic, which will be renamed the Hermione Granger Clinic for Indigent Care. The gift has been made in Healer Granger's name as a thank you for her contributions to medicine and magic."

There was a stunned silence and then Theo leapt to his feet and started to cheer. The others at his table immediately did the same thing as the rest of the room slowly stood to give her a standing ovation.

Hermione looked truly shocked and suddenly turned to stare at Draco, who was standing and clapping next to her.

"Did you...?" she said.

"Did I what?"

He smiled in satisfaction at the look on her face as she choked back tears, while Pansy frantically shook her head no. He saw her take a deep breath and compose herself as she smiled instead, and Pansy gave her a thumbs-up from the floor.

Draco laughed. Pansy was going to be a household name by the morning if Hermione could hold it together tonight. The special recognition almost guaranteed it.

As the crowd quieted, the director waved her over and gave her the podium. She took a deep breath and began to speak, glancing at Draco as she did it.

"I didn't prepare a statement tonight, because this was a complete surprise. But I just wanted to thank the anonymous donor — whoever you are — for your support of the St. Mungo's indigent clinic. The clinic provides a place for healers to donate their time to assist walk-in patients who cannot afford to pay for private care. It's been my privilege to spend a great deal of time in the clinic ever

since I was in my final year of training, and it's become a cause that's very important to me. Everyone in this room tonight has something to give, whether it's time, attention, or money, and all of it is critical to St. Mungo's and the patients we serve. So thank you to that anonymous donor for using your resources to help us. It means so much to me and to my patients."

Everyone clapped again while she turned and locked eyes with Draco. She was giving him a look he couldn't identify as she walked back toward him. When she got there she leaned in and whispered, "I know it was you. And I don't know if I want to kiss you or slap you."

"You can't prove it. But for the record, both are hot."

She blushed deeply as she pulled back. He just smiled a little and pulled out her chair for her to be seated again, and before long the director finished the concluding remarks and dinner was served.

She kept casting glances at him, totally ignoring the person on the other side of her as she studied Draco out of the corner of her eye. He smiled a little but kept conversation light alternating between his mother and Hermione. When the dinner concluded the head table rose, and Draco held out his arm for her to escort her back down to the crowd.

"Hermione!" cried Ginny as she hurried forward. "Congratulations! That's so wonderful. It's just... gracious!"

Hermione laughed, as Harry and the Slytherins gave him knowing looks. He pretended to ignore them, focusing all of his attention on Hermione.

"We're going out," added Blaise. "Are you two game?"

It wasn't lost on Draco that Blaise had just coupled them up. Hermione blushed a little but shook her head. "I don't think so. I promised the media one more interview. I suppose the event coordinator told them to wait until dinner was over."

She gave them a wry smile.

"I'm going to hang back with Hermione," said Draco smoothly. "But you all go on. We'll catch up later."

They nodded and after Pansy reminded Hermione to drop the name of her dress designer, the group moved off and Hermione turned back to him with a determined look on her face.

"Admit that it was you," she said.

"I will neither confirm nor deny anything," he said airily.

She narrowed her eyes. "What do I have to do to get you to admit it?"

A thousand ideas sprang into Draco's mind as though fully formed. He leaned in. "You may not be prepared to hear the answer to that princess."

She bit her lip and Draco nearly groaned. "Fine. But I'm going to keep asking. I want you to tell me."

"You are more than welcome to try to convince me. I will make myself available at any time."

She gave a reluctant smile at this but headed over to the media, and Draco fell back while he watched her start to talk to a reporter.

"Drakey!" came a shrill voice from immediately behind him, and Draco nearly groaned as he turned around. It was too late to run, and he didn't want to leave Hermione alone. She was far too attractive dressed like that.

"What is it Ella?"

"Drakey, when am I going to see you again? It's been *weeks!*"

“Ella, I’ve told you. I’m not interested. It was one night, and I’m sorry if it meant something to you but it meant nothing to me.”

She got an ugly look on her face at this, and Draco felt a twinge of guilt. But he had to take the blunt approach with her. Avoidance clearly wasn’t working.

“There are rumors, but they are so absurd they can’t possibly be true...”

“Rumors about what?” he asked in a bored voice.

“That you are considering a mudblood for –”

She gasped as Draco turned and gripped her arm hard. “Do not ever use that word in my presence again, do you understand me?”

She swallowed, but nodded quickly, as Draco released her roughly. “Go away, Ella. I’m not interested in whatever you have to say.”

Her lip trembled, but she turned on her heel and marched off just as Hermione finished and headed back toward him. His face relaxed into a smile as he saw her. She shook off Finnegan again, who scowled as Draco extended his arm for her.

“You want to head back? It’s getting late.”

She nodded, and Draco maneuvered them toward the floo gallery, which had a small line in front of the various fireplaces.

She was worrying her lower lip as she looked at him sideways. “You can come over if you want,” she said quietly.

Draco stilled as he thought about it. He wanted to. He really, *really* wanted to. But there were still things she didn’t know. She also had a lot she needed to process about tonight. He had to balance Theo’s suggestion about making sure she didn’t get into her own head and Harry’s suggestion about giving her space to think. He was playing the long game with her and couldn’t afford to fuck it up.

“I’ll floo you home, but then I need to get back to the Manor,” he said.

She blinked in surprise and looked a bit confused for a moment, but she nodded and led them toward the nearest floo. She floo’d first, and he followed right behind her. He stepped out into her dark flat as she reached over to a lamp and turned it on before kicking off her shoes. She suddenly dropped three inches, and he grinned as the hem of her dress pooled a bit.

“Pansy doesn’t approve of hem drag, you know,” he said.

She turned and smiled a bit. “What Pansy doesn’t know won’t hurt her.”

“True,” he said, and she took a step closer to him.

He reached out, and she went to him willingly, as Draco slipped an arm around her waist and grabbed her left hand with his right. He raised it to his lips to kiss the back of it, and she gave him a longing look. Unconsciously he used his index finger to brush the ‘M’ of her mudblood scar, and he felt her breath hitch.

“You were a triumph tonight,” he said.

“Only because of you,” she retorted.

He gave a negligent shrug. “I’m sure there are dozens of wealthy bastards whose lives you have saved. I have no idea why you think it was me.”

She gave him a small smile. “Is that why you did it then?”

“I expect there are a lot of reasons why your anonymous donor thinks you’re worth a gift like that, princess. But life-saving does tend to tip the scales doesn’t it?”

She gave him another sweet smile before surprising him by flinging her arms around his neck and hugging him. Draco almost staggered back at the feeling of having her in his arms like this for the first time

in more than seven years. He buried his face into her and inhaled and was hit with that same sweet scent he remembered. Fuck if it didn't do something to him.

He felt his resolve crumbling, but he was determined not to do this tonight. He didn't want her to give him sex because she was grateful. He didn't want her to think he expected it. That wasn't why he had done it. And besides, there were things he had to do first, things she still had to learn. He had been waiting until she softened more toward him, and they were nearly there. But there was one more plan he wanted to execute before sitting down and talking to her about that night he was Mark. He had to make sure that when she learned the truth she would say 'fuck it' and give him a chance anyway. Draco had plotted and schemed to connect with her emotionally to give himself the best odds possible when he finally told her. Yes, Draco was a planner, and shagging Hermione tonight was *not* part of his plan.

When she was done squeezing she pulled back, and Draco saw her eyes drop to his lips.

Don't do it. Don't do it.

"Thank you," she said. "I'll never be able to thank you enough. You have no idea how much good that's going to do."

He smiled a little. "I don't know why you're thanking me. I haven't admitted to anything."

She huffed. "You're impossible."

He shrugged. "I'm a Malfoy. That's a foregone conclusion."

He forced himself to release her and step back. She looked perplexed but a bit intrigued by the fact that he was moving away. "I'm going to head back to the Manor. Have a happy birthday tomorrow."

She flashed him one last smile, and he threw some floo powder back into the fireplace and stepped through to the Manor.

He moved as quickly as possible to get to the safety of his room, and the moment his door was shut he leaned against his door and dropped his hands to his pants as he began to pump.

Fuck, I want her. I can't wait much longer.

Happy Birthday Princess

Chapter 15: Happy Birthday Princess

AN: Draco executes his next phase of the plan, which includes staking his claim on certain... activities.

Is it getting a bit warm in here or is it just me?

AN2: I have updated the tags to clarify the rape/non-con elements at the suggestion of one of the comments (thank you!). I've also added a few more tags. They will continue to be updated as I finish writing the end.

Hermione

Between the fiddly zipper on her dress and all the makeup she had to remove and the extended session with her vibrator, it took Hermione more time than she cared to admit to fall asleep that night. Draco had been so handsome, so attentive, and so obvious about the fact that he had donated five million galleons to the clinic that she had gotten herself quite worked up for him.

Of course it had been him. Of *course* it had. For one thing, he was the only person she knew who was wealthy enough to do it, apart from Harry. And for another thing, hadn't she discussed this with Narcissa while Draco was sleeping off his potions at St. Mungo's? Hadn't she told Narcissa that the hospital focused so much on fundraising for their general operating fund that they neglected the clinic?

The annual gala was just one way St. Mungo's fundraised. They worked through the year to solicit donations, grants, and funding from the Ministry of Magic too. St. Mungo's had subsidized patient care, but it was also partially privatized and charged patients a fee for some of its services. The clinic was the arm that was completely free to all patients, largely relying on whatever pro bono care healers were willing to provide. The people who ran the hospital had never prioritized the clinic because it generated no revenue for them. And when Hermione found a sympathetic ear in Narcissa Malfoy, she had bitched about how underfunded the clinic was compared to the general hospital and ranted about how important it was to the magical community, to *her*.

So of course it was Draco. But not only did he refuse to take public credit for it, he wouldn't even admit it to her. It was as infuriating as it was endearing.

And even more perplexing was the fact that he didn't even kiss her once they got to her flat, not really. She was almost certain he wanted to. He gave her numerous heated looks. He found excuses to touch her all night, including the brush against her scar that felt positively sinful. He stayed by her side the entire night once he found her. He ran off other wizards and kept them away from her. She was certain *The Daily Prophet* would be running an article about them the next day, but when she mentioned it to him he said it didn't bother him at all. He told her that if she didn't like what they wrote, she could always floo him or visit the Study or Library where she wouldn't be disturbed.

Yes, he was interested in her. He almost had to be.

It was true she was a bit nervous to invite him over to her flat, but he had just made the single largest donation to the clinic that it had ever received from a private donor. If there was ever a time to compromise her standards and engage in a thank you shag, that had to be it. Besides, she really wanted to do it.

But he had been a perfect gentleman and had not taken what she was clearly willing to give to him. It was almost enough to give her a complex. This was Draco Malfoy for God's sake. He had an actual contract at The Ruby Slipper to match him for casual sex with random witches. Why didn't he bite?

It was almost like he didn't want to be thanked.

That was also an odd notion, because it felt very out of character for the Draco of old. But then again, she knew he was quieter, more introspective, and less likely to seek the spotlight as an adult than he had been as a child. To use his words, the war had fucked him up. Maybe this was another way he had changed — he was capable of donating millions of galleons and wanted to keep it a secret from everyone.

By the time Hermione woke the following morning, it was late, and she had a whole flock of owls waiting for her at the window, along with a stack of muggle mail that had been pushed through the slot in her front door. She knew Harry and the Weasleys would give her gifts at the Burrow later on that afternoon, but she still saw owls from Theo, Blaise, and Pansy, along with a handsome eagle owl she knew was Draco's. His owl was carrying a truly enormous package, and Hermione gaped at it.

Was he really giving her a birthday gift after the previous night? Bloody hell she might actually have to kill him.

There was another owl carrying her general mail and yet another with a copy of *The Daily Prophet*. A quick glance at it showed she was right: the front page featured Draco holding her hand as they made their way to the head table together the night before.

She tossed it aside. She would read it later after she opened her gifts.

She opened Pansy's first to find some new makeup. Blaise had sent her some luxury quills. Theo had sent her a stack of books with a

note.

Dear Darling,

These are the darkest, most vilest, most foulest-est books in the Nott library. I'm sure my dear old dad used some of these to curse the shit out of people who didn't like him, including myself. I thought you might add them to your collection at the Ministry, which I must say is truly impressive and rather scary.

If any of these are duplicates do let me know, in which case I will send you muggle board games instead.

A thousand kisses for you my darling.

Love, Theo

Hermione smiled. She truly adored Theo.

The books looked very interesting, and she wrote him a quick note back to let him know they were all new for her.

Then she took a deep breath and finally turned to Draco's gift. She realized her hands were shaking a little as she opened it.

She removed the wrapping paper to find a large, intricately carved wooden box. It had a crest on top with an M surrounded by two serpentine dragons and the words "*Sanctimonia Vincent Semper*," below it. From there the pattern spun off with vines and flowers and even several woodland animals carved into the sides. It reminded Hermione of the front gates of the Manor, but carved into wood instead of cast into metal.

She frowned at the Latin words. She had seen the Malfoy crest here and there. It appeared in several places around the Manor, and Draco wore a ring that bore it. But she had never seen it close

enough to study the words. She didn't know what they translated to, but she was sure it had something to do with pure blood. The Black family motto certainly did, and there was no reason the Malfoys would be any different. It was an odd thing to give a muggleborn witch.

She noticed the latch on the box glowing gold.

Very curious now, Hermione slowly opened it and found several things inside: a note, a bottle of something that looked like perfume, and a delicate silver bracelet that Hermione was surprised to see had a single charm on it in the shape of a female lion. The lion's eyes were set with some type of light brown-gold stone she couldn't immediately identify and were exactly the same color as hers.

She read the note curiously.

Dear Hermione,

This box is magical. It's part of a pair, and I have the other one. You can send objects between them. All you have to do is place something inside of your box, close it, and touch the latch as you focus on sending it, and the object will disappear from your box and reappear in mine just a moment later.

When something appears in your box, the latch will glow until you open it. That's how you'll know something is waiting for you from me.

You can send anything through your box, as long as the lid can close. There are no other limits to it.

As to the other things in the box, the perfume is a birthday gift from Florrie and Rosie. We normally wouldn't send you a scent without finding out what you liked first, but I had a theory about it, and they wanted to give you a gift too. Tell me if we guessed right. It won't offend me at all if we got it wrong (and I'll make sure Florrie and Rosie don't injure themselves with disappointment if it falls flat).

The charm bracelet I had to include for two reasons. First, everything I've given you so far has been something I already owned. While I haven't gone through everything Father left behind, I'm confident there is no lion memorabilia anywhere in Malfoy Manor nor in the Malfoy vaults. So this lion I actually purchased from the goblins in Diagon Alley because Salazar knows I had to actually buy you something for your birthday this year instead of just regifting you things I already had or taking credit for my elves' brilliance.

As for the lion itself, that brings me to the second reason I wanted to give it to you: watching you curse break that ring (after you saved my life of course) reminded me that you're a true Gryffindor. You thrive on danger and risk and meet every challenge head on. I have thought about this extensively and decided the Gryffindor lion on the Hogwarts crest really has no business being male. It's not fierce enough to represent a witch like you. So I chose the female version of the lion instead, because I find it far more terrifying and sexy.

The last thing to say about the box is that I have set it up with a blood ward. If you prick your finger and add a drop of your blood to the latch then that will seal the ward I cast upon it. Once the ward is complete you will be the only one who can open the box. I hate to ask you to draw blood, but it's the only way to ensure that the things inside the box stay just between us.

Happy birthday princess. Write back whenever you get a chance and send it through the box. I'll see it on my end.

Love, Draco

P.S. If you want to send me something back, I wouldn't say no to a slice of cake from your party at the Burrow this afternoon. Harry's birthday cake was the best thing I've ever eaten. Don't tell Florrie or Rosie though. The other Manor elves will hear, and they might try to punish themselves if they find out their cooking comes in second place.

Hermione read the note in awe, and then she stared at the box. She really would have to kill him. This was far too much. But then again, if she had any questions after his behavior the previous night, this told her he really did like her, and he was just biding his time for some reason. It was far more personal than anything from her other friends.

He gave her a family heirloom with his crest on it so he could write faster and send her things under everyone's noses. Sure, he had an owl and she lived alone. But it still felt more private, more *intimate* when done this way. And the magic of it was utterly charming.

"This is incredible..." she murmured to herself, as she traced the carvings.

She was suddenly struck with a memory of the vanishing cabinet that Draco had repaired at Hogwarts to let the Death Eaters in the castle. This box seemed to function in much the same way, though obviously it was far older and much smaller. Hermione wondered, however, if this box and its mate was the reason Draco knew the cabinet could be fixed.

She opened the lid again and pulled out the charm bracelet. Something squeezed in her heart just a little as she looked at it.

He said it was from the goblins in Diagon Alley. She knew exactly which shop it was from. There was one that specialized in jewelry like this, and Hermione used to enjoy window shopping there. It had been years since she had done it because she wasn't welcome at goblin establishments ever since robbing Gringotts, nor even in the small alley where their shops were clustered.

As a student at Hogwarts, Hermione noticed that other girls had these bracelets. They were usually the girls from entirely wizarding families who were rather well-off. Eventually she learned that the bracelets were goblin made. She found the shop and went inside with her mother a single time to browse before the war made it too dangerous for her parents to visit Diagon Alley. The bracelets were

popular enough that there was an entire case of charms, and the goblin said they could make anything she wanted if the charm she desired wasn't there.

She begged her mother for a bracelet because for once she wanted to be like the other girls. They were very expensive though for what they were, and Hermione's mother promised she could have one for her eighteenth birthday.

"When you come of age dear."

Hermione explained that wizards came of age at seventeen, but her mother just laughed and reminded Hermione that she followed muggle rules in their house, not wizarding ones. Hermione was a bit disappointed that day, but she consoled herself with the knowledge that she would get one eventually. And her parents would still have years to fill it for her.

Then the war heated up and by the time Hermione's eighteenth birthday came around her parents were obliviated and Hermione was on the run. Then when the war was over she had robbed Gringotts, and the goblins made it clear Hermione wasn't welcome in their shops.

She knew then that she would never get a bracelet, even after she finished her healer training and finally had a job. Besides, she knew enough about them to know that they were always gifts. The affluent wizarding families filled their daughters' bracelets with charms as they hit life milestones, and many witches still wore them as adults. It would have been odd to buy one for herself, even if she was welcome in the goblin shops. Hermione had been bitterly disappointed when she realized she would never get one, but she had never told a single person about it. She was embarrassed by how shallow it felt compared to everything else she and others had lost during the war.

She couldn't believe he had started a bracelet for her. He must have noticed she never wore one. Narcissa wore one and Pansy did too.

Even Ginny had one because she finally took Harry in hand and made him start one for her after he gave her an utterly ridiculous Christmas gift one year. Of course the goblins still let *Harry* into their shops. He was the Chosen One, after all, and a very important client.

It made Hermione's heart swell to realize that Draco, of all people, had noticed she didn't have one and had taken this on all by himself. If he gave her any more charms they would be things he picked out for her. It was exceptionally personal.

She studied it closely and noticed that it was very delicate but also had a little weight to it. The metalwork was perfect, flawless, and Hermione turned it over to find a tiny *P* stamped at the base of the clasp. She sucked in a breath.

It was platinum. It wasn't silver like most of the bracelets and charms she had seen with her mother all those years ago. It wasn't even from their much smaller selection made out of gold. It was platinum, and that meant the entire bracelet was probably custom. Of course it was. Draco Malfoy didn't buy anything that was off the shelf, and evidently that included bracelets and charms for his...

What was she to him?

Hermione didn't know because he hadn't told her yet. But this certainly implied something that was more than friends or even friends with benefits. And she couldn't find any other way to rationalize it like the donation the night before. After all, it was possible that he had donated all that money simply because she had saved his life, and he was grateful. He hadn't really denied it.

No, this bracelet had nothing to do with any of those things. This was a sentimental gift.

Hermione felt a surge of hope as she finally clasped it around her wrist. Then she reached for the bottle of perfume and opened it to sniff. To her utter surprise, she was instantly transported back to Hogwarts as she was hit with her favorite scent from the Prefects'

bath all those years ago. It was incredibly unexpected, but she would have recognized it anywhere, even though she hadn't smelled it in years. It was citrusy and very light. It never made her feel like she was bathing herself in fragrance. She had always used it to scent the water whenever she bathed at Hogwarts.

Florrie and Rosie blended it just for me. How on earth could Draco have possibly guessed I like this scent?

Hermione knew she would wear it. It was so light it was less like a perfume and more like a fragrant afterthought. She absolutely loved it, but it raised so many questions for her. It was baffling that he had selected this specific scent under the guise of "a theory."

Finally, at long last she turned to her regular mail. A quick glance through the wizarding post told her that some of it was in reaction to whatever was printed in *The Daily Prophet*. She learned long ago never to read it. Good or bad, she didn't want to know.

She picked out the few birthday cards from the stack — Kingsley, Hestia, Minerva, Hagrid, and Neville had all sent her greetings. Then she sighed and turned to the paper.

There they were, front and center, just as she knew they would be. She was blushing, and he was smiling down at her, his eyes lingering as she turned around and pulled him toward the head table. The article was breathless with speculation, debating all the predictable questions about whether she was after his money or whether he was after her reputation.

Surprisingly, the article did not speculate that he was her anonymous donor. Apparently that was too unbelievable even for *The Prophet*.

The article *did*, however, resurrect his failed engagement to Astoria Greengrass, which Hermione had pointedly never investigated. She didn't know how much of it was truthful, but it sounded like he had formally courted her for two years just after Hogwarts. Then they

were engaged for six months with the date for the wedding set before they suddenly announced it was over.

“Neither Mr. Malfoy nor Miss Greengrass have ever confirmed rumors about the source of their breakup. Further, despite many requests from The Daily Prophet, neither party has ever provided copies of their engagement contract for our reporters to review. It was thought, however, that Mr. Malfoy likely broke off the relationship.”

Hermione frowned at this. She knew purebloods often had engagement contracts. She had always likened them to prenuptial agreements in the muggle world. It made sense when one or both parties had significant assets they needed to protect.

Then again, divorce was almost unheard of in the wizarding world, so it didn't necessarily serve the same purpose as it did in the muggle world. She also didn't know what the reporter meant by courting. She had heard the term thrown around before of course. Pansy mentioned it more than once. But Hermione always assumed it was another word for dating. The way *The Prophet* described it, however, it sounded a little different. He had *formally* courted her. That was... odd.

Hermione idly wondered if she could find a book about this in the Malfoy library, but she dismissed the thought almost as soon as she had it. She would need Florrie's help with it, and that was too likely to get back to Draco. Her ability to communicate with the Manor's magic had only lasted that one night. It gave Hermione some fodder for her theories surrounding the odd ways the Manor manifested its magic for Draco, but she couldn't be certain. In any event, she had never been able to find anything else that way, and she was back to manual searching. If she wanted to research pureblood courtships, she would have to do it the slow way to find the right shelf or else get Florrie's help with it.

Hermione skimmed the rest of the article, and it was only at the end that the reporter wrote about the donation and the clinic being

renamed for her. Hermione rolled her eyes at this, but it was expected, and on the whole the press could have been much worse. Hermione had really grown to dislike the press over the years, but she knew there wasn't much she could do about it. If she wanted to appear in public with Draco, they would draw attention. She would have to get used to it.

At least Draco doesn't seem to mind.

She had to admit it was refreshing to be around somebody who didn't seem to care about the press at all. She didn't get the impression he was seeking it out by spending time with her. He got plenty of his own press without her. But he also wasn't going to let it rule his life. If Draco didn't care what they wrote then Hermione wouldn't either.

She flipped to the next page and suddenly a broad grin broke out.

"Pansy Parkinson Designs: the Cutting Edge of Witches' Fashion"

Hermione read eagerly and saw Pansy had been interviewed for it. There were pictures of her, Ginny, Luna, and Pansy spliced together and all showing their dresses from head to toe. Hermione had to admit they all looked amazing. The reporter wrote that she was making a splash, after establishing herself as a respected wizards' fashion designer.

"But the things she can do for witches may be even better."

The reporter noted that it was the first time Ginny or Hermione had ever discussed their clothing with the press.

"Pansy is curating my entire wardrobe for me," said Miss Granger. "She's incredibly talented, and I'm thrilled to be working with her."

"Her evening gowns are utter perfection," said Ginny Weasley, long-time girlfriend of Harry Potter. "I would trust her to design anything."

Pansy would be thrilled. Hermione was thrilled for her. And she was telling the truth: Pansy was incredibly talented. It was high time she had her shot.

Still smiling to herself, Hermione put the paper aside and quickly turned to her muggle mail. She sorted it quickly, most of it junk, but there were a couple of bills she had to pay that she set aside with a sigh. Pansy's wardrobe help had been welcome, but it was far more expensive than she had been expecting. She didn't want to face it on her birthday. Then she pulled out a thin letter, and her heart sank as she recognized the name of her landlord's property company as the return address.

Her lease was due to renew on the first of November, and the renewal notice always came around this time of year. She had never gotten one delivered on her actual birthday though.

She sighed as she fingered the back flap. If they increased rent on her again, she might have to give up the flat. It was really far beyond what she should be paying for housing, and it had gone up each year she had lived here, while her salary at the Ministry had not. She would have to take actual shifts at St. Mungo's to afford it if they did it to her again, instead of just being called in as a curse specialist when needed. That would mean cutting back her hours at the clinic or going back to the insane schedule she had while she was in muggle medical school. She didn't think she could bring herself to do either one. She would probably have to move.

She sighed as she finally opened the back flap, bracing herself to see what the damage would be.

Dear Tenant,

We have performed a historic market survey of rents in your area and have determined that the rent for your lease has been above market since your original lease was signed in November of 2001. As such, our owner has agreed to abate rent for the next calendar

year for all tenants at this property to offset the higher rates paid since 2001. New rates that more appropriately reflect market conditions will go into effect in November 2005, with notices to be sent at least six weeks before renewal.

If you wish to renew your lease beginning November 2004 with the proposed rent abatement described above, please sign the attached amendment to your lease and return it to the enclosed address by the fifteenth of October.

I am, most truly yours,

Bryson Cadwaller

Property Manager

Legacy Properties Trust

Hermione stared at the letter. She read it. She read it again. She read it a third time. Suddenly she checked the clock and realized the bookstore downstairs should just be opening.

“MAUD!” she shouted as she sprinted out the door and down the stairs. “MAUD! TOM!”

“Hermione dear, what on earth?” asked Maud, one of the owners of the bookstore, who watched Hermione fly around the corner.

“Have you checked your mail?” asked Hermione eagerly.

“Not yet dear, but —”

“Check it!” she insisted, waving her own letter in the air and hopping up and down.

Maud looked at her in confusion, but went to get the mail while Tom came out from the stock room. “What’s all the racket?”

“The mail!” squealed Hermione.

Maud came back over with a stack of mail and sighed. “Our renewal notice came. I knew it was time. Our five-year lease is up soon.”

Hermione nodded eagerly. “Open it and read it.”

Maud looked at her askance but did as she asked and her eyes widened as she scanned the letter.

“There’s no way...” she whispered.

“What?” demanded Tom. “What is it?”

Maud handed the letter to him, her hands shaking a little.

His jaw dropped as he read.

“A year for free? And then they’re going to renegotiate rates next year for a new five-year lease?”

Maud suddenly turned to Hermione. “Is yours the same?”

Hermione nodded eagerly and beamed at them as Maud’s eyes filled with tears and hurried over to give her a hug. Hermione felt herself being crushed against Maud’s rather ample bosom, before being released.

“We’re all here for at least one more year then?” said Tom, smiling broadly.

“Definitely,” said Hermione.

“Oh let’s close the shop for the morning dear!” said Maud. “This news deserves a celebration! Go get buns from the bakery down the street, and I’ll grab some coffee at the cafe!”

As Tom and Maud hurried off, Hermione stared down at the letter one last time and the charm bracelet that was dangling on her wrist.

And of course she thought about the events from the night before too. Tom and Maud knew she was a muggle doctor, and she mentally crafted a story she could tell them so she could share her news about the clinic with them.

This was the best birthday ever.

Draco

After much consideration of the dragon or egg problem, Draco decided that in Hermione's case neither answer was perfect. He certainly wasn't going to tell his mother this, but Draco rather thought Theo was correct and courting could make Hermione fall for him. But Narcissa was also correct that he couldn't court her publicly *until* she was committed to him. So Draco's solution was to do it quietly and without telling anybody about it — not even Hermione herself — until she fell so hard he could take it public.

Pureblood courting rituals varied, but they generally involved a wizard formally expressing his interest to a witch and doing things to bring her into his family before an engagement. Courting didn't require a contract. It didn't create any real *obligation*. It was just meant to be a public claiming to make the witch feel wanted and to tell other wizards to back the hell off.

Historically there were balls and chaperoned meetings and arrangements to protect the witch's virtue. But even the staunchest supporters of courting traditions had let some of those strict rules go by the wayside. Draco fully intended to modernize his brand of it with plenty of sex if Hermione was interested, and he rather thought she might be.

But sex alone wasn't enough for him any longer. Draco wanted a lot more from her than that, but he came with so much baggage he would never be the easy choice. That was why he had to make her fall in love with him.

Draco considered many different ways to do it, but he truly didn't know how to build her feelings for him unless he could use every tool in his arsenal. That arsenal was fairly robust thanks to his family's resources. But the notion that he could make Hermione fall in love with him *before* he used those tools was absolutely ludicrous. She was Hermione Granger for fuck's sake. She might wish for companionship, but she needed no wizard to make her happy. He wouldn't stand a chance of getting her to agree to let him court her publicly unless he did it privately first and used every advantage he had while he was doing it.

Hence the box.

Sending Hermione the box would make a very strong statement if anybody knew about it, but he hadn't told anybody he was sending it to her. There was every possibility their other friends would learn about it eventually if any of the girls saw it in Hermione's room. But their group was becoming so tight-knit, that he was sure it wouldn't spread and become public until they were ready for it.

Draco had been checking his box every hour, but the latch didn't glow until early evening. When he finally saw it glow, he felt his stomach flip over with excitement as he opened it to see what he would find.

He lifted the lid and discovered a truly decadent slice of chocolate cake that made his mouth water and a slightly stained note on top.

Dear Draco,

You are absolutely ridiculous, I want you to know that. Between the box and the lovely charm bracelet and the perfume from Florrie and Rosie and the FIVE MILLION SODDING GALLEONS you donated to the clinic last night (I know it was you, stop denying it), I was beyond spoiled today.

In fact, I'm half convinced that you have been doing legilimency on me because how else would you have known what to get me? Did you know that I always wanted one of those bracelets? My parents promised me one when I turned eighteen and came of age in the muggle world, but the war intervened, and it didn't happen. And the perfume was like a flashback in a bottle. It was my favorite scent at Hogwarts from the Prefects' bath. How on earth did you know that?

Secret legilimency is the only explanation I can think of, but oddly enough I'm not annoyed. In fact, if there was ever a defensible reason for using secret legilimency, discovering the perfect birthday gift is probably it.

The cake is a humble attempt at giving something back to you. I would have sent this along earlier, but I wanted to make it. Of course it didn't come out right so Mrs. Weasley had to fix it for me. I suppose it's a good thing I dumped Ron all those years ago, because I really cannot cook to save my life. An accomplished cook tops his list of criteria for a wife.

I added blood to the box like you suggested, and it has the place of honor on my nightstand so I'll never miss a note. Do tell me if I should hide it from Pansy when she comes over. I think she's done as much damage to my old wardrobe as she could ever do, but she does like to barge into my room and watch me get dressed now and then.

Get your mind out of the gutter, that's not what I meant.

I'm sure you saw the papers this morning. I've decided to take a leaf out of your book and ignore it for now. In any event it wasn't nearly as bad as I thought it would be. I did receive some "fan" (hate?) mail, but I didn't read any of it so I'm not sure what the public perception might be. The Weasley's reactions were mixed, but Harry and Ginny threatened to hex anybody who asked me about it. They're all far more scared of Ginny than Harry.

And now I must go. I'm going to take a rare night off with a movie and extra cake. This has been the best birthday I've ever had, thanks in large part to you. I never thought I would enjoy one this much without my parents, but then again I've never celebrated it with you.

Thank you again you positively unbelievable man. I'm grinning like an idiot over here, I hope you know that.

Love, Hermione

Draco smiled a little as he munched on the cake, though he wondered about her parents. He certainly noticed she never ever discussed them, and his mother was still very tight-lipped about it.

He decided she had finally given him an opening to ask, though he would give her some time to have her movie and cake first. She had explained what a movie was a couple weeks ago, and Draco didn't understand it but he could tell she liked them. Perhaps he could strike up a conversation tonight.

Smiling slightly he stuffed the last piece of cake in his mouth and then made his way back downstairs to join his mother for dinner, suddenly filled with hope that maybe he could pull this off.

Draco turned in early, stuffed full of dinner and feeling rather tired. But as soon as he walked into his room and saw the latch on his box glowing *again* all exhaustion left him.

He opened it eagerly and found a large piece of parchment with just a few words written on it.

Movie is over and cake is consumed. Thank you again.

Biting his lip he grabbed a quill and jotted something back.

Are you awake?

He put it back in the box and sent it to her, keeping his eyes peeled. A moment later the latch glowed again, and Draco nearly whooped.

I am. Maybe a little drunk, but awake. I can tell you are too.

Draco raised an eyebrow at this but smiled broadly. He wondered what she would say to him tonight.

Hermione Granger is drunk all by herself at her flat? I don't know if I should chide you or reward you.

It's the best way to survive a Weasley family gathering. And I might have had another round when I got home since it's my birthday. I think a reward is in order.

He smirked. She was ready to play.

Only good girls get rewards.

I've been so good.

You'll have to prove it to me first.

There was a brief pause, and Draco sensed she was trying to decide how to react to this. Finally it glowed again.

How do I prove it then?

Tell me something you've never told me before.

Like what?

I'm curious about your parents.

There was another long pause, and this one stretched for a couple of minutes. Draco was starting to kick himself for prying when it finally glowed again.

I will tell you, but in person. Preferably with more champagne than I've consumed now.

Draco bit his lip, but decided not to push her if it was that bad.

Fair enough. Will this confessional take place on the window seat or in your flat?

My flat is far more private.

It is, that's true. You teased me with it last night.

I think YOU teased ME. I would not have stepped away.

Perhaps. But I have it on good authority that you like to be teased.

I like to get it in the end too.

Maybe, but I wanted to treat you like a lady last night. You're worthy of my best manners princess. I hope you liked it.

You know I did.

Good. Now tell me one more thing: when I left you hanging did you take care of yourself?

Yes. I used the purple one.

Goddammit, Draco's cock was aching now. He desperately needed a wank, but he really couldn't wank and write at the same time.

That's a perfect answer my beautiful girl. Now tell me how you want to be rewarded.

I want you to tell me what you want from me.

Draco groaned. Right now he wanted her impaled on his cock more than anything else. But that's not what she was asking.

I want a lot of things. Big things, hard things, sexy things, all of it. We can talk about it in person, but suffice to say I want you.

Draco's heart was pounding as he sent this through. He was nervous to put himself out there, but he had known it was coming. The gestures he made over the last couple of days were too big for her to ignore. Writing it down was easier than saying it out loud.

I was hoping you would say that.

Draco smiled in relief. They had a lot to talk about – some of which made him very nervous – but it sounded like his plan was working. He had her where he needed her to confess the rest. Still, he wasn't going to do it on her birthday through the box and *certainly* not while she was drunk. He decided to keep it fun instead.

I'll admit that at this very moment I mostly want the sexy things.

You could come over.

Draco dropped one hand into his pants and started to stroke himself as he thought about it. He wanted nothing more, but he needed to tell her about Mark first. He was playing the long game, and he couldn't, *wouldn't* rush it and fuck it up, no matter how much they both wanted it tonight.

I'm very tempted to, but not until we've had a long, sober chat about a few things.

You're going to kill me.

Tell you what, birthday girl... since it's your big day, you can have one more round with yourself tonight. Make it really good because once you're done, I want you to send me your vibrators and keep your hands to yourself.

There was a long pause, and Draco closed his eyes and stroked himself as he waited to see if she would really play with him like this.

It might be too much and too fast for her, but *fuck*. All those books she had been reading in the Library had sent his imagination running for weeks now.

The latch glowed and he opened it to find the paper and a green dildo.

I'll send the purple one along in a minute.

Oh fuck him, Draco was truly lost now. She was masturbating on the other end of the box right this moment, and she was going to let him do this. She was going to let him control her orgasms.

Draco was sure some of his ancestors were rolling over in their graves to know he was using the box this way, but he didn't care. This was exactly the sort of thing he was hoping to achieve when he sent it to her. He wanted to turn her on, get in her head, tease her, charm her, romance her, seduce her. It was the only way to make her fall in love. And that was the only way she would ignore all the reasons she shouldn't want him and decide to be with him anyway.

Come for me and think of me when you do it. And do not clean the purple one before sending it to me. I want evidence that you finished.

There was a pause, and Draco used the opportunity to close his eyes and pump harder. He imagined her in bed. Her center would be slick, her brow furrowed, and that perfect mouth of hers would drop open as she started to come. She would press it into her clit and send herself spiraling. He could see it all over her face, the flush moving from her cheeks down her neck and toward her tits just like he had been dreaming of. More, closer, just a bit... *there*.

He grabbed his wand to clean up the mess and a moment later the latch glowed.

He opened it with slightly shaking hands and there it was, the famed purple vibrator with the slight hook on the end, still glistening from where it had just been.

Here's your proof.

Draco felt a surge of something hot, dark, and possessive rush through him. Hermione Granger had just gotten off while thinking about him because he told her to. And she sent him actual, fucking proof that she did it. Draco didn't think he had ever felt this sexually accomplished in his entire life.

He lifted it from the box to study it and almost unconsciously he swiped some of her slick onto his finger and popped it into his mouth. He closed his eyes and groaned at the taste.

Great fucking Salazar she was going to be delicious when he finally got to eat her. He set the vibrator back down and grabbed the paper.

You are a very good girl. And you taste amazing.

Oh God, now I need to go again.

Keep your hands to yourself. No touching. Every orgasm from here on out is mine. You need to wait until I let you come.

When?

When I decide the time is right.

There was another long pause and then the latch glowed.

I'll be good, I promise. But I should try to sleep now.

Draco smiled a bit and pulled out the wildflower he had picked from his mad garden. He put it in the box along with his final note.

Then sleep well, princess. Try to have good dreams tonight. Happy birthday.

He waited a bit longer but the latch didn't glow again. Draco gave a contented sigh as he rolled over and closed his eyes. A moment later he was drifting off himself, for once into a perfect, dreamless sleep.

Mark

Chapter 16: Mark

AN: Hermione has a lot to think about.

Hermione

Hermione felt like she was in a dream. The magic box was, well, magical. It was faster and far more private than sending owls to each other, and Draco had taken to dropping her notes and trinkets throughout the day. He sent her his favorite novel to read, dog-eared and creased and clearly well loved. He pulled a true power move and sent luxury cat treats for Crookshanks. One day he even sent her a cup of tea, piping hot, with a slice of lemon just the way she liked it and a truly baffling note that said, *"Stir back and forth, 12 o'clock to 6 o'clock. No circles princess, and never touch the sides of the cup with your spoon."* It was odd, to be sure, but it worked rather well when she tried it.

Every evening they would write back and forth for an hour or so before bed. Once it had even turned sexual again. But always, without fail, Draco sent a flower through the box with his final message. Hermione would have a bouquet of wildflowers before she knew it.

She was walking on air. She was utterly enchanted. And she had no idea what the hell she was supposed to do now.

The morning after her birthday, she woke up and cringed when she remembered what they had done the night before. He caught her more than a little tipsy, and she was both incredibly turned on and utterly mortified to realize she had sent him her used vibrator through

the magical box. While he had them he truly owned her orgasms, because Hermione couldn't finish without their help. She had never been able to do it with her hands alone. Draco coaxed this information out of her a few days after her birthday, and then he really slowed down, knowing there was nothing she could do but wait.

Hermione was tempted to buy herself another vibrator – for once she was feeling like she could afford it since her landlord thanked her for staying on as a tenant by abating her October rent as well – but she resisted. There was something incredibly erotic in the knowledge that Draco could control whether she came or not. Until he let her do it she was at his mercy.

But all of it was so new for her and out of character for her that she also needed some space to think. So she let Draco know that she would be at St. Mungo's a fair bit to advise on improvements for the clinic, though she would drop by the Manor now and then when she needed a break from it.

To Hermione's immense surprise, he didn't seem terribly put out by this. A few times he invited her to come by and see him for a chat whenever she was ready, but she always deflected. He took the hint and backed down to give her space without complaint. As long as she wrote to him at night and responded to his messages through the box, Draco seemed perfectly happy to give Hermione the time she needed to sort her own feelings.

Hermione took a couple of weeks for it. Between two planned auror raids, Theo's list of curses, the occasional drop-in at the Manor, and her work at St. Mungo's, Hermione had plenty to do. She might be in a state of perpetual sexual frustration, but at least she could think.

Her time spent at the Manor was sporadic and always while Draco was occupied with meetings. He had gotten rather good about sending her his schedule each morning, so she knew when she would be alone. Once Narcissa had caught her for tea, and she had taken lunch with Rosie in the Elves' Lounge a couple more times, but

for the most part she had privacy whenever she was there. And privacy was necessary for the room she finally decided to search: Draco's bedroom.

She told him it would be coming soon, and he said he had nothing to hide and hoped to talk to her after the search. But it still felt odd as she approached one of the rooms she had avoided for weeks now, especially since the wizard in question was doing things to her head and her heart.

As she made her way to the door, she started to look for the name plate, suddenly realizing she had never learned the name of his room. But her eyes started to slide past it as she approached. She tried again, and she couldn't hold her attention to it. Hermione had a sudden brainwave, and she pulled out her wand and cast a spell in its general direction to remove the notice-me-not charm he had cast over it.

Sectumsempra Suite

"Oh Draco..." she said quietly, as she stared at it. There was something almost cruel about the fact that the Manor had named his own room after this spell. She knew the Manor's magic came from him, but this wasn't the same sort of whimsy she had come to expect. This was dark and sad, almost brooding. She knew Draco had those qualities too, but why did the Manor have to pick his room for it? And now that it had, why didn't Draco move out?

She cast the notice-me-not back on the nameplate. There was nothing about it to interest the Ministry, and she was sure Draco didn't care to see it. As she walked into the room she got her answer about why he hadn't moved out: as far as spare bedrooms went, his was absolutely enormous and befitting the heir of a grand estate like this. It was nothing at all like the other spare rooms that littered the rest of this wing.

His bed was a handsome four poster, and Hermione was a bit amused to see that Narcissa had decorated it in a similar manner as

all the other bedrooms – apparently even Draco’s room wasn’t spared her sense of style. But unlike the other rooms, his was large enough for a seating area near a fireplace, and he had a bookcase with some novels, photographs, and a few other personal items displayed on it. Hermione took a deep breath and tried to call the Manor’s magic because she had to give it a shot. But of course it didn’t work, so she was back to a manual search.

She started in his closet, searching robes, shirts, and pants pockets. She found a few sickles and a crumpled note from one of his meetings, but there was nothing else there. Then she moved to the attached bathroom, which was large with an oversized tub and enormous shower. She went through the drawers around his sink, and there was surprisingly little inside of them. Apparently Draco Malfoy just naturally looked the way he did and didn’t have to rely on products for it.

How annoying.

Hermione then moved back to the bedroom and went through his dresser, blushing a bit when she found his underwear drawer. She checked under his bed, which was totally bare, and then finally the only place left to search was his nightstand.

Hermione took a deep breath. Nightstands could be rather personal, she knew. She kept her jewelry and a few other important items inside of hers. On top of his nightstand was his box, and Hermione tried to lift the lid, but it wouldn’t budge. It occurred to her that he could have put anything he didn’t want her to see inside of it, but there was nothing she could do about that now. She didn’t think he was hiding any dark objects, and that’s all she was supposed to be looking for.

She finally slid open the nightstand drawer and paused as she took it in. There was the usual collection of odd items: a couple quills and jar of ink, a spare button, a few galleons, even a pair of reading glasses that made her gape. But she also saw a cluster of objects in

the back of the drawer, and she pulled it out all the way so she could see them clearly.

Her heart started pounding as she stared at them. There was a thick book, several black and white photos, a piece of muggle paper that looked like a report, a larger stack of muggle paper that looked like a long list of names, some fabric, and both of her vibrators.

She was shaking a little as she pulled it all out. She set the vibrators aside and stared at the other items. The first photo was from a muggle security camera, and it was a grainy photo of two people clearly having sex against the wall of a building. Their faces were unrecognizable, but Hermione knew that wild cloud around the woman was her own hair. She flipped it over, and sure enough, he had written the date of her parents' obliviation on the back of it, the name of the bar, and the time it was taken. She flipped through the other photos and found they were all of her, transfigured as Jeanine. He had tracked her down the street, until suddenly she vanished between one camera and the next. The last picture was blank, and he had written a note on the back.

How did she disappear?

Then she pulled forward the large stack of paper and started to review it. It was astonishing. The top of the first page showed it was a print out from University College London, and it was a list of enrolled students with Jeanine as their first or middle names with their addresses of record and their class schedules. Draco had crossed through all of them. The next was from the London School of Economics, and it was exactly the same thing. On and on it went. Draco must have confounded the registrars of every university in London to get these lists before locating each Jeanine to confirm they weren't her. He even expanded his search to the suburbs when the universities in London proper didn't turn up a match. Hermione's heart was thudding as she realized he had traced several dozen Jeanines as his search expanded from central London, all the way out to both Oxford and Cambridge, where he finally called it quits.

Hermione's heart was beating out of her chest as she unfurled the fabric, and her stomach lurched to discover an old pair of cotton knickers. They were a size too small for her now, but they were rainbow striped, and they used to be one of her favorite pairs. She had been wearing them the night she took her parents' memories because they cheered her up, and Merlin knew she needed *something* that was cheerful that day. Mark had taken them off of her during their encounter, and she fled so fast when it was over that he had never given them back.

The report made her gape. It contained lab results for muggle genetic testing of the underwear he had sent in for analysis. They collected samples of skin and hair from it, and the receipt on the top showed that he paid a small fortune to have them extract her DNA, presumably so he could then compare it to the national DNA database to try to find her when the universities turned up nothing for him. The report came back inclusive because there was some part of her DNA that made the test fail, and Draco had written, *THIS IS BULLSHIT* across the top.

Hermione knew it wasn't bullshit. The test had failed because her genetic makeup was that of a witch and not a muggle. But of course Draco didn't know that at the time.

What *Hermione* didn't know was how on earth Draco Malfoy had learned about DNA testing, while he was in the middle of the war. The date at the top of the report indicated that it had been produced during the fall of that year, right around the time she, Harry, and Ron stole the locket from Umbridge.

Finally, Hermione stared at the book, which she now realized was the only muggle book in the entire Manor. She had finally found it, though in the last place she had ever expected.

The Complete Works of William Shakespeare

She raised an eyebrow at this.

The spine was cracked, and several pages were dog-eared. She flipped through it and was astounded to find that he had annotated it, as though he really studied it. Almost unconsciously she flipped to *A Winter's Tale* and opened it to the first page. She froze when she read the annotation at the top.

"The first one I read, less than an hour before I met Jeanine. Did Granger's parents know their daughter would be cast out too?"

Hesitating now, she slowly flipped toward *Hamlet* and saw another note at the top.

"If I follow Lucius like Hamlet follows his father, will all of us die? Why do I always listen to the ghosts of my ancestors?"

Hands shaking now she flipped to *Othello* and there she found yet another note.

"Jeanine's favorite — am I to be Othello if I ever find her again? I think of her giving herself to someone else, and I'm consumed by jealousy. What has she done to me?"

Hermione's heart was beating out of her chest as she stared at the words, before looking back at the photographs and the underwear and the stack of university print-out and inconclusive lab report.

Of course she had wondered about this when he named Jeanine as the best sexual experience he ever had. But the moment she thought of it she dismissed it. Jeanine wasn't a terribly common name, but surely it was common enough. In all the bars in all of London and its suburbs, she thought it was an impossible coincidence.

But was it so impossible?

The bar was near her parents' house, and he had been a Death Eater. What if he had been sent that night to capture her or her family? And when he failed to do it perhaps he stopped by the

nearest bar, ran into Hermione who had transfigured herself so she wouldn't be recognized, and then in the span of two hours caused Hermione to fall head over heels for him before taking her virginity.

It seemed so unbelievable, and yet incontrovertible evidence was staring her in the face. And now she recalled the odd looks he gave her that night she confessed to murder and the way he pressed her about Mark. Had he figured it out too?

Suddenly Hermione started flipping through other plays and saw more notes about Jeanine. She found *Romeo and Juliet* where he wrote, *"If this is the fate of star-crossed lovers, perhaps it's best she's free of me and the wretched world I am a part of."*

When she flipped to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* he wrote, *"Was all of it a dream? I had my very own Tatiana for a single night. That makes me Bottom of course. The moment the deed was done and her vision was restored, she left me for her own world."*

Hermione was nearly breathless as she realized just how much that night had affected him. He cared about Jeanine. He obsessed about Jeanine. He tried very, very hard to find Jeanine again. Even though he thought she was a muggle, he had been positively captivated by her for at least a little while. It had been years but he had never forgotten her, that much was clear.

Hermione didn't know what to think. She was astounded of course, but she was also worried. If he had figured it out too – and it seemed like he had since he had placed her vibrators in the same pile as his souvenirs from Jeanine – what then? Was she Jeanine or Hermione to him? Or could she be both? Was this the reason he was suddenly lavishing attention on her, donating millions of galleons in her name, and implying that he wanted something very serious with her whenever she was ready?

Was this why he had taken so long to do anything? Had he been waiting for her to figure it out too?

Hermione slowly closed the book and put it and the other items back in the drawer exactly as she found them.

Hermione's thoughts were cluttered, but she knew one thing: she couldn't tell him she knew, not yet. She had to sort her own feelings first. They had been young adults, practically still children, on the brink of war that night they were together. Everything was so different now, and Jeanine and Mark existed in a bubble that would never be popped. Hermione and Draco, however, were very much here and present. She needed to better understand it and better understand *him* before they discussed this.

More confused than ever, Hermione slid the drawer closed and stood up. She had done enough at the Manor today. She had to get out of here so she could think.

Hermione sat at her desk inside of the Playground, where she idly twirled the time turner on its chain. All of the Ministry's time turners had been smashed during her foray into the Department of Mysteries in fifth year, and this one was rather new. The unspeakables had developed it after the Ministry stabilized post-war, and it took them several years to create a new one. By the time they finally managed it, Hermione was about to join the Ministry of Magic. Soon after she joined the staff Kingsley passed a decree that said time turners were to remain in the custody of those employees with a Level 12 security clearance.

Hermione was certain that this edict, more than anything else, was the reason all of the unspeakables resented her. She was the only person at the Ministry who was allowed to have their precious time turner.

Hermione had used it to complete muggle medical school while working full-time at the Ministry, much like her third year of Hogwarts. She had never told her friends about it – they all assumed she completed medical school by going part-time. But that was not the

case: medical school was far too rigorous for Hermione to maintain a full-time job without extra hours in the day.

When she told Kingsley she wanted to be trained as a muggle doctor too, but that there was no time for it with her Ministry job, he passed that edict for her so she could turn back time. Hermione had been scrupulous about it, only using it to turn back hours so she could work at the Ministry while her other self was in class or studying. Since she was already a qualified healer when she started, she was able to skip the first several years of muggle coursework because it overlapped well enough. St. Mungo's had a way of transferring credits to muggle universities, and she finished her muggle medical degree in two years, taking classes year-round.

Now as she stared at the time turner, she was tempted to use it to keep turning back time so she would never have to go to the meeting she had scheduled that night. But Hermione knew it was no use. She had to face him.

After her latest discovery at the Manor, Hermione gave herself another week to process the revelation that Mark was Draco Malfoy, and he probably knew that she was Jeanine. She had been confused, hurt, worried, and still sexually frustrated. It was a lot of different emotions to sort through.

Once she processed her surprise, she was hurt and angry that he hadn't told her about it. She had even gone silent with the box for a few days while her anger manifested, though to his credit he let her stew. He still sent her nightly flowers those days, but he didn't press her to talk to him.

Her anger eventually burned itself out when she realized that it was probably a hard thing for him to confess, given the lengths he had gone to in order to find her. Hermione and Draco were becoming friendly by the time he figured it out, but they still weren't *that* close. When she put herself in his shoes, she knew she would have taken some time to process it too before spilling the secret — hell, she *had* taken time to process it, and it wasn't even a secret anymore.

Still, she was perturbed by it until she realized two things. First, Draco *had* tried to talk to her about it several times after her birthday. That night he told her they needed to have a sober chat about a few things before they went any further, but Hermione had deflected him the next day and every day after that when he raised it because she was still thinking about the box and gifts and just how seriously he was suddenly pursuing her. It was true he never really pushed her, but he had given her a few chances to have that sober conversation, and she never took them.

Second, it occurred to her that hadn't tried to hide the evidence from her, not really. He had searched half a dozen bedrooms with her, and he knew she always looked in the nightstand. If he had really wanted to keep it a secret from her, he could have moved those things to a hundred other hiding places. It was a bit cowardly to reveal the secret to her that way instead of just telling her directly or writing to her about it, but she had to acknowledge that he made sure she found out about it. With Hermione avoiding him, maybe he thought this was the best way to do it.

Once she realized that he wanted her to find the evidence, she started writing to him again. But she was still worried.

Her real fear was that he wanted her to be Jeanine and not Hermione. True, Hermione hadn't held back that night. She didn't pretend to be somebody she wasn't, other than a fake name and appearance, along with a few untruthful details about her life because she thought Mark was a muggle. But her personality had been real, the pain had been real, the feelings for Mark – no, *Draco* – had been very real. She was still Hermione through all of it, and in some ways she had been more herself that night than she had ever been when she was with the people she knew. But she had also seen how much he wanted to find Jeanine. He dwelled on Jeanine even more than she dwelled on Mark. What if that was what he wanted? What if Hermione wasn't enough?

And then to make matters worse, it had now been several weeks since she had spoken to him in person, having made excuses to

avoid Theo's while she was thinking. And now that she was using the box again, he was attentive and present as he sent her notes and other things multiple times a day. But her physical absence from him had lasted long enough that she didn't know how to behave once she finally saw him again. It was easy to be flirty and sexy behind ink and parchment. She could ignore her fears about Jeanine and feign confidence in his feelings for Hermione. But it was much harder to do all of that in real life. And he still hadn't established any type of relationship with her or asked for exclusivity. He was just lavishing attention on her.

Were they together or just flirting? Was this a secret or would he act this affectionate in public? Was she Jeanine or Hermione? Did she want to blush and hide her face the next time she saw him or jump him and shag him within an inch of his life?

The answer to that last question was definitely yes.

They had written so much that she was sure he was interested in at least one of her personas – she just very much hoped it was the right one. But she had never dealt with a wizard who behaved the way Draco did, let alone shared their history.

Hermione was confused, but she knew he would have to figure out how to behave in person with him eventually. She couldn't avoid him forever, and she finally arranged a meeting that included Harry and Theo to force herself to face him.

She just didn't know what she would do when she finally saw him.

After going around in circles about it, she requested the meeting at her flat to get an update. Once Harry and Theo were gone, she and Draco needed to have a talk – a *real* talk – to clear up a few things.

Hermione looked in the mirror, feeling more critical of her appearance than usual. Her hair was tamed and pulled up into a high knot. She was wearing the jeans Pansy approved of and a jumper with a low V-neck. She hesitated a moment but then spritzed

a little of the perfume onto her exposed skin and then fastened the bracelet he had given her on her wrist. She knew she wanted him, and maybe if she presented herself like this he would want Hermione too and not Jeanine. She realized with a small lurch that she hadn't actually seen him since the night of the gala.

She walked into her living room to wait, nervously jiggling her foot. Suddenly the floo turned green, and she looked up to find Harry coming through.

"Hey Hermione, I haven't seen you recently outside of those raids," he said, as he pulled her in for a hug.

"Sorry, I've just been really busy."

He nodded agreeably and sat down to wait with her. A few moments later the floo lit up again, and then Theo came through, immediately followed by Draco, whose gray eyes locked on hers.

She was a bit surprised when Theo stepped forward first to give her a hug and peck on the cheek. But then it was Draco's turn, and he pulled her in tight and gave her a much slower, lingering kiss on the cheek than Theo did. She felt him inhale while his face was still against hers, and he muttered, "fuck me," before pulling away. He didn't completely release her though. He simply moved one of his hands to the small of her back to guide her to the sofa. He sat next to her and flung an arm around the back and settled in with her.

I guess we are doing this publicly then... or at least around our friends.

It was a bit forward of him, but Hermione felt relieved. It was real then, at least some of it. He seemed to know exactly how to behave, even if Hermione didn't.

Theo and Harry were both smirking at her, as her face turned crimson.

“So darling,” started Theo. “You have some news?”

Hermione took a deep breath. “Yes, I have news and thought we should check in with each other.”

All three wizards were giving her their undivided attention as she thought about the best way to say this.

“I spent quite a bit of time looking through my library to find the last of the spells on the list Theo and Draco provided. I finally cracked a couple of them when I realized they weren’t curses, but tracking spells.”

All three of them looked at her curiously, as she nodded.

“Yes, they were variations on tracking spells, used for sentient magical creatures.”

“We don’t track sentient magical creatures though,” said Theo slowly. “It’s against the law.”

“I know,” said Hermione. “And that’s why those spells are obscure and you didn’t recognize them. But one was for centaurs and the other...” she trailed off, hesitating slightly.

“What?”

“The other was for werewolves,” she said quietly.

Now all three of them were looking at her like she was mad.

She just raised her hands. “Yes, it’s odd. And based on what I found, you have to be very close to one to cast the spell. But once you do, the caster could effectively track the location of all of them, and they could be mapped. It’s similar to the tracking spells on the Marauder’s Map, Harry, except it’s just magical creatures.”

“What’s the Marauder’s Map?” asked Theo in confusion.

Harry gave her as lightly annoyed look, but she just shrugged. Then he sighed and started to speak.

“It’s a magical map of Hogwarts that shows every person in the castle and where they are. My dad wrote it, along with Professor Lupin and Sirius Black when they were at school. They were best friends.”

Theo and Draco’s eyes were huge.

“Goddammit, is that how you two snuck around the castle so easily?” asked Draco.

Hermione and Harry both nodded. “That was one of our tools, yes,” said Hermione. “And I deconstructed the spell work on it during eighth year because I was awfully curious about how they did it, and I didn’t have any dark wizards to defeat so I had some spare time.”

“Your brilliance is truly astonishing, darling,” said Theo.

Hermione gave him a small smile. “Yes, well, the point is, tracking spells exist. They are *all* illegal except for the Trace or when used by aurors or other law enforcement. The Marauder’s Map was very illegal, though Harry and I were unaware of it when we were using it. And if anybody is placing tracking spells on centaurs or werewolves that would be illegal too.”

“Alright, that makes this even fishier, I’ll grant you that,” said Harry. “Is there anything else?”

Hermione nodded. “There’s one spell I haven’t been able to find yet. I only have the name to go off of, but it’s not in any of my books. It’s probably a new invention, but I don’t know what it does. I’ve tried casting it at the Playground a few times, but nothing happens when I try. I’m probably getting the wand movement wrong or something, but I can keep playing with it. If I knew what it *did*, it would be easier to figure out how to cast it, but I might stumble on it anyway with enough trial and error.”

She felt Draco stiffen at that suggestion, but said nothing.

“What about you two?” she asked Harry and Theo.

“Well on my end, I’ve started an audit of several departments,” said Harry. “It’s all for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures of course, but I’m also auditing Magical Games and Sports and the Floo Network just to disperse suspicion. So far the books for Magical Creatures are so clean it’s obvious to me they’ve been scrubbed. Games and Sports and Floo are both riddled with small errors. It’s what you would expect to see. Magical Creatures is fucking pristine. There’s not a single decimal out of place. Of course, that doesn’t help me track where the money went.”

They all nodded slowly.

“Theo?” asked Hermione.

Theo shrugged. “Estes is a bastard, as I’m sure you are aware. And he has us pouring over maps of grazing lands for the herd creatures – unicorns, grannies, and centaurs,” he added, nodding at Hermione. “I don’t know if there’s a connection there to your tracking spell or not, my darling, but he’s becoming utterly obsessed. If I never have to look at pictures of pastures in North Yorkshire again, I will die happy.”

Hermione bit her lip. There was something linking all of this, she was sure of it. But they didn’t know what it was yet.

“Alright,” said Harry. “Well there’s some progress, but we haven’t cracked anything, and it’s not enough to let me arrest Estes yet. We’ll keep investigating, yes?”

All three wizards nodded as Harry rose. Hermione sighed. That was her signal. She started to stand too, which meant Draco and Theo did as well. Once again, Draco pulled her toward him.

“Can we talk?” he asked her softly, and she looked up to see his gray eyes studying her carefully.

She nodded. “Yes, I think we need to.”

She was surprised to see that he looked nervous about it. Maybe he had been feigning confidence the last few weeks too. His veneer was starting to crack.

She noticed Draco exchanging meaningful looks with Theo and Harry as he hung back with her.

A few moments later they said their goodbyes and floo'd away, and Hermione was left staring at Draco who was watching her cautiously, like she was a frightened animal he was trying not to scare.

“Do you want to get dinner first or talk?”

“Talk I think.”

He seemed to steel himself, but he nodded. “Then come over here, and we'll talk sweetheart.”

That was the moment Hermione felt her heart break.

Sweetheart

Chapter 17: Sweetheart

AN: Hard conversations build great relationships.

Draco

Draco had never been this nervous in his life, not when he was taking his O.W.L.s, not when he asked Astoria to marry him, not even when he told the Dark Lord that he had failed to kill Dumbledore. Hermione knew he was Mark now, he was almost certain of it. Once it became clear she was avoiding him after her birthday, he decided to let her to figure it out instead of telling her directly, and now that she had he wondered if he had royally fucked this up.

He wasn't terribly surprised when Hermione needed a couple days to think about everything that happened on her birthday. He told himself he would be patient, and besides she was still writing to him and responding through the box. Harry had told him to give her space when she wanted it, and he was determined to take his advice about that.

But after a couple days he invited her to come talk to him, and she didn't take him up on it. Then he did it again, and she still declined. That was the point at which Draco decided to let the chips fall because he didn't know how long it would be before she was willing to see him again, and he was sure she would be searching his bedroom soon. Florrie reported she was nearly done with the guest rooms in that wing of the Manor.

Sure enough, eventually she said she was going to search his room, and Draco knew what she would find. He was dreading it, but he was also relieved. He couldn't allow himself to do the things he wanted to do with her until she knew, and he was desperate for her. But it was hard to talk about. She might hate him when she learned why he was there. And she might be disturbed by the lengths he had gone to in order to find her.

When she told him she had completed the other bedrooms in that wing and his room was next, Draco braced for the fall-out. But that day passed normally and the next day and the next. Draco was practically jubilant, thinking she had searched it, discovered the truth, and nothing had changed.

Then suddenly she went dark, and Draco knew he was wrong about those previous days. She had finally found it, and now she was questioning everything.

He had gone spare, absolutely spare. He had taken days off of work, just pacing his room and staring at that fucking box hoping, praying it would light up for him. He even called Theo and Harry about it because he was so close to just floo'ing to her flat and pressing her about it that he needed a gut check. Theo was in favor of going, but Harry said give her space. It took every bit of self-control he had, but he went with Harry's advice because he had known Hermione much longer than Theo.

It took three days, but then she contacted him, and Draco nearly levitated from relief. He could tell she was trying to act normal, so he did too. He reverted to the flirty notes and practically bombarded her with treats and flowers. But he also sensed an undercurrent of stress and worry in her notes to him. Something was wrong and Draco wanted to talk, *now*. He needed to get to the bottom of it.

But then Hermione had taken *another* week to think about it before she finally said she wanted to meet with him and said that Theo and Harry would be there too. Draco forced himself to keep it together

and not demand a long-overdue talk, but it had been one of the hardest things he had ever done.

Harry had not been exaggerating when he said Hermione craved space when she was having an emotional leap. Draco just hoped her leap would land in his favor. And he had no notion of how much patience it would require on his end.

Once he arrived at her flat, he couldn't help but pull her into his arms and relish the feel of her cheek under his lips and the scent of her in his nose. When he smelled her he felt faint. He had waited so long for this, so fucking long. He had finally found his amortentia.

On the first day of sixth year potions, Professor Slughorn had brewed amortentia. Draco had caught a few familiar things in it: broom polish and the leather he associated with quidditch gear, the Malfoy library, and the chocolate cake the house elves always made for his birthday. But there was one other thing. That last thing was complex: it was floral and a bit citrusy, and he didn't recognize it at all. He had wondered for months what it could be.

Eventually he figured out part of it. There was a particular scent that came out of one of the nozzles around the Prefects' bathtub that accounted for the citrusy notes. It was light and clean. It was fairly gender neutral. And once he discovered it, he made use of it whenever he bathed in there. He even bottled some and brought it to the Manor so Florrie could smell it. She and Rosie experimented with essential oils until they figured out what it was and could recreate it. Draco still used it whenever he took a bath.

And then there was that night with Jeanine when he smelled the floral half. It had utterly stunned him because she was a muggle, and that was one of several reasons he spent so much time looking for her. He couldn't make any sense of it, and eventually he decided they were two distinct scents and were never meant to be mixed together. He must have misremembered what he was smelling. Draco thought it was the only reason he would smell the floral notes on a muggle.

But once he learned Jeanine wasn't a muggle at all, but Hermione Granger, former Hogwarts Prefect, it all came together for him. He developed a theory that Hermione had used that scent when she bathed at Hogwarts too, and he asked Florrie and Rosie to take some of his bath oils and turn them into a perfume for her to see if he was right.

Now, for the first time since that day in potions more than eight years ago, he smelled that same citrusy scent combined with the floral fragrance that must be her shampoo. Draco finally knew what he smelled in his amortentia that day: it was Hermione Granger right after she had taken a bath.

He kept getting whiffs of it while he was on the couch with her, and he struggled to focus on what she was saying. But the look on her face when they finally stood and Theo and Harry left was enough to make him snap out of it.

His stomach sank and his heart raced.

"Do you want to get dinner first or talk?"

"Talk, I think."

He nodded. "Then come over here, and we'll talk sweetheart."

Oh fuck.

The look on her face when he finally called her the nickname he had wanted to use for weeks now was one of utter devastation.

She started looking around like she was trying to find the nearest exit.

No. She isn't running from me again.

He strode forward and gripped her arms gently to hold her in place.

"Hermione? Sweetheart?" he tried again.

To his horror he saw tears start.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

It was definitely the nickname that was triggering her, but he didn't know why. He abruptly shifted tactics.

"Please princess, tell me what's wrong."

She sniffed before a tiny sob emerged. "You want Jeanine," she finally whispered, and then she began to cry in earnest.

Draco furrowed his brow. He didn't understand what she meant by that. Of course he wanted Jeanine. He wanted her because she was Hermione. They were the same person.

"Please come sit and explain," he said. "I'm sorry, I don't understand it..."

He was desperate, and perhaps she could hear it in his voice, because she just gave a glum nod as she allowed him to lead her over to the sofa. She didn't resist when he pulled her into his arms and tucked her head under his chin, still shaking with tears. While he waited for her to calm down he breathed in that delicious smell of her again. It was distracting, but it also made him resolve to figure this out. He would hold her in place if he had to until he understood what the fuck was happening. He wasn't going to let her leave like this.

In fact, Draco now wished he had listened to Theo instead of Harry and demanded to talk to her the moment she went dark through the box. He expected her to be angry with him, not sad. Whatever this was, she had gotten into her own head about it, just like Theo predicted.

"Tell me. Help me understand what's wrong."

She took a moment and gave a great sniff. "It's just... you liked Jeanine so much. You fell for her so hard and you tried to find her for

months. You saved everything you had of hers. You read every bloody thing Shakespeare ever wrote just because she talked about it that night. You want Jeanine, you don't want me. And that's what I've been afraid of ever since I found those things in your nightstand."

Draco stilled. He sensed he was getting closer to the thing that was bothering her, but he still didn't really *get* it. He was cursing Harry Potter more than ever. Harry might be right that Hermione needed space to think, but this time Draco had let it go too long. Somehow she had gotten it into her head that Draco didn't want her. That was utterly absurd.

"Hermione, you *are* Jeanine."

"No, I was Jeanine that one night, Draco. I've never been Jeanine before or since. I just transfigured myself that night in case the Death Eaters were watching my parents' house."

Draco felt a lurch. They were watching. *He* was watching. Or rather, he would have been watching if he hadn't taken so long to start his mission that night.

"So you're concerned that..." he prompted.

"That you've romanticized some version of me that doesn't exist! That you want me to be *her*. That you've fallen for some fictional woman from seven years ago, and that the real me won't live up to your expectations!"

Now Draco understood. She wasn't right – not at all – but he finally understood what was bothering her, which was a relief. He scrambled to think of something to say to convince her that this was not his perspective at all.

"Hermione, do you want to know the very first thing I thought of when I realized Jeanine was you? Literally, the very first thing?"

She was quiet, like she wasn't sure if she wanted to know.

"It wasn't 'Oh wow I found Jeanine,'" he added.

"What was it then?" she asked in a small voice.

"It was, 'Thank Merlin I'm the bloke who took Hermione's virginity.' I wanted to kill Mark every time I thought about it. I was insanely jealous. I didn't want to share you, not even with some bloke from seven years ago. And when I realized Jeanine was really you, it was like I could finally breathe."

She pulled back and gave him an odd look. "Really?" she said.

He nodded.

"But you've slept with so many other people!"

She sounded a bit outraged, and Draco was pleased to hear it. It was much better than being sad.

"I know, princess. Trust me, I know I'm a hypocritical bastard. But I'm the jealous type. I've always been jealous. It's one of my vices, and I wanted to fucking crucify Mark for touching you like that."

She frowned a little as she thought about this, and he pressed his advantage.

"When I realized that I was Mark, and I had been the one to take that from you..." Draco shuddered a bit and unconsciously gripped her harder.

"Because I'm Jeanine?" she said in that small voice again.

"No, because Jeanine was you."

She blinked. "It's the same thing..." she said slowly.

"Is it?" he asked. "Is it really?"

She went quiet again, so he decided to press on.

“The next thing I thought about was relief that I hadn’t lost my fucking mind all those years ago.”

This seemed to pull her out of her thoughts. “Wait, what?”

Draco sighed. “You’re right I was obsessed with Jeanine. That night just... it was amazing, and then it broke my heart. And it didn’t make sense. None of it *ever* made any fucking sense. It drove me mad that I couldn’t get you out of my head, and I could never really pinpoint *why*. I mean, I went over our conversation that night a thousand times. I went over the sex another thousand times, and none of it ever added up. The conversation was wonderful – it was deep, almost therapeutic in a way, and you were really funny even though you were very sad. I connected to that. And the sex was obviously really hot. But neither of those things should have been enough to make me become fixated on you. I’ve had deep conversations with other witches. I’ve had plenty of hot sex. And I never felt that way about the others. But then when I found out Jeanine was really *you*? It was like, well of *course* I was fucking obsessed! I hadn’t lost my mind at all! I was just attracted to the smartest witch I’ve ever met, who has always been really pretty, and who gave me my very first public erection when she slapped me in third year. It was like the goddamned sun came out, and I no longer had to question my own sanity.”

She was gaping now, and Draco was breathing hard after that rant, but once he started he couldn’t stop. Every bit of it was true.

She frowned now, and he could tell she was thinking hard.

“Something I’m hung up on though... you must have realized who I was that night on Theo’s window seat. Up until then I sensed you were holding back and questioning things with me. And then as soon as you knew I was Jeanine, it was like something turned on and suddenly you seemed sure.”

He inclined his head. He could see why the timing of that would bother her.

“Look, I was into you before that night. I was just fighting it.”

“Why?” she asked softly.

“Well at first it was because I thought you wouldn’t want anything to do with me. And then it was because I knew this was going to be hard. We have a lot of history and a lot of baggage, especially me. I felt like I had enough hard things in my life, and I didn’t need to start something else that was hard. But I was crumbling before that night princess, I really was. Learning about Jeanine just made me realize it was inevitable, and I stopped fighting it. I knew I had never been able to fight Jeanine, and I realized it was pointless to try to fight you. But I promise you, if Jeanine had been some other random girl or if I had never learned the truth, I would have ended up in exactly the same place with you. Jeanine might have pulled the timeline forward two or three weeks, that’s all.”

“Really?” she asked. She sounded so hopeful it almost broke Draco’s heart.

“Really.”

She was quiet again, but she leaned back into him, and Draco felt something start to unclench. Maybe, just maybe he was convincing her.

“We should probably talk about that night,” she said softly.

Draco nodded, his tension immediately returning. “I have things I need to tell you. And there are things I’d like for you to tell me, but that’s up to you.”

She nodded against him, but didn’t say anything so Draco knew he had to go first.

“I was in the bar that night because I had been sent to torture and capture your parents. I didn’t want to do it. I absolutely panicked, actually, and I took as long as I could transfiguring myself to stall and come up with some other plan. I had the idea to kidnap them and force them into hiding, but I don’t know anything about muggles so I wasn’t sure how to do it. And I also didn’t know if you would be there. I was sure you would probably kill me if I tried.

Eventually I couldn’t stall any longer so I had to leave, and I figured I would just wing it. When I got there they were already gone, and the house was stripped. I was so relieved, Hermione, you have no idea. But I knew I couldn’t go straight back to the Manor because he would have expected me to look for them. So I hung out in one of the bedrooms – I assume it was yours judging by the massive bookcase – and I saw *A Winter’s Tale* on the nightstand. It looked short, so I read it to kill some time before I went back to the Manor, and that play just ate at me. I mean, the queen is named Hermione and she’s falsely accused of being something she’s not? It just felt too close to real life, and I decided to get a drink to brood a little before I went home to take my torture.

I stopped in the bar around the block, and there you were. The first thing I noticed was your hair, and for a minute I thought it was you, and maybe you had dyed it. But then you turned around and looked different, so I decided I could approach you. I told you my name was Mark because all I could think of was the fucking Dark Mark on my arm that was turning me into a monster.

And then after that night I started looking for you. I went back to that bar for a month, and eventually the bartender took pity on me and gave some ideas about going through the muggle authorities to find you. I just... I *had* to find you. I did fall for you, but I was also really afraid you would be killed in the war. That was when I realized I needed a safe house that Father couldn’t find. Mother and I planned to use it if we had to, but I also wanted to keep you safe. If I had found you, I would have kidnapped you and kept you there as my prisoner until the fucking war was over. I’m not proud of it, but you

deserve to know. I would have taken away your freedom for years if I had to.”

He held his breath. This was the thing, even more than Mark and Jeanine, that he felt he had to confess to her before he allowed himself to really touch her. She deserved to know that he had been sent to torture and capture her parents. She also deserved to know he made plans — entirely of his own volition — to capture *her*. He would have tried to do something to help her parents if they had been there that night, but he was absolutely determined to find and imprison her. And if she wanted nothing more to do with him after she learned about these things, he had already decided he would accept it and not fight her on it. It would break his heart, but it would be nothing less than he deserved.

She nodded a bit, and to Draco’s utter relief she didn’t pull away but nestled in closer. “I figured that’s why you were there. It was the only explanation for your being in that specific bar. That bar is nowhere close to Wiltshire. As for your plans to kidnap Jeanine... well, I can’t really judge given what I did to the muggles I cared about.”

Draco finally let himself start to relax. He had hoped that she already worked out some of it herself, but he hadn’t been certain. And she didn’t sound angry about any of it. He felt lightheaded with relief.

“So that’s why you could quote *A Winter’s Tale* then? You had finished reading it ten minutes before you walked into that bar?” she added.

Draco felt the first smile crack his face in what felt like ages. “Yes. You don’t think I just walk around quoting Shakespeare do you?”

He thought he heard a smile in her voice when she said, “No, I suppose you don’t.”

There was another long pause, and then Draco tentatively asked, “Hermione, what happened to them? Mother knows but won’t tell me. She says it has to come from you.”

She slumped against him, and Draco pulled her tighter.

“You’re going to be horrified,” she whispered. “It’s the worst thing I’ve ever done. Much worse than kidnapping them and making them live in a safe house.”

Draco blinked in surprise at this, but he forced himself not to react. She had kept this from him, but he wanted to know. He needed to know. And he thought – or maybe he just hoped – that *she* needed for him to know. It might help her heal from whatever it was.

“I won’t judge you, and I won’t tell anybody,” he said. “Just like that night at Theo’s. Tell me once, and then if you never want to talk about it again, we don’t have to.”

She nodded and took a deep breath. “I never told them about the war, not really. They knew a little about blood prejudice, and they knew that Harry kept getting into scraps with this crazy dark wizard who had it out for him, but that was all I ever told them. They would have tried to pull me out of the magical world if they knew what it was really like.

So that morning I told them I was going to pick up Lavender Brown from the train station. They knew she was my dorm mate, and I told them we had finally become good friends, and she wanted to come stay for a few days. I told them she was still underage and couldn’t travel by magic, so I had to drive Dad’s car to get her. They let me take the car, and I drove it around the block and transfigured myself. I didn’t want anybody to recognize me, not even them.

I drove back home, got out, and rang the doorbell. I introduced myself as Lavender and said that Hermione offered to get my bags and would be there in a moment. They invited me in, and I stunned both of them. Then I obliviated them and removed myself from their memories. I made them think they wanted to go live in Australia, and while they were unconscious I packed their essentials with magic. Kingsley had arranged a couple of illegal portkeys for me just after Dumbledore’s funeral, and I used the first one to go to Australia for a

few days to buy a house with money I stole from them. I told my parents I was visiting Lavender of course. Then the day I obliviated them I used the other portkey to take their things and move them in.

When I was finally done I changed the color of Dad's car, revived them, and pretended to be the person they had hired to drive them to the airport for their move to Australia. I took them to Heathrow and dropped them off, and that was the end of it. I was in that bar for a couple hours before you showed up. My middle name is Jean. I told the bartender my name was Jeanine because he knew Hermione Jean of course. I thought it was close enough that I could remember it if I got roaring drunk."

She said all of this in a flat voice, and Draco's heart really did break now.

"Oh Hermione..." he said, and he felt her start to shake.

"I'm a horrible person..." she said.

"No. No, you're not horrible at all. You saved their lives. You saved *me* from having to make an awful choice. You were perfect. Absolutely flawless. I found nothing at all that could tell me who they were or where they had gone."

She sniffed and nodded a bit, and Draco felt her calming back down. "I read *A Winter's Tale* the night before I did it," she said quietly. "It was Mum's favorite play, and Dad liked it too. That's why they named me Hermione. I just thought I owed it to them to read it one more time before I did that to them. That's why it was on my nightstand."

"I thought you said the last book you read was *The Gift of Fear*?"

"Well it was. *A Winter's Tale* is a play, not a book."

Draco cracked a small smile at this. "Of course, how silly of me."

Adorable little swot.

They were silent for awhile, and then Draco squeezed her and gathered his courage to ask her the next thing. "Have you tried to reverse it?"

She sighed. "I did find them after the war, but no I haven't tried. I went back to Hogwarts and researched it, and it looked really dangerous given how much time had passed and how much I had to take away. So I decided to become a healer. I was choosing between that and becoming an unspeakable anyway, and I thought maybe if I understood more about the brain I could attempt a reversal. My healer training actually made me less comfortable with it, though it also introduced me to curse breaking so I'm still very glad I did it. And I adore the clinic of course. Then I had this mad idea to go to muggle medical school, because I thought maybe muggles would know something about the brain that would convince me it could be done safely. So that's why I'm a doctor too. But none of it worked, Draco. They're still in Australia, living their best lives without me. They never saw me graduate from Hogwarts or St. Mungo's or Cambridge. They're never going to see me get married or know their grandchildren. They're so happy, and I know it was the right choice at the time. But it still makes me very sad."

Draco sighed as he held her close. "Thank you for telling me. And I'm serious, we don't ever have to talk about it again, unless you want to. But Hermione, if you want to talk about them... you can tell me. I'd love to know all about them."

She pulled back, and looked up at him. Her eyes were rimmed red, and Draco was struck by her similarities to Jeanine that night. Not for the first time he wondered how he had never guessed it was her.

He reached up and tugged on one of her curls, and she gave him a watery smile.

"There's one other thing," she said, looking a bit shy now.

"Anything," he said.

“I just... I don’t understand why you seem to... like me so much.”

He looked at her incredulously. “What’s not to like?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. But I just don’t know how to measure up to you sometimes.”

Draco snorted. “Hermione... You’re gorgeous, funny, brilliant, powerful, strategic, and ridiculously brave and protective. Not to mention you’re incredibly sweet. You’re the total package.”

She blinked in surprise. “But I’m rather bookish.”

“It’s really hot,” he said.

“I have all those scars...”

“I know. They don’t bother me at all, other than the fact that you were injured. You know mine are just as bad.”

“Oh...” she said quietly, and he could see she looked surprised by this. He got the impression she was thinking hard.

“Well I’m not high society, and I don’t have any money. I used to, but not anymore. I spent all of my savings on my education and keeping us alive during the war. Up until very recently I lived paycheck to paycheck. My parents had some money after their move to Australia, but I didn’t take it, not after the things I did to them.”

He felt himself soften a bit at this, and he moved his hand to her chin and brushed his thumb across her lips. She inhaled, and they parted just a little. Draco again felt his self control weakening, but he had to finish this conversation with her first. He needed her to understand that he wasn’t looking at other witches and comparing them to her.

“At risk of sounding like the giant arse I used to be in school, I’m obscenely wealthy. I know you’ve seen an asset list of the estate, but they didn’t make me list gold or business interests on it. You don’t need to know exact numbers yet, but please trust me when I say you

don't have to have money because I have more than enough for both of us. I'll admit that settlements are still very much a part of the circles I run in, but it's never been important to *me* nor to my parents, not even Father. Any money or property a witch would normally bring to the table in settlements would just be a rounding error compared to the Malfoy fortune. It would have to be nine figures before it even starts to move the needle, so we've never cared about it."

"Bloody hell," she muttered.

He chuckled a little. "And as for high society, you should know that Mother has only found a single flaw with you. I've already corrected it, so there's nothing more to say on that."

He was pleased to see she was starting to smile at this. "Oh? And what was my one flaw?"

"You stir your tea using circles."

Hermione rolled her eyes, but she was starting to give him that slow smile he loved so much. "I suppose it's good to know what my flaws are."

"Of course. You are perfectly imperfect. The matter of tea stirring is very serious business."

Her smile turned a bit shy, and as usual Draco felt himself softening as he watched it. "So I take it you aren't *too* disappointed in the real Jeanine then?"

"Oh sweetheart, I could never be disappointed in you."

Her eyes got big, and she searched his face for something.

"Sweetheart?" she whispered.

"If you don't like it, I'll keep calling you princess. Hell, I'll call you princess regardless because it's grown on me. But I've really wanted

to call you sweetheart this whole time. I just wanted you to know why first.”

She bit her lip. “I do like it. I like it a lot. It’s just... the only person who has ever called me that was Mark,” she said softly.

Draco took a moment to run the pad of his thumb over one cheek before pulling her face closer to him so he could feel her breath on his lips. He moved his hand lower so he could feel her pulse thudding under his hand, and he knew his own heart was racing too.

“No, sweetheart. The only person who has ever called you that is me. And I’ve been calling you that in my head for seven years, three months, and fourteen days.”

She gasped a little, and Draco’s eyes drifted shut of their own accord as he closed the meager distance between them. Finally, at long last, his lips touched hers, and he knew he had found his way home.

The Edge

Chapter 18: The Edge

AN: Which comes first, the orgasm or the date? Reasonable minds can disagree.

Hermione

Hermione was instantly transported back those seven plus years to the small, bright bar when she was first kissed like this. It started soft, almost tentative until suddenly Draco gripped her face with his hand and opened his mouth. It was so familiar and yet so different at the same time. This man – whom she had dwelled on and dreamed about in the months after their encounter all those years ago – had grown up. He had more purpose, more confidence in his kiss at this age, but it was still the same lips and slightly stubbled chin and the faintest trace of peppermint that called to her.

She let him do it of course. How could she not?

Her emotions felt almost bruised after the last few weeks and the temporary, but devastating moment she thought Draco really wanted Jeanine and not her. The way he was kissing her now was like a balm to reassure her that he wanted Hermione. He *really* wanted Hermione. It was slow, deep, and exploratory.

She slipped her arms around his neck, and he lifted her a bit, settling her on his lap so she was straddling him. She sighed as she melted against him like that, and she heard Draco almost whimper beneath her as soon as she did it. When he finally broke their kiss and pulled back to look at her, his expression was almost as raw as she felt.

“Do you have *any* idea how much I’ve wanted this?” he whispered.

His hands were tracing her face, studying every freckle and dip. If he didn’t look so amazed by what he was seeing, Hermione would have been embarrassed. She could hide nothing from him under a stare like that.

She said nothing, but just bit her lower lip, and his eyes instantly darkened as he saw her do it.

“Don’t test me sweetheart,” he suddenly said.

Hermione blinked. “Oh I didn’t mean…”

He licked his lips, and his nostrils flared just a bit. “What *exactly* didn’t you mean to do today? Did you mean to wear those jeans that practically outline your arse? Or put on a top that gives me the barest hint of your tits? Or wear that bracelet that says you’re mine? Or use that perfume that makes me want to bury my face into your neck? Because when you do all those things and then bite that sweet lip while giving me doe eyes, I’m pretty sure you’re trying to fuck with my self-control.”

Hermione’s breath caught, and her eyes widened.

He pulled her toward him and put his lips against her ear. “Tell me. How much self-control do *you* have?”

Then his tongue flicked it and he pulled her earlobe into his mouth to suckle just a bit. Hermione felt goosebumps erupt, and she tilted her head toward him before he released her earlobe and said, “Are these earrings special?”

A bit nonplussed now, Hermione frowned and felt them. She couldn’t even remember what she had put in her ears this morning. With one touch she realized they were her cheap faux gold balls she had purchased at a pound shop a couple years ago. She shook her head.

“Give them to me later,” he said.

What on earth?

“Why?”

“You’ll see. Just do it for me, yes?”

She hesitated for a moment, but nodded. He made an approving sound and returned to her ear, but then her thoughts left her as he started to kiss down the column of her throat, inhaling as he did so. “You liked the perfume?” he murmured.

She nodded dumbly.

“Then wear it every day for me. When you run out, I’ll give you more. And please, don’t ever switch your shampoo. I swear to Merlin, it’s the best combination I’ve ever smelled.”

“How did you know?” she breathed.

“Later,” he said simply.

Hermione didn’t object because he had reached her clavicle, and he was starting to lick all around it.

“How do you feel about marks?” he asked.

Hermione said nothing, but felt a flush start at her cheeks and work its way down her neck, all the way to her knickers. He pulled back as he asked her this and watched the progress of her blush curiously before giving her a truly decadent smirk.

“Well I think that answers *that*,” he said softly before leaning in and sucking hard.

Hermione gasped and unconsciously rocked her hips into him, which made him grip her arse hard. He pressed his own erection into her core, and she groaned a little bit.

“Fuck,” he muttered as he released her and pulled back to stare at the mark he had left.

Hermione was breathing hard. The last time they had been together, it had been fast, almost frantic. This time he was so unhurried that she was still fully dressed and so was he. It didn’t matter though. Her knickers were as soaked as they had ever been. She couldn’t *wait* for him to slip a hand under her shirt or into her jeans. She had been waiting for weeks, and she knew it would take her no time at all once he finally did it.

“I’m going to make a rule about marks,” he said as he stared at the place on her shoulder that was surely turning red.

“A rule?” she asked.

His gray eyes flicked up to meet her hazel ones. “You like rules, sweetheart. You like to follow them.”

“I also like to break them.”

It just slipped out, but something slightly dangerous flashed in his eyes as she said it.

“Did you break my rule about touching yourself without me?” he asked bluntly.

She blinked in surprise at how serious he sounded. She had thought he was just teasing her with it, but then she thought back to some of those books she had read in the library.

Had he really meant it?

“I can’t give myself an orgasm without my vibrators, I told you that,” she said, blushing a little.

Draco cocked his head to study her. “That wasn’t the rule. The rule was no touching.”

Damn.

“I –” Hermione started before clamping her mouth shut. The truth was she had done it once – only once – to confirm that she still needed her vibrators to get off.

“You broke my rule, didn’t you?” he said softly. And again he looked a bit dangerous.

“Just one time! I didn’t realize you meant it after that one night, and I wasn’t sure if I still needed my vibrators or not!” she said quickly. “I haven’t tried without them in so long, and I thought maybe if I was thinking of you...”

She trailed off and glanced at him to see how he would react to this. She wasn’t sure why she was trying to justify it to him. It was *her* body. She could do whatever she wanted with it. But for some reason she wanted to make him understand. She didn’t want him to believe that she had broken it intentionally, not really.

He seemed to think about it before nodding a little. “Alright, I’ll admit that dry spell lasted longer than I thought it would, and it was my own fault. I’ll give you a pass this time. But sweetheart, when you agree to a rule with me in the future, I want you to follow it. If you don’t like a rule I propose or you need to change it, just tell me. We’ll talk about it. But if you agree to it, then I expect you to follow through.”

She felt surprisingly guilty now, and she lowered her eyes as she nodded a little.

“Oh fuck me,” he muttered as he caught her lips and kissed her hard. When he finally pulled away, she was practically breathless.

“What was that for?” she asked in confusion. “I thought you were disappointed...”

He gripped her face again and made her look at him. “Sweetheart. Hermione. I already told you, I could *never* be disappointed in you.

Not ever, OK?”

He looked so serious, that something in her soul unclenched, and she nodded again.

His eyes warmed as he studied her expression. “Good. Now back to my rules. The no touching rule still stands. And for the marks I give you... no glamors.”

“Then everybody will see,” she said.

He inclined his head. He seemed to relish the thought.

“Can I add some limits?” she asked carefully.

“It’s your body. You’re always allowed to tell me no or establish limits,” he said easily.

Hermione blinked. She wasn’t really expecting that since he insisted on having rules in the first place. But as she thought about it, she was starting to understand. He wanted some control over her sexuality. But for it to be legitimate, it had to be fully consensual. She could always veto any rule he created. That was a relief and made her far more willing to play this game with him.

“Alright. I’m a fairly private person. I don’t mind *you* seeing my marks, nor our closest friends I suppose. But I don’t want the media to see them. They’ll write horribly nasty things about me if they do. And I think I would die of embarrassment if your mother saw them. So I won’t glamor them in private, but I’d like to glamor them in public or around the Manor if they’re in a visible place... for now at least.”

“Done,” he said instantly.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief, as he moved back to her chest and added one just on the very upper swell of her breast. By the time he pulled away and brushed it lightly with his thumb, she was wriggling a bit. He was driving her utterly mad, and she *really* wanted

him to get started on some of her more intimate parts. The teasing was becoming unbearable.

He looked back up at her and gave her a slow smile before he gave her a peck on the lips and swatted her lightly on the arse.

“Up you get. Dinner time.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped in horror. “*Excuse me?*”

He gave her a smug grin as he removed her from his lap and stood up. “I said I’m taking you to dinner. Come on, glamor those marks, and then let’s find a place.”

“But... I thought you were going to...” she trailed off, feeling utterly confused and incredibly frustrated. It had been so long, and she was utterly wrecked. She wanted her orgasm *now*, dammit.

“You thought I would get you off before taking you on a date first? Of course not. I have manners.”

He actually looked offended that she would ever consider this. Hermione decided she didn’t care if he was offended or not. He had gotten her worked up and then left her hanging.

“Draco... *please*. We can go eat in a few minutes. I *need* it.” She gave him her best pleading look, making her eyes wide and biting her lower lip.

To her consternation he just gave her a slightly evil smile as he leaned over her. “Oh my clever little swot. You already know exactly what to do to drive me crazy, don’t you? But unfortunately I heard your stomach growl while Harry and Theo were here. I’ve already let it go far too long, and what kind of wizard would I be if I didn’t feed my witch when she’s hungry?”

“I’m hungry for something else...” she muttered, but he just smiled broadly and laughed as he pulled her to her feet.

“That’s what I like to hear. Now come on, take me to your favorite place nearby. I know you must have one since you say you don’t cook.”

He gave her a knowing look, and Hermione sighed but conceded defeat. She rose and flicked her wand to glamor her marks, and he caught her hand as she led him toward the door.

She couldn’t believe this. She really couldn’t believe this, but then her stomach rumbled again, and Draco just gave her a superior look.

Alright fine, so she was hungry. And maybe she had a habit of skipping meals. But did he have to be so bloody arrogant about it?

She was pulling him down the stairs when she heard Maud’s voice shout, “Hermione!”

Hermione tried not to groan. She adored visiting with Maud and Tom, she really did. They had become the closest things to muggle parents that she had, ever since her own parents had been sent to Australia. But she wanted to eat *now* so she could get back to more important things.

“Oh hi Maud, we’re just heading to dinner,” she said quickly, hoping very much that Maud would take a hint.

Maud raised her eyebrows and took in the picture of Hermione and Draco, hand in hand. “Well I won’t keep you long, but do introduce me to your friend first, dear!”

Hermione sighed, but turned to Draco who had an almost gleeful look on his face.

“Maud, this is Draco Malfoy. He’s a...friend of mine.” She glanced sideways at him as she said this, and she saw a muscle in his jaw twitch, but his expression didn’t change. “Draco, this is Maud Brown. She and her husband Tom own the bookshop below my flat.”

Draco gave Maud his most charming smile, and Maud looked slightly transfixed as she shook his hand. "Mrs. Brown, it's a pleasure to meet you. Hermione has said such lovely things about you."

"Oh! Well the pleasure is all mine, dear. I admit, I haven't heard about any new gentlemen friends recently, but I'm thrilled she's finally found one."

Oh bloody hell.

Hermione turned crimson as Draco grinned broadly and immediately engaged Maud in conversation.

She tapped her foot a bit impatiently as she listened to Maud question him about his job ("Oh I'm in finance"), and how long he had known Hermione ("It feels like years, but we've only gotten together recently"), and finally where he lived ("Mayfair, though I'm from Wiltshire").

Draco, meanwhile, asked Maud how long she had worked with books ("My whole life dear"), and where she met her husband ("Childhood sweethearts; we were neighbors"), and whether their bookstore searched for rare books they didn't have in stock ("Oh yes, we have several clients who like to send us on the wildest scavenger hunts you can imagine").

By the time Maud finally bid them farewell, with a very meaningful look toward Hermione which clearly said, "*We will discuss this later dear!*" Hermione was in a bit of a state.

"Come on," she demanded, grabbing his hand and pulling.

"Make it a sit down place, sweetheart."

She cast an annoyed look at him, but he just grinned. "I just want to take my witch out. Is that a problem?"

“*Fine*,” she grumbled, as she pulled him toward a tucked away Italian place. It was small, but delicious. It had become a favorite of Hermione’s over the last few years, though she hadn’t been recently. It had become a bit too dear for her budget after Pansy Parkinson came into her life.

They were seated quickly, much to Hermione’s relief, and Draco murmured his approval when he saw the wine list. “Champagne or something else tonight?” he said.

“Just entrées, then back home,” she said sternly.

He just smiled indulgently and ordered their best bottle of champagne and a large caprese salad to share as a starter. Hermione nearly groaned.

“Might as well enjoy it,” he said easily. “We’re here until I’m done.”

“But *why* Draco,” she huffed, as she picked up a piece of mozzarella. Her stomach gave a loud rumble right on cue, and Draco just looked at her pointedly.

“That’s why.”

“We could have waited fifteen minutes and gotten off first though,” she said grumpily.

He was silent for a moment as he considered her words. Then he looked at her thoughtfully. “Tell me what you know about intimate power exchanges.”

She blinked, a bit thrown off by this apparent non sequitur. But answering questions was such a reflex for her, she automatically started to talk.

“Well... there are different degrees. In sexual power exchanges usually one person gives the other the right to control things. It can

be just sex or it can be their entire life or something that falls in the middle. It all has to be consensual to be legitimate though.”

He nodded. “Correct. And when you agreed to keep your hands to yourself and let me control your orgasms, that was a power exchange. You’ll soon learn that I’ll only let you come if you care about yourself first. That means you have to eat, you have to sleep, and you have to take breaks from saving the damn world now and then to relax. If you can do that for me, then I’ll make sure you come so hard you see stars.”

Hermione was struck by this. It was both very controlling and... sweet? It was so odd, because she thought something like that would bother her, but it didn’t, not really. Instead, it made her feel cared for. It made her feel seen. Some part of her really craved a relationship with a wizard who noticed those sorts of things about her instead of just letting her run herself ragged like she was wont to do. Besides, Draco was a master at giving her space and not interfering with her need to think or work — he had proven that over the last few weeks. Limiting his interference to make sure she cared about herself made her feel warm, not trapped.

She flushed, but nodded a little, and he just gave her a small smile as he sipped some champagne.

As Hermione ate through the starter with him, she realized she really *was* famished. She had been so nervous to see him again today that she had skipped lunch, and breakfast had been her usual grab and go on the way to work. Perhaps he had a point, and she could wait another hour while she ate her first real meal of the day.

She noticed him watching her carefully as she ate her lasagna, and when she finally put down her fork, he nodded to himself just a bit.

“Dessert?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No, I’m stuffed.”

He gave a small smile and settled the bill, while Hermione chewed on her lip a bit nervously. It had been a long time since she had been on a real date — that dinner with Terry Boot didn't count — and she wasn't used to letting others pay for her. But she didn't fight him about it. She knew it wasn't a burden for him by any stretch. They finally rose, and Hermione felt her nervousness start to pique as she led him back to her flat. The build-up tonight had been excruciating, though she had to admit she *did* feel better with some food in her stomach.

She let him into her dark flat and saw a familiar shape sitting on the sofa in the dim light. "Crooks boy, go to your bed."

Crookshanks stood, gave a negligent stretch, and then hopped down and leisurely made his way out of the living room to the small utility room just off the kitchen. He meowed when he arrived, and Hermione flicked her wand to close the door.

"He's unbelievably well-trained," muttered Draco.

She shrugged. "He's half-kneazle."

Draco just looked at her for a moment, and Hermione felt herself falter. "Ummm, I'm just going to go and freshen up," she said quickly. She could still taste tomato sauce and garlic in her mouth from dinner, and she couldn't remember if her bra and knickers matched.

"Take your time," he said comfortably, as he sank down on the sofa.

Hermione hurried off to her small bathroom and quickly brushed her teeth. She cast a contraceptive charm on herself just in case and then put her wand and holster in her nightstand. Finally, she checked to confirm that yes she had remembered to match her bra to her knickers today, or close enough at any rate. Then she touched up her makeup just a bit. Bloody hell it had been so long since she had done this sort of thing she was woefully out of practice. Draco seemed perfectly relaxed, but Hermione was having a damned aneurysm from nerves.

She finally exhaled and looked at herself in the mirror.

“You can do this,” she muttered to her reflection. “He wants you. He likes you. You don’t have to understand it. Just follow his lead, and it will be fine.”

Her reflection looked unconvinced, but there was nothing for it. She still felt dreadfully unsatisfied from earlier, and now she was getting into her own head about it. She just needed to trust that he had done this enough times that he could make up for any of her shortcomings.

She cast one last look in the mirror before turning and hurrying out, coming to a complete halt when she saw him lounging on the sofa, an enormous bulge in his pants already very evident despite the low light. Hermione swallowed and started to approach him.

“Stay right where you are,” he said.

Hermione stopped walking and looked at him in confusion.

“Please remove your top sweetheart.”

Hermione blinked and bit her lip, but fingered the edge of her jumper and slowly pulled it over her head. She was a bit nervous to show him her scars again, but she consoled herself that the room was rather dark. And there wasn’t anything she could do about them anyway.

Draco’s eyes roved over her greedily. “And your jeans,” he said quietly.

Hermione unbuttoned her jeans and shimmied out of them before straightening up. She clasped her hands in front of her a bit nervously, and Draco’s eyes immediately dropped to her chest. Only then did she realize it was making her breasts press together, and she forced herself to release her hands, but she didn’t know what to do with them now.

She was so nervous. She had never done anything like this before and was already very out of her depths.

“Please turn around for me,” he said.

Hermione swallowed and turned around. She heard the slight rustle of fabric and glanced over her shoulder to find his pants unbuttoned, his hand slowly stroking himself as he looked at her. Hermione’s heart started to pound, and she felt that telltale dampness between her legs again. She had no idea what she was doing, not really. But she did remember that his favorite feature was arse, and here he was touching himself while he looked at hers. Almost unconsciously she released her lower back and popped her arse out just a smidge.

His eyes widened slightly, and he started to nod. “Just like that, sweetheart. Fuck you’re gorgeous.”

Hermione felt a flush of pleasure at his words, and his observant eyes picked up on it immediately. He smiled a little.

“Come over here and sit with me.”

Hermione exhaled and walked over to him. He removed his hands from his pants, but he was still completely dressed while she was just down to her underwear. He scooted back against the cushions and spread his legs a bit, motioning that she should sit on the sofa in between them.

She lowered herself cautiously, and then suddenly she felt his hands on her shoulders.

“Oh my *God*,” she groaned as he pressed his thumbs into her. He chuckled a bit as he dug in.

When was the last time somebody had given her a massage? Had any man *ever* given her a massage? She couldn’t remember, but she finally felt some of the tension start to drain out of her.

“Fuck Granger, you have a ton of knots.”

This suddenly pulled her back to the present.

“Granger? I thought you called me Hermione now. Or sweetheart or princess.”

“I reserve the right to call you Granger whenever I’m annoyed with you. I might also call you Granger if you let me pound you into a mattress at some point. I’m not sure yet.”

Hermione faltered again at this image.

“And why are you annoyed?”

“Because you need to take care of yourself. If you’re this tense, it means you need to take more breaks.”

With that he flattened both hands on her shoulders and then ran them down her back, as his thumbs continued to dig in along her spine. Merlin but his hands were large. She knew she was a lot smaller than him. She was rather short and petite, and he certainly was not. She realized that he could stretch his fingers and cross her entire back with two hands. It made her shudder.

“Well...” she said a bit breathlessly as he continued to rub. “This will surely help.”

“Mmmm,” he said as he continued to work in silence for a bit. She felt him start to zero in around the band of her bra, and then all of a sudden there was a slight tug, and she felt it release.

Automatically Hermione tensed again.

“Relax, sweetheart,” he said soothingly.

He ran his hands up and down her back again, and then gently slipped her bra off of her shoulders. Hermione felt it fall forward so

she was now bare for him, though she was still facing away so he couldn't really see her.

"That's better," he muttered, as he really started to rub.

"Tell me, what's Gamp's Third Law of Elemental Transfiguration?"

Hermione was so surprised by this she forgot to be nervous for a moment, and automatically she started to recite it.

"Good. What's the best preparation method for flutterby petals?"

"Why are you asking me these questions?" she said faintly.

"Because you're tense," he said. "This isn't supposed to be tense."

"Oh..." she trailed off. "Well then..."

She started to tell him, and he asked her a few more questions as he worked his hands down to her lower back until she started to groan a little. She felt his hands slow just a bit at the sound and dig into that spot for another few moments until Hermione was breathing heavily. This was truly the most wonderful, most torturous thing anybody had ever done to her.

Finally, at long last, he allowed his hands to drift toward her side and then her front until he touched the edge of one scar.

"Do they ever get tight?" he asked her softly, as he stroked the edge of it.

"A couple of them do," she said quietly.

"Which ones?"

Hermione surprised herself by grabbing his hand and leading it toward the top of her right thigh. He was exceedingly gentle as he touched the rippled skin there.

"This one," she said. "It gets tight a lot."

"The fiendfyre," he muttered.

She just nodded, as he stroked it a little.

"I have a paste that might help," he said. "Florrie blends it for me. It has elf magic in it."

She turned to look at him in surprise. "Really? I've never heard of such a thing."

Draco nodded. "Yes, elves are brilliant with pastes and salves and lotions and such."

"And perfume," she said.

"And perfume," he agreed.

"Tell me how you knew about the perfume," she said.

"It's classified," he retorted.

She huffed, and she heard him chuckle a bit behind her, but then it trailed off as he started stroking her again.

"Have her... conditions changed at all?" Hermione asked hesitantly. "Or Rosie's?"

"I'm paying them now, if that's what you're asking," he said simply. "I'm paying all of them. I paid back wages too."

She turned around again, and she knew her eyes were huge. "Really? Why?"

He gave her a small smile and nudged her a bit. "Because somebody very tiny and very bossy went on a crusade about it once."

She felt herself blush a little.

“But the point is, I have a special paste for my fiendfyre scars. It keeps the skin more flexible. You’re welcome to try it.”

“Alright then,” she said softly, as she turned back to the front.

“Good. I’ll send it to you later on tonight. Any others?” he asked.

She didn’t answer him, but moved his same hand from her thigh to the place just under the swell of her right breast where her scar from destroying Hufflepuff’s cup lived.

“Here,” she whispered.

She finally felt his breathing get heavier as he brushed his thumb across the scar. All he had to do was move his hand up half an inch, and he would be touching her where she wanted it. She was nearly quivering with anticipation. But he didn’t move his hand up. Of course he didn’t.

“Can you feel that?” he asked as he rubbed it a little. “Or is it numb?”

“A little numb,” she admitted.

He raised his left hand to match the position of his right. “So to be clear, you can feel this,” and he brushed his left thumb under her left breast, “better than you can feel this,” and then he did the same to the right.

“Yes,” she groaned, and she was nearly panting now. He was so tantalizingly close, she instinctively arched to try to make his hands move up.

Suddenly she felt him pull her back against his chest so she could feel his erection now. He was rock hard. She turned in surprise, and her eyes immediately dropped to his lips. He smirked a bit.

“How much do you want it sweetheart?”

“I... so much,” she said breathlessly.

He moved his face to her neck and inhaled, and she felt the lightest brush of his lips against it. She shuddered. “What do good girls say?”

“Please...” she said.

“Please what?”

“Please... touch me.”

He started stroking her again, running his fingers around her breasts now, but not over them. She arched again.

“And what else do you want?” he asked.

“I want to come, Draco. *Please*, I’ve been so patient...”

“Mmmm,” he said. “I’ll make a deal with you.”

“I... what?” she asked. She was so worked up she was in no state to negotiate.

“I’ll let you come. But once we’re done here you’re going straight to bed. No work, no research, just turn that beautiful brain off and sleep.”

She immediately thought of the research she had been planning to do tonight on the Manor’s ritual. Florrie had owed her a few books from the library to see if she could confirm one of her theories.

“But I was going to –” she started, but he cut her off.

“No. Whatever it is, it can wait until tomorrow. You have circles under your eyes, so I know you haven’t been sleeping. Say you’ll go straight to bed when we’re done here, or I won’t let you come.”

“You can’t be serious...” she groaned.

“I’m entirely serious,” he said firmly. “I told you at dinner you have to eat, you have to sleep, and you have to take breaks to relax. Tonight I’ve discovered you haven’t been doing any of those things. We’re going to course correct before you get your orgasm.”

His fingers were skating up and down her sides now, drifting over her abdomen and even brushing her inner thigh as he spoke. She was so desperate, she was twitching involuntarily against his touch.

She finally just shelved her plans for the night and said, “Fine. I’ll go to sleep.”

“I was hoping you would say that,” he muttered, as his fingers finally drifted up, and suddenly he pinched her nipples while latching down on her shoulder to suck. It was such an abrupt shift from the light touches he had been using that she cried out and spasmed, arching back toward him.

His hands suddenly splayed out to grab both breasts and crush her to him. She felt him rolling them under his hands greedily, as he pressed his erection into her bum.

She wasn’t sure what inspired her to say it, but suddenly she gasped, “Are they still perfectly adequate then?”

She heard him groan behind her. “You should have just *Avada’d* me on the spot for ever suggesting they were anything less than perfect. Pansy just caught me off guard. I wanted to *Crucio* Terry Boot that night, you know. It absolutely killed me when I thought he was touching you.”

Hermione gasped. “Back then?”

“All the way back then,” he confirmed. “Let me see them sweetheart. Please. Turn around for me.”

Hermione was eager now, and when she turned to face him and settled back on his lap, she could finally see his face as he stared at

them.

“Goddamn...” he muttered, his eyes wide as he stared at them.
“Blaise might be right. These might be just as good as arse.”

Then he lifted her up so her breasts were at the height of his face, and he pulled one nipple into his mouth.

Hermione groaned and felt her eyes roll back, her hips starting to involuntarily buck. He hadn't touched her where she needed it yet, but she was already perilously close. It would only take moments if he would just give her the touch she wanted.

He held one arm around her waist while his other hand drifted down between her legs and gave the lightest brush against the gusset of her knickers. She groaned, and her thighs tried to clench together to pull him closer, but she was straddling him, and she couldn't squeeze them tight enough.

He lifted his face from her breasts and looked up at her.

“You've already soaked them through for me,” he said in an almost reverent voice, and he started to slide them down.

He shifted her off his lap and nudged her to stand for a moment to slide them all the way down before picking them up and shoving them in his pocket. He reached out and jerked her back toward him, and she stumbled a bit, falling onto his lap as his hands freely roamed her body.

“You're keeping those?” she gasped, as he gripped her bare arse for a moment.

“Anytime you're that wet, I'm keeping them,” he said bluntly.

“I'll run out...” she said, and he laughed a little as he groaned.

“Then I'll buy you more. I want a whole fucking collection of ruined knickers from you.”

“Alright,” she breathed, because she couldn't say anything else. If he wanted her to dance naked in the middle of Piccadilly Circus she'd do it if it meant he would finally shove something inside of her and help her release this wonderful, terrible pressure that had been building for hours now.

“Draco, *please* ...” she said.

“Just one more thing sweetheart,” he said as he gave another delicate brush against her slit. Her hips spasmed.

Dammit I need to come...

“What is it? I'll do anything...”

“Can I taste you?”

Hermione felt her world stop for just a moment. He had asked her that seven years ago in precisely the same way, and she told him no. Mark was the *only* person who had ever asked her for that. Ron said it was gross and wouldn't reciprocate the few times she went down on him. The three or four other blokes she had gotten handsy with over the years had never tried, and she hadn't suggested it. But here was Draco, asking that question *again*, and she could hear the eagerness and hopefulness in his voice.

“Yes,” she breathed. “But I've never...”

“I know, and it's truly one of my favorite things about you,” he said, as he brushed the outside of her slit again before running his hands around her. “This is all mine.”

Again Hermione felt herself jerk, but she was hopeful now. Maybe, just maybe, if he went down on her she would be able to come. She had no room for nerves or embarrassment because she was so frustrated she was willing to try anything that might bring her to completion.

To her surprise he gripped her by the bum again and physically lifted her while he stood up. Hermione instinctively wrapped her legs around him, but she didn't need to. She had to admit that the ease with which he handled her made her unbearably turned on. He was so much bigger than her, so much stronger than her. He could do anything he wanted to her, and she wouldn't be able to stop him, not really.

He lowered her onto the couch and gently pushed her back as he sat up and gripped her knees to open her legs. She felt so wanton like this. He was still fully dressed. The only thing out of place was the button on his pants. Hermione was completely naked, and he was opening her like a present while he stared down at her center.

"You're like a fucking piece of art," he muttered, and almost involuntarily Hermione arched for him, trying to show him she wanted him closer.

Even in the dim light she could see his pupils blow wide at this. "Oh sweetheart I'm going to have so much fun with you..." he muttered. "So needy. So desperate. What do you think, can I get you there without a vibrator?"

"Yes," she gasped, wriggling her hips. "*Please.*"

He gave her another light brush across her slit, and she convulsed. "*Draco...*" she said, and her voice caught. She felt something building in her chest as she quivered. She needed it so much she was nearly *crying* for heavens' sake, and she felt a few tears gather in the corner of her eyes. Nobody had ever done this to her before, not even close.

She saw him studying her, and she was certain he missed nothing. He saw her shaking. He saw her tears. He knew exactly what he was doing to her as he lowered his head slowly, never taking his eyes off her face. He opened his mouth and gave one long lick.

Hermione practically screeched at the sensation. It was so *odd*, so delicious, but her poor, sensitive core was begging for pressure. The soft, wet sensation of his tongue was incredible, but it almost made her need even worse.

He did it again, and Hermione was rocking her hips into it, seeking that pressure she just couldn't find.

"You're delicious," he said, and with that he settled in for long, slow, lazy licks and flicks while Hermione clapped her hand over her mouth to keep from moaning too loudly.

He saw her do it and instantly moved away. "Hands off, I want to hear," he said.

Her hands were shaking, and she felt cast adrift, but she obeyed him and almost unconsciously gripped her breasts instead. It wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough. It was taking her right to the edge but it wouldn't, *couldn't* push her over it.

She opened her eyes to find him watching her greedily.

"You can keep doing that princess," he said, and then he lowered himself again.

His tongue was everywhere, on the outside, on the inside, over her clit, running in circles and flicking back and forth. She was moaning and writhing as she felt herself continue to approach that moment before pulling back again. Over and over he did it, coaxing her, bringing her closer before lifting his head to watch her, and she would lose her momentum.

The tears were gathering in her eyes again, as she shook and gripped her breasts so hard she knew she would leave nail marks.

Her first experience with oral sex was both divine and infuriating. Hermione sensed that even if he hadn't continued to take little breaks, she wouldn't have fully gotten there. She had always been a

penetration girl. That's why she relied on her vibrators. She needed pressure to feel that release. His tongue could get her ninety-five percent of the way there with the sinful things he was doing to her clit, but she wouldn't break until she finally felt it inside of her. She sensed that if he would just give her that last little push this might be the best orgasm she had ever had.

"Your hands..." she gasped. "Or..."

He lifted his head. "Or?" he asked.

"Or your.... You know," she groaned.

"You want my cock?"

"Yes," she moaned.

"You want me to fuck you into this couch?"

"I want it so much, Draco... *please*."

She opened her eyes to find him staring at her. His expression was odd. He looked both exultant and surprisingly shrewd, like he was calculating some sort of risk.

Finally he said, "Not tonight, sweetheart."

Hermione nearly sobbed. "*What?* Please, I need..."

"I know what you need. You need this," and then finally, blessedly, he moved one finger inside of her and crooked it, and Hermione nearly came apart as she moaned with the pleasure of it.

Something about the sound she made seemed to make him snap, because suddenly he was pumping his finger into her roughly before adding a second, and she nearly fainted with relief to discover they were long enough to hit that special spot inside of her that she couldn't reach on her own. As it built faster and faster she suddenly heard words spilling out of him, filthy and beautiful.

“...gonna fuck you just like this, goddammit Granger...”

“... so tight, gods you’re going to make me come in my pants like a fucking teenager...”

“... fuck my ring, Granger, go on and come all over the House of Malfoy...”

“... so close, go Granger, come on my sweet, sweet girl... look at me and come!”

At his final words, Hermione’s eyes flew open to meet his for a split second as he twisted his fingers, and she felt the ridges from the Malfoy crest on his ring press into her clit. He looked transformed as he watched her, and then something ripped apart as somebody moaned and somebody else convulsed and yet somebody else gushed hot and wet all over his hand. Hermione was sure it wasn’t her because her vision popped, and all she saw were those stars he promised her. She surely couldn’t have managed all of those other things too.

What felt like a long moment later, but was probably just seconds, her vision cleared to find his cock in his hand, as he pumped frantically. He hunched for a moment, and she heard a grunt as he spurted something hot and sticky all over her chest and stomach. She vaguely realized he still had a finger inside of her and was stroking gently, drawing her orgasm down from its peak.

Draco released his cock and braced himself over her with his hand, breathing hard as he stared down at her. Time felt suspended as something passed between them, and then to her surprise he leaned forward and gave her languid kiss, which made her sigh.

He pulled back and studied her face for a moment. “I neglected to do that after dinner,” he whispered.

Hermione didn’t know what to say, so she just watched him, a flurry of emotions she couldn’t identify crossing his face.

But then something seemed to settle in him, because he pulled back a little. "Time for bed sweetheart."

She just nodded. She was spent, totally and utterly spent. She felt practically boneless as she laid there, and she knew she would be useless for anything except for sleep anyway.

He leaned back, and to her surprise he dipped his finger in the mess he had left on top of her and placed it on her lips.

"Just a taste of the future," he murmured, and Hermione let him pop it into her mouth. She sucked it clean, and he stared at her intently, his expression darkening again. Then he pulled back, shuddering a bit.

He finally reached for his wand and flicked it to clean her up, then he helped her stand on shaky legs. She felt her knees buckle a bit, and he caught her. "Easy," he chided gently.

They slowly made their way to her bedroom, and he lowered her onto the bed, glancing at the box on her nightstand with some fondness. She saw him looking around a bit curiously, a small smile on his face as he took in more of Luna's art, a pottery mustard jar from her trip to Dijon with her parents, the wildflowers he had been sending her dried and in a vase on her dresser, and another bookcase, filled with muggle books.

"What do you wear to bed?" he asked simply.

"Pajamas and underwear," she said a bit wryly.

He smiled down at her. "Which drawers?"

She told him, and to her utter shock, he told her to sit still while he collected them, returning a moment later with underwear he helped her slip on, and an oversized shirt he dropped over her head.

Then he grabbed her left hand and turned her wrist over to unfasten the bracelet he had given her, before grabbing her right hand and sliding her grandmother's ring off her middle finger.

"Where do you store your jewelry?" he asked, glancing around in confusion.

"I just use my nightstand," she said.

He gave her an odd look at that, but didn't say anything else as he leaned over and opened it. She saw him glance at the very small collection of jewelry, the ruby earrings standing out like beacons compared to everything else she owned. A worn copy of *Jane Eyre* with her favorite bookmark was there too. There was also her wand and holster, along with some bills Hermione needed to pay. She winced slightly as she saw the "past due" stamp was facing up on one of them. Hermione quickly grabbed it and turned it over.

"I'm getting caught up," she said quickly. "My landlord gave me a rent abatement this month, so I'll be fully caught up soon. It's just been tight recently because Pansy keeps coming up with new things I have to buy and –"

"It's fine, sweetheart," he said, cutting her off. "There's nothing wrong with it."

She flushed. "It's embarrassing."

"It's not," he insisted, and he gave her a quick kiss as he placed her bracelet and ring in the drawer. "Now give me the earrings you're wearing. It's time to sleep."

"Why do you want them?" she asked as she started to take them out.

"You'll see soon enough," he said cryptically. "Right now I want you to go to sleep. You need rest."

He gave her a stern look at that last missive, and she just sighed and nodded. He slipped out of her room, and about ten minutes later the latch on her box glowed.

She opened it, expecting to find her nightly flower. The flower was there, but it wasn't alone. There was a small jar of paste with a note that said, *Florrie's special recipe for scars*. And next to it was something that made Hermione's heart thud. It was a small bottle of potion that she recognized as a month-long contraceptive. The accompanying note said, *Just in case*.

Mr. Fix It

Chapter 19: Mr. Fix It

AN: What's that saying about the road to hell being paved with good intentions? Our Draco is well-intended, but he certainly likes to meddle. Now he's bringing the lawyers into it.

Note that lawyers in the UK are broken down between solicitors and barristers - but they are all lawyers. I will only call them lawyers (or attorneys) in this fic for ease of reading.

Draco

Draco had spent a couple hours staring at the ceiling of his bedroom the night before, turning over many things he learned about Hermione Granger the previous day. It wasn't that late when he left her flat, but he had seen the exhaustion and strain on her face the moment he arrived with Harry and Theo, and after their difficult conversation and then the incredible orgasm she gave him, he knew she needed to rest. After he sent her the flower and the potions through the box, he gave her fifteen minutes and then called Florrie to go check on her to make sure she was really asleep. Florrie reported that she was dead to the world, and Draco smiled with satisfaction.

Draco, however, couldn't sleep. His mind was racing, trying to put together all the things he needed to do to outsmart the smartest witch he knew.

Hermione was proud and independent, and Draco loved that about her. But she also needed help, and she was bad at asking for it. When she went to freshen up after dinner, he took the opportunity to

snoop in her kitchen cupboards and discovered they were rather bare and quite a few of the staples she did have were expired or nearly so. He saw a rather large stack of muggle mail on the counter that all looked like bills which were unopened, and of course he saw the one in her nightstand drawer with a past due notice. The minute he sucked on her earlobes he tasted the nickel from the cheap earrings she was wearing, and a quick glance at her selection of underwear when he helped her get dressed told him that most of it was faded, as though it had been washed too many times.

It made him think of a few other curious things he had noticed over the past several weeks. Whenever he met Theo for lunch at the Ministry and caught glimpses of her in the canteen, she always brought a lunch or skipped entirely and just drank tea. There were a couple pairs of jeans she started to wear that he was obsessed with; but he realized he only ever saw her in two different pairs these days. He hadn't seen her wear any others since Pansy took over her wardrobe. And there were a few books he noticed on her shelf the first time he visited her flat that were overused and patched with spellotape instead of being replaced.

Hermione had definitely overextended herself, that much was clear to him. She might command an unlimited budget for Hermione's Playground, but she didn't have one for herself. Her salary was a public record — Draco's lawyers had looked it up for him of course — so Kingsley couldn't pay her more than other similarly situated public employees or there would be questions. Draco knew that despite her tendency to steal things, she would never actually embezzle money from the Playground to make herself more comfortable.

He had to admit she hid it well. Her outer appearance had become more tailored recently, thanks to Pansy's help, and she was so busy that nobody would see her cracks unless they were watching her carefully. But Draco watched, and he knew better. Between Pansy's new wardrobe list and the outrageous rent her previous landlord was charging her, she had been stretched thin. Hermione had become

financially vulnerable. He knew that finding another flat like that in London would have been nearly impossible for her, so she hung on longer than she should have. And all of that, on top of her general tendency to skip meals and sleep in favor of letting her brain run circles around everybody else, meant that she was crumbling a little and nobody but Draco had noticed.

The rent abatement he had arranged would help tremendously, he knew, but he also felt that there was more he needed to do while he waited for her to get caught up. After the previous night he was more certain than ever that she was his. He had never connected to a witch so deeply, had never seen such a beautiful orgasm in his life. He had set out to make her fall in love with him, and instead, he was the one falling in love with her. He really hoped he would be able to make their arrangement a permanent one at some point, and if he ever convinced her to move into the Manor then taking care of her would be much easier. But until that wonderful event came to pass, she would be independent and on her own, struggling to keep up.

The notion that a Malfoy witch was struggling to pay bills was wholly offensive to Draco's sensibilities. The fact that her cupboards were filled with expired food, her clothes were becoming threadbare, and there were cracks in the plaster around her flat – charming as it may be – was intolerable. He had to do something about it, but he would have to be subtle. He didn't want to wound her pride or make her run from him again. He just wanted to give her a lift so that her brilliant mind could focus on things like inventing new potions instead of whether she could afford to buy a third pair of jeans. He wanted to find a way to solve some of her problems without her ever knowing about it, and he wanted to use her orgasms to make her comply with the things that required her cooperation, like eating and sleeping.

Draco knew Hermione liked to break rules, but when he discovered she didn't want to break *his* rules, not really, he had been struck by inspiration. Her misstep when she touched herself had been because she was curious and didn't understand just how serious Draco was about it. He could see the truth of it on her face. She

wasn't trying to be a brat, she was just inexperienced with power exchanges and made a mistake. When he explained that he was very serious about his rules, and he expected her to follow them going forward, her immediate agreement was so utterly sweet Draco fell for her all over again. Then her fear that he might be disappointed in her almost broke his heart.

No, Hermione wasn't a brat at all, though Draco wouldn't mind it if she showed her claws a little when she was annoyed with him. Her true nature was to be his little swot, his good girl, his sweetheart. She desperately wanted to be good enough for him. And that meant he could use her orgasms to his advantage. He could hold them hostage to make her care for herself and force her to accept help from him now and then.

He was perturbed that her fear of being a disappointment had come up twice in one night – first by being Hermione instead of Jeanine and then again by breaking a rule she didn't fully understand. His sweet witch was the least disappointing thing he could possibly imagine, and he didn't like that she put that kind of pressure on herself or had those insecurities. But he had to admit they didn't really surprise him. She had always overachieved, tried to impress, and pushed herself further than she should. She craved praise and feared letting others down. She got into her own head about it, and Draco knew that would have to soothe her fears and convince her that she was already perfect.

It took ages, but when she finally stopped thinking and just allowed herself to feel, the sounds and sights and scents she made for him were nothing short of extraordinary. He teased and edged her, both because he was sure it would drive her mad, but also because he had to break down her walls. She was tense, nervous, afraid that she would come up short. She was inexperienced compared to him, and he could tell she was painfully aware of that fact. It made her confidence around him falter. So he took his time with her, slowly, aching, until she wanted him so badly she finally got out of her own head and just allowed herself to let go.

Fuck if it hadn't been the hottest thing Draco had ever seen. Draco had been utterly transfixed by her climax. He had his very own little nymph who seduced him so sweetly with her innocence and big eyes and pretty gasps. When she finally relaxed into it her body practically sang for him, and she secured her place as the single most powerful person in Draco's life, though she was unaware of it. He would do anything, absolutely anything, to see her like that again. It filled his head with all sorts of incredible, dirty fantasies, as he imagined all the ways he could make her come and all the things he wanted to do to her. He wanted her to come on his fingers, on his cock, on his face. He wanted to push her to the point of exhaustion so she collapsed in on herself and needed him to take care of her, just like she had the night before. And he wanted to ruin every pair of threadbare knickers she had without touching her down there, because it made her openness when he finally did it all the more perfect.

Speaking of ruined knickers, Draco had taken it upon himself to clean out a drawer in his dresser to dedicate it to Hermione's ruined knicker collection. He was entirely serious when he said he would keep them all. The next time the Ministry of Magic came searching his bedroom for something, he hoped they would find the drawer so full it barely closed. Just like his witch, Draco liked to collect trophies.

Draco woke the next morning, with the outlines of a plan coming together, and he sent a few owls off that morning to request meetings. The rest of it would have to wait until he heard Hermione's plans. He intentionally didn't ask when she would be coming back to the Manor in case she wanted some space to think. Besides, it was a Friday, and he hoped he would see her at Theo's tonight.

Draco was thrilled and a bit surprised when his box latch lit up to find a note that said, *Will you be around the Manor today? I thought I might study there.*

Draco smiled broadly and wrote back, *I have a lunch meeting and some business this afternoon, but I'll be around in the morning. Can't wait to see you.*

The moment he sent it back through he called for Florrie and Rosie, who appeared with simultaneous *CRACKS!*

“Yes, Master?” they said in unison.

“Florrie, Rosie I have a very important task for you both.”

Their eyes widened, but they nodded and looked at him seriously.

“Hermione’s coming over to the Manor today to study, and I’ll be with her in the morning. While she’s here, I need you both to go to her flat and make a list of all the food in her kitchen cabinets by brand and also check the large white box she has in there. Please write down the expiration dates for everything.”

They looked a bit confused, but Draco wasn’t done. “Once you’ve finished with that, check her bathroom for her shampoo, makeup, lotion, all of it. And see how much cat food she has stored away. Write it all down. I want to know everything she buys and how much of it she has.

“Finally, look around the flat and make notes of everything that’s worn out or broken, everything that doesn’t work properly, and everything that needs to be repaired. I want to know about objects along with the building itself. For instance, I know she spellotapes books. And I saw some cracks in her ceiling. I want a list of every single thing in her flat that’s worn or broken.”

The elves were staring at him in amazement, but they were nodding along.

“Perfect. And before you come back today, I want you to check the mail on her kitchen counter. Bring half of it to me and wait until I’m alone to give it to me. I have a lunch meeting at noon, but get as far as you can with it until then. If you don’t finish by noon, I’ll send you both back the next time she’s at the Manor with me. And I don’t want her to know you were there, so if you have to move anything, put it back exactly how you found it.”

Florrie and Rosie both gave little bobs to this.

"Wait until she arrives at the Manor, and then you can go," Draco added. "Florrie, you're dismissed. Rosie, please stay behind, I need to talk to you about something else."

Florrie nodded and disappeared with a *CRACK!* and Draco turned to study Rosie for a moment.

"Rosie, you're rather fond of Hermione, yes?"

Rosie nodded eagerly. "Yes, Master. Miss Hermy is the bestest, most wonderful witch Rosie has ever met... err, outside of the family of course, Sir."

Draco hid a smile at her quick clarification.

"Very well, Rosie. Whenever Hermione is at the Manor I want you to answer her call. She is going to be your responsibility."

Rosie's eyes widened, and Draco thought he saw some tears in them.

"Master is letting Rosie pretend to be Miss's elf?"

Draco nodded a little. "Yes. You know Hermione needs help with the Library since she can't call the books yet, and I'll need assistance making sure she's cared for properly whenever she's here. Please help me make notes of her preferences and anticipate her needs. I originally assigned Florrie to do this when Hermione first started visiting the Manor, but Florrie is busy with many other tasks for me. I have every hope that Hermione will be visiting more frequently, and I need somebody else to be in charge of that job. It's extremely important to me, do you understand?"

"Yes Sir," Rosie whispered, her eyes huge.

Draco smiled a little. Rosie practically hero-worshiped Hermione, and he was sure she would be perfect for this task.

"Excellent. Also, anything you may see that's intimate or private stays quiet, do you understand? I'm hoping Hermione may be spending more time with me in the evenings, and Mother doesn't necessarily need to know everything that happens between us. If she asks you about it, keep your answers vague."

Rosie bobbed in acknowledgment.

"Thank you, Rosie. You're dismissed until Hermione shows up - then I want you to help Florrie inventory the items in her flat."

"Yes Sir, thank you Sir," she said. "Rosie is trying very hard to help Master Draco with this important task."

Draco just smiled as Rosie disappeared with a *CRACK!* and then Draco hurried down to the Study to wait for Hermione.

He called a different Manor elf to set out some breakfast, and the moment he disappeared, Draco heard the sound of the floo activating.

He turned to find his witch stepping out delicately onto the rug, lightly dusting off a dress that looked new. Draco could tell it was a Pansy creation, and he loved the way it fit her. She looked up and saw him and instantly blushed.

Gods she's adorable.

It was true. Looking at her you would never know she had begged him to fuck her the night before. She looked so innocent, so earnest with her pink cheeks and large hazel eyes. It did something to him every single time he saw her like this.

"Good morning," he said as he moved toward her and pulled her in for a light kiss that turned a bit more heated than Draco intended as soon as their lips touched. He couldn't help it though. He still wasn't used to being able to kiss her whenever he wanted.

“How did you sleep? Have you eaten?” he asked.

She gave him a knowing smile. “I slept wonderfully. As for breakfast, I grabbed a granola bar on the way out,” she said and held up something that looked to be made out of straw.

Draco frowned at it. That was not going to be enough, and it looked questionable. He gestured to the miniature buffet the elves had laid out on a sideboard in the Study.

“Help yourself. You said you were studying today? Or are you searching more rooms?”

He steered her toward the buffet and started to make a plate as he watched her out of the corner of his eye. He smiled to himself as she started to make a plate too, and then they took it to the round table she occasionally used.

“Just studying,” she said. “I have a theory about the Manor’s magic and why the Master’s Hiding Place hasn’t been revealed yet.”

“What’s the theory?” he asked curiously.

She just shook her head. “I don’t want to say just yet. It was just an idea I had, but I need to read through some things first before it’s worth discussing.”

He nodded agreeably to this. He had learned that Hermione liked to have a problem nearly solved before she talked about it with others.

“In that case, why don’t you work in here today? Mother has some guests in the Manor, and they may be in the Library.”

She nodded. “And what will you be doing?”

He groaned. “Trying to wrap my head around everything I’m paying my financial firm and my lawyers. I have a feeling I’m being taken for a ride by both of them, and I’m trying to figure it out.”

Hermione frowned. "Expensive?"

He shrugged. "Yes, but that's not really what bothers me. I'm pretty sure my lawyers are billing me unnecessarily for things. And the financial firm has all these hidden fee structures built into the products they recommend. They also charge me a percentage of assets under management on top of it. I certainly need help with it, but the sheer amount of gold I'm paying them is shocking for the amount of actual work they do. It's been months of meetings where they talk about how wonderful my father was, try to set me up with their daughters or granddaughters, and then 'educate' me about the latest product they've heard about. It's asinine and feels like I'm being ripped off. I don't really care what it costs, but I expect to get some value for the gold I spend."

"Well, have you thought any more about moving things to Blaise?" she asked.

Draco sighed. "I wish. I actually raised it with Blaise a week or so ago, and he said not to do it yet. Even after the Ministry investigation, he doesn't think their firewalls are good enough for an account like mine, even if it would make him a partner overnight."

She cocked an eyebrow at him. "Why not just hire him directly then?"

"I... what?" asked Draco in surprise.

"Hire Blaise directly. Bring things in house. If they're really charging you a percentage of your assets, you could probably pay him twice what he'd earn as a partner and still come out ahead. Both of you would win that way."

Draco cocked his head as he thought about it. "You think?"

Hermione nodded a little. "It's what I would do. You know I haven't seen a complete asset list of the estate. But what I *have* seen tells me you need a family office, Draco, a real one. Lucius obviously used an amalgam of outsourced help, and maybe that worked for

him. But now that you're getting your arms around what you have, you should do it your own way. A lot of high net worth muggles assemble their own team of advisors, and those advisors work only for them. There are no commissions or conflicts of interest that way. I'm not saying it would be simple, but if you trust Blaise that's a first step. Maybe there's a lawyer you like too."

"That's..." he trailed off. It was such a beautifully simple solution. "How have I never thought of that?"

She gave him a small smile. "You've been incredibly busy. It was a lot to take on, and it made sense to do it Lucius's way while you were learning about it. But it's all yours now. You can do anything you want."

Draco realized she was absolutely right. It was similar to the advice Theo had given to Draco about courting Hermione. Draco could put his own spin on things. He didn't have to follow in Lucius's footsteps. Lucius had always seemed very self-assured and totally confident in his role as head of the Malfoy family. Draco certainly didn't have his father's confidence, and he suspected he never would. But if he could do things his way he might understand it better. He might do a credible job. And if Hermione was with him, she might help now and then. She would certainly support him emotionally when it became a lot to deal with. His mother had been right about *that* at least — the burdens of the estate were too large for him to do it alone.

Draco realized he needed a team — advisors, friends, *Hermione* — and maybe then he wouldn't feel so overwhelmed by it.

"You're right sweetheart," he said. "I don't have to do what Father did."

She gave him a truly beautiful smile, and he pushed his plate back and stood to walk around behind her.

He moved his hands to her shoulders and dropped a kiss on top of her head. He smelled her shampoo and perfume and smiled into her

hair.

“What’s gotten into you?” she said a bit breathlessly as he leaned down to nibble her ear.

“What do you think?”

“We’re supposed to be working...”

Draco couldn’t help but notice that she tilted her head to the side to invite him in as she said this.

“No, *you’re* supposed to be eating. And I’m finishing my breakfast.”

He licked the shell of her ear until he got to the lobe. Again he tasted nickel from the small hoops she was wearing and frowned a little.

“Are these earrings special?”

She reached up to touch them and then said, “No. But why do you keep asking me that?”

“No reason. Leave them with me tonight, alright?”

“Draco, I would like an explanation...”

“And I would like for you to trust me.”

She huffed, but he just grinned as he kissed down her neck until he reached a thin chain. It had a tiny diamond pendant on it that Draco had always thought was too small for someone as magnificent as her, but he had seen her wear it rather often.

“I suspect this one’s special,” he said, now tracing it with his fingers until they drifted to the neckline of her dress.

“My parents gave it to me on my very first day of Hogwarts,” she said simply.

“Good,” he said firmly, no longer annoyed by the size of it. If it was special to her, then it was good enough for him. Maybe Hermione would give it to their daughter one day when *she* started Hogwarts. It was the perfect size for an eleven-year-old girl.

Draco froze for a split second as he thought about this, the picture so vivid in his mind he felt a bit breathless. He forced himself to exhale and push it aside. He might want it, but there were about a thousand steps before he could allow himself to dwell on something like that.

Instead, he traced the edge of her dress and dipped his finger down into it until he brushed the cups of her bra. Her skin was erupting in goosebumps, and he heard her breathing get a little shallow.

He gave her one last light brush and then started to move away toward his desk.

She gave a frustrated little sound and he just chuckled. “Get those knickers nice and wet for me,” he said over his shoulder.

“But I’m not wearing any.”

Draco came to a complete stop, and he instantly hardened as he turned around to find her face aflame. Despite the naughty thing she had just said, she was still giving him that wide-eyed earnest look that made him want to fuck her until she couldn’t breathe.

He stalked toward her slowly, and her eyes widened at the expression she saw on his face. He glanced toward her plate and decided she had eaten enough for now, so he grabbed her chair and turned it abruptly so she was facing him squarely.

“You aren’t wearing any knickers?” he asked in a soft voice. He was unbearably turned on, but he also wasn’t sure how to react to this. This wasn’t what he had planned for the day. *She* was teasing *him*. That wasn’t their agreement.

She looked a bit nervous now as she shook her head.

“Did I tell you to leave them off?”

“I...” she faltered.

“Did you touch yourself?”

“No!” she insisted quickly. “No, I promise. I just wanted...”

“You wanted to seduce me so I would get you off again,” he finished for her.

She bit her lip nervously and nodded, and Draco’s cock dripped for her.

“Did you take your potion?”

She looked even more nervous, but she nodded slowly.

He reached up and tucked her hair behind her ear. She blinked in confusion.

“You’re not getting my cock today, sweetheart. Not yet.”

“When?” she asked in a small voice.

“When the time is right.”

“But what does that mean?”

He shrugged. “When you can show me how good you are. When I know you’re ready.”

When you say you’re mine.

“I thought I was being good,” she said, frowning a bit. “I thought you would like it.”

“Oh I do like it,” he said.

“But you said you wouldn’t...”

“I said you weren’t getting my cock.”

“But –”

She was cut off by Draco’s kiss, hot and bruising as he pulled her to him until she was standing. He cleared the table with a swipe of his arm, and their plates and glasses crashed to the floor as he pushed her back onto it and hiked up her dress so it was bunched around her waist, exposing her to him.

Her eyes were huge, wild, but Draco couldn’t stop. Hermione was testing him with this, and Salazar help him, but he would win.

“You want to know why I need to be the one who says when you come and where you come and how you come? It’s because when you push me Granger....when you taunt me....I can’t fucking control myself... ”

Draco hooked his arms around her legs and pulled her forward to the edge of the table as he dropped to his knees and started to eat her out before pushing a couple fingers inside of her. There was no teasing this time, no edging. She had thrown down the gauntlet, showing up knickerless and looking like she wanted him to fuck her senseless. But he hadn’t told her to do that. She had agreed to give him control over this, and now she was trying to take it away again by making him weak for her. He absolutely *was* weak. He knew he was, but he wouldn’t let her win this. Her sex was *his*. Her cunt was *his*. He wanted every single part of her to be *his*. She would only come when he said she could.

Hermione was gasping, moaning, writhing, and Draco knew she was getting close. A few more seconds would do it. He wrenched his mouth off of her and stood over her breathing hard as he stared down at her.

“You see?” he said. “You see what you do to me, Granger?”

“Draco...” she said, trembling with the release he didn’t give her.
“*Please...*”

He stepped back, and just shook his head slowly. “Not yet.”

She looked at him in horror. “*What?* You can’t just –”

“Oh I can. Don’t you dare touch yourself.”

“But *when?*”

“Maybe tonight. But only if you do exactly what I say.”

She squeezed her eyes tight and shuddered as she closed her legs and pulled her dress down. Then she slowly sat up. Her hair was a wild cloud around her head, and her cheeks were flushed with want. She looked utterly fuckable like this.

“What do you want me to do then?” she asked, furrowing her brow in frustration.

“This morning I want you to work on the thing you planned to work on today. Then I want you to have lunch in the Witches' Parlor. I can’t join you today, but Mother will be in, and I know she’d love to see you. The afternoon is up to you, but I want you to have dinner with me before we go to Theo’s for a little while. Then if you’ve been good for me – and *only* if you’ve been good for me – we’ll floo to my room tonight after Theo’s.”

Hermione pouted a little, but finally nodded her agreement, and Draco smiled as he kissed the tip of her nose. “That’s better.”

Then he turned to walk out of the room, and Hermione called, “Wait!”

He turned to look at her questioningly.

“Where are you going?” she asked in confusion.

“Oh I’m going to have a wank,” he said, as he reached for the door.

Her jaw dropped. “You can’t do that!”

“Of course I can,” he said.

“But you aren’t letting me...!”

“Obviously. You broke the rules. I didn’t.”

“I did *not* break any rules!”

He raised an eyebrow. “Right now I want three things from you sweetheart and only three things. I want you to eat. I want you to sleep. I want you to take breaks to relax. That’s it. I told you last night that if you do those things for me, you’ll earn plenty of orgasms. Showing up knickerless and dripping from that sweet cunt to tempt me was not on the list.”

Her pupils blew, and her jaw dropped at this, but he just smirked. “I’ll be back soon, princess.”

Draco thumbed the stack of letters Rosie had handed to him, just as the clock was striking a quarter to noon, and Hermione was heading into the Witches' Parlor for lunch. Rosie had also left an extensive list for Draco, and Draco saw she and Florrie had made it through Hermione’s entire kitchen and most of the items in her bathroom before running out of time and coming back to the Manor. Draco shoved all of it into his briefcase, along with some leases he was due to review with his lawyers after lunch and a stack of legal bills.

Hermione had been very put out with him, and Draco thought it was adorable. As much as he enjoyed the softer, more innocent side to Hermione, Draco also loved to see her temper. She was sharp and her eyes glittered with frustration. Draco just smiled fondly at her every time she glared at him, and he was sure it was making her mood worse.

That was alright though, she was learning. He was only asking her for three things at the moment. He might ask her for more than that eventually, but learning to take care of herself was his top priority. He wanted to see that she was actually doing it before he let her come. And if she was going to fuck with his self-control to coax an orgasm out of him over breakfast, then Draco would fuck back harder and give her a small taste of punishment. A ruined orgasm seemed like a good place to start exploring that particular kink.

She huffed as she flounced out of the Study and toward the Witches' Parlor for lunch, still knickerless because Draco told her that if she put them on she wouldn't be getting any later.

Draco's 'lunch meeting' was actually an appointment with the goblins to order a couple new things for Hermione.

"I need you to duplicate these," he said, holding out her earrings from the night before. "Cast them in gold, please."

The goblins nodded and took the earrings, wrinkling their noses at the cheap yellow metal.

"Also, I'm ready to purchase that item we discussed. I believe you already have the stones from the Malfoy collection, correct?"

The goblins nodded, and Draco described the tweaks he needed to make. They assured him that they would pull their master artisan from his current project and make it their top priority.

"The designs are simple enough, Sir. We should have them ready for you within a few hours."

Draco thanked them and told them he would be back at closing time to pick up the things he ordered. Then he grabbed some lunch on his way to the lawyers, and here he was led into a handsome office with a rather nice view over Diagon Alley, toward a conference room that looked down on the shoppers below them.

“And how’s our landlord today?” asked a jovial voice. Draco stood to shake hands with Mortimer Price, the lead attorney for the Malfoy file. Draco didn’t *dislike* him exactly, but he was pompous, long-winded, and Draco really wasn’t certain if the man did any actual legal work. Over the last several months Draco had gotten the impression that Mortimer simply managed *Draco* and sent him the bills, while others in his firm did the actual work.

“As long as you lot pay your rent on the first of the month, I’ll be just fine, Mortimer,” said Draco, smirking at him. Mortimer’s laughter boomed as four more lawyers walked in behind him.

One of the most interesting things Draco had learned after his father died was that the Malfoys owned most of Diagon Alley and several commercial districts immediately surrounding it. Their properties included this very building, where Draco’s law firm was located. The fact that young Draco Malfoy was their landlord – or rather, his wholly-owned family company was their landlord, if you wanted to be technical about it – always made Mortimer laugh.

Draco looked around at the five lawyers and sighed. This was the problem with Mortimer and the way he did business. Every single one of them was billing him by the hour, and each meeting had at least four of them in attendance. Draco had spent all morning pouring over the time entries from the legal bills he had been sent the last couple of months, and there was one name that stood out over and over again. Draco’s eyes narrowed in on the young, sandy-haired man who had never said very much during these meetings, but was hauled in every single time. He usually bore stacks of parchment, the occasional treatise, and most interestingly, muggle pens and notepads like Hermione favored. Every other lawyer used quills and loose parchment.

The meeting droned on for a couple hours as Mortimer pontificated about triple net leases and three of the other lawyers kept nodding sycophantically. The sandy-haired young man, however, mostly ignored them, as he discreetly marked up a document that Draco noticed was not the one they were discussing. It was muggle and

distinctive with its crisp white paper and printed text that was too small to read from a distance. Only when Draco spoke about the changes he wanted to make to the lease did the young man snap to attention and take notes.

The meeting wrapped up as it always did, with an offer from Mortimer to “take a young man like you out! I’m an old geezer, I know, but I can still put away a drink or two, eh?”

Draco knew Mortimer was expecting him to decline because Draco always declined. But instead, Draco said, “Actually, if Ben is free this afternoon, I’d like to take him out. I just learned we have some mutual friends.”

There was a shocked silence at this, as the other four lawyers turned to look at sandy-haired Ben Bershwick, who was staring back at Draco in confusion. Ben looked back and forth between Mortimer and Draco. Draco could see Mortimer’s face darken a bit at this perceived intrusion upon the client relationship, but he gave Ben a curt nod.

“Sure, Mr. Malfoy, I’m free,” he finally said.

“Call me Draco,” he said, coming up and shaking Ben’s hand. “Come on, I know a place.”

Ben gathered his things and gave one last, bewildered look back at the others as Draco led him out of the conference room, down the magical lifts, and across the street to the barrier that opened to the muggle world.

Ben looked at him incredulously, but Draco just motioned for him to follow, and they eventually slipped into a cozy bar that was nearly empty this time of day.

Draco put down a muggle credit card to open a tab, and Ben looked surprised by this, but he pulled himself together to order a drink.

Then he turned to Draco and said a bit awkwardly, “Erm, I’m pleased to be here of course, but can you tell me what this is about? I’m almost certain we don’t have any mutual friends.”

Draco smiled a little as he reached into his briefcase and pulled out the legal bills from the last couple of months.

“I wanted to talk to you about these,” he said, gesturing to them.

Ben looked down at them a bit nervously and said, “You’ll have to talk to Mortimer if you want a write-off or –”

“No, that’s not it,” said Draco. “I wanted to talk about the fact that you’re the only one who does any real work. There’s entry after entry from the others that say, ‘meet with client,’ or ‘internal meeting to consider lease terms.’ But yours say things like, ‘draft lease,’ and ‘negotiate termination provisions with opposing counsel.’ You’re the only one doing any fucking work.”

Ben’s eyes widened a bit, and he swallowed uncomfortably.

“Mr. Malfoy –”

“Draco,” said Draco.

“Fine, Draco. I do the work because that’s what I’m asked to do.”

“Tell me why your rate is so much lower than the others then. I’m paying Mortimer to spew bullshit about things I’ve heard a dozen times, and he gets twice as much as you do for it.”

Ben shrugged. “I’m an associate. I’m younger than him.”

“Why aren’t you a partner yet? I assume you’re in your late twenties or early thirties?”

Ben shifted uncomfortably. “I’m thirty-two. But it’s complicated.”

“Then enlighten me.”

To Draco's slight surprise, Ben just gave him a wry look. "If I do, I'll probably be fired."

"Attorney-client privilege," said Draco instantly.

Ben flashed an amused smile at this. "That's not really how it works."

"I'm serious, I want to know. I get that I'm putting you in a tight spot, but I need to understand why the only person who's doing any actual work on my file isn't getting credit for it. Because I'm pretty sure that's what's happening."

Ben considered this for a long while and then sighed. "Fine. But if you want me off your file after you hear about it, I'd just ask you to give them some other bullshit excuse instead of the truth."

Draco cocked his head, very intrigued now. "Done."

"I'm a squib," he said simply.

Draco nodded slowly, as he thought about it. "Now that you say it, that doesn't really surprise me."

Ben blinked in surprise, but then looked at Draco cautiously. "And why's that?"

"Because you know muggles really well. You're the one who amended Hermione Granger's lease for me. I found your time entries for it."

Ben narrowed his eyes. "Attorney-client privilege, yes?"

Draco nodded.

"Are you seeing her? I read about it in *The Prophet*, and things died down pretty quickly after you two weren't seen together again. But you came to us for that lease amendment and rent abatement. I do all of the muggle real estate in my firm so I'm the only one who worked on it. The others didn't know it was for her."

Draco smiled broadly. "As of last night, I am officially welcome into Hermione Granger's knickers. But that stays privileged, mind you. She's sensitive about the media."

Ben laughed a little and just waved him off. "Of course, that goes without saying. Well good on you. I've always admired her... from a distance of course, I've never met her. My wife is also a huge fan."

Draco raised his eyebrows. "Your wife?"

Ben nodded. "She's also a lawyer. Different firm though. We met in law school."

"Tell me how you did that since you didn't go to Hogwarts," said Draco.

Ben shrugged. "I went to muggle schools and went through the normal channels to complete my law degree and become an attorney in the muggle world. My parents are both magical — muggleborns, both of them — so I've always been connected to this world too. Lawyers who can practice in the muggle world can qualify to take a fast-tracked magical law program through the Ministry of Magic since quite a bit of it overlaps. I met my wife there, while she was doing the regular program just out of Hogwarts. I do real estate law in both worlds. The rules and documents to transfer ownership are a bit different between magical and muggle worlds, and of course magical properties often have wards. But otherwise, it's all just dirt and buildings isn't it? Anyway, I ended up joining a wizarding firm instead of a muggle one because I have a real niche being able to do muggle work too. There are enough clients like you that have some muggle holdings that I'm very employable. But the fact that I'm a squib is a dark firm secret that I'm never supposed to disclose to clients. I also suspect it's why my partnership application continues to be overlooked year after year."

Draco nodded slowly, very impressed by what he was hearing. "And what kind of law does your wife practice?"

“Estate planning, tax planning, that sort of thing,” he said.

Draco raised his eyebrows. *I’m going to need that too.*

A plan started to form in his mind. “Is she a partner?”

Ben shook his head. “Not yet. She’s due to go up at the end of the year.”

“Think she’ll make it?”

Ben grimaced. “Unclear. Her client book should be good enough for it, but the law has always been a bit patriarchal. And she’s married to a muggle.”

Draco raised an eyebrow. “They don’t know you’re at a rival firm?”

Ben shook his head. “No, we have different last names to help her career and to keep my secret with mine. She just says she’s married to a muggle, and nobody ever follows up or wants to meet me.”

“That’s bullshit,” said Draco

Ben looked surprised. “Maybe, but it’s the way it’s always been. I thought about disappearing into the muggle world for good, but there are things about magic I still love, even though I can’t cast spells. And squibs have a tiny bit of residual magic in them. I can use the floo network and apparate safely if somebody side-alongs me. I can see magical properties - muggle repelling wards make my skin crawl when I pass through them, but they don’t keep me out. I couldn’t give up the magical world, but I knew it wouldn’t be easy when I came back after law school.”

They were silent for a moment, and then Draco suddenly said, “Can you help me with something?”

Ben smiled a little. “Mortimer would like to know if it’s billable.”

“Mortimer can go fuck himself,” grumbled Draco, and Ben threw back his head and laughed.

“Then yes, I’ll help you. I won’t even write down any time for it.”

Draco raised an eyebrow as he pulled out the stack of bills Florrie and Rosie stole from Hermione’s flat, along with the list Rosie had created so far.

Draco ripped open the first bill and saw a credit card statement for a couple thousand pounds. “I need you to show me how to pay off part of this without Hermione knowing. I have no idea how muggles pay bills. My muggle card is tied directly to Gringotts, and they just handle it for me. I really don’t know how it all works. And then I need you to take me to a place where I can buy the things on this list so I can sneak them into her flat.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “I’m pretty sure you committed a crime by stealing and opening her mail. And I assume you plan to break and enter to give her these groceries?”

Draco waved him off. “I’ve done far worse than that. Besides you’re my lawyer. You can’t say anything about it.”

“Bloody hell you’re one of those types aren’t you?”

“What types?” asked Draco, grinning at the pained sound in Ben’s voice.

“The, ‘you’re my lawyer so you’re also my priest,’ types where you like to confess all the shit you’ve done because I can’t turn you in.”

Draco thought about this for a moment, and then nodded. “Yes, that sounds right. I probably do need a priest.”

Ben groaned a little, but he was smiling as he looked at the open bill. “You don’t want to pay the whole thing then?”

“She’ll know if I pay the whole thing. I’m just going to pay part of it and then cast a spell to change the document a little.”

Ben studied him for a moment. “You abated her rent too. That letter I ghost wrote for your property management company was utter bullshit. The rent was high, but not *that* high given the location.”

“She has no idea I’m her landlord,” said Draco with some satisfaction.

“You’re also her anonymous donor. I read about the gift to St. Mungo’s.”

“Oh she figured that out right away,” said Draco, grinning now. “I still haven’t admitted it though.”

“Just tell me why,” said Ben. “Because there’s a possibility I’m going to help you break the law, and I’d like to know if there’s a good reason for it.”

Draco nodded. “She’s given everything to the wizarding world. She works incredibly hard. She’s saved so many lives. And because my fucking father was a greedy bastard, he increased rents on all of his tenants to wring them dry, including her. That flat should be hers, and it’s perfect for her. It’s in a very safe part of London. It’s cozy and private. It’s above a goddamned rare bookstore for fuck’s sake. But she couldn’t afford it once the rent increases started, and she’s been bleeding a slow financial death for the last couple of years. When you told me I already owned the building, abating her rent was simple. I was fully prepared to *buy* the damned building if I had to. This thing with her bills and her groceries is just more of the same. She’s been living paycheck to paycheck, and she shouldn’t have to do that, not when she’s done so much for the world. And *certainly* not when she belongs to me.”

Ben studied him for a long moment, and then finally nodded. “Alright. Just like credit cards, Gringotts can produce paper checks that appear to be muggle for use in the muggle world. They’ll be tied

directly to your account there, and the goblins just do the currency exchange behind the scenes automatically. It won't take long to get them, we can do it this afternoon. You simply post the check for whatever amount you want, and it will credit her account. I'll take you to a muggle post office and show you have to do it. Then for your shopping list, I'll probably have to take you to Sainsbury's. A lot of these brands are muggle."

Draco nodded eagerly. "Excellent. And after Sainsbury's why don't you check with your wife and see if you have plans tonight? If not, there are some friends I'd like for you to meet."

Secrets of Malfoy Manor

Chapter 20: Secrets of Malfoy Manor

AN: It's time to visit THAT room.

Hermione

Hermione was quite put out with her.... Boyfriend? Partner?

Denier of Orgasms.

Yes, that was a perfect title for him. He was her Denier of Orgasms.

It was really quite unfair. If he hadn't done such a good job of it the night before, she would never have been so worked up the following morning. She wasn't trying to break any of his bloody rules, she was just trying to move things along a bit instead of submitting to that slow torture he seemed determined to give to her. Who could blame her really?

Hermione was truly regretting ever confessing that she wanted to be teased during Secrets and Truths. She really meant a few kisses around sensitive areas before giving it to her. She didn't mean *hours*.

Draco, however, had taken her words and then interpreted them to mean the most drawn out, terrible, wonderful form of teasing she could possibly imagine.

Actually bringing her to the brink this morning and then outright denying her, however, was a new form of torture she had only read about. She never thought he would actually *punish* her.

Even worse, her Denier of Orgasms had set it up to be ridiculously hot sex just before he stopped. He actually shoved the plates off the table for heaven's sake. Hermione was pretty sure she had watched a scene like that in a movie once, but never in her life did she believe it would happen to *her*. That a man as hot and sexy as her Denier of Orgasms Draco Malfoy would be so overcome that he would shatter hundreds-year-old china for her was beyond her comprehension. It was enough to let her open her legs in the broad daylight, without any concern whatsoever about her scars or the other flaws he may see.

But then he just *stopped*. Hermione glared at him all morning, fantasizing about ways she could kill him. He just blew her a kiss whenever he noticed.

When her research was finally done – which made Hermione more convinced than ever that she was on the right track about the Manor's magic, though it wasn't an answer she liked at all – a Manor elf appeared to announce that lunch would be ready soon.

She stood and started to walk toward the fireplace.

"Where do you think you're going?" he asked in a stern voice.

"To get some sodding *knickers*," she said. "Since you refused to take advantage of the situation earlier!"

To her consternation, he just smirked and walked up to her. "Oh I took plenty of advantage. That picture you made for me with your cunt all bare like that inspired a truly fantastic wank. I really should thank you. You might have set a new record for me."

She felt a stab of heat below her navel at his words and scowled.

"Well I did not enjoy the experience nearly as much, so I'll thank you to let me go and fetch some bleeding undergarments before lunch!"

"Cute that you think I'd let you do that, princess," he said, tapping her on her nose. "No, you're going to lunch just the way you are. You can

run back to your flat once it's over."

"It's with your *mother!*" she said in horror.

He just gave her an evil smile. "Mmmm, that's true. But you decided to show up without them today, and now we must reap what we sow, yes? You'd better work hard to control yourself or you might soak through your dress. We wouldn't want her to know about all the dirty things you want to do with her son, would we?"

"I need my knickers!" she said a bit desperately. Just then Rosie appeared with a pop, and Draco's eyes glanced her way.

Then to Hermione's surprise, he shrugged. "If you need them more than you need your orgasm tonight, I won't stop you. But choices have consequences."

Hermione turned to look at Rosie in embarrassment. "You didn't hear that, Rosie."

"Of course not Miss Hermy," she said in a surprisingly sincere voice.

She looked back at Draco and could see he was not backing down from this.

"Oh *fine*," she hissed. "But you had better make it a bloody good one, Mr. Denier of Orgasms!"

He got a look of unholy glee on his face as she turned on her heel and marched off.

"Enjoy lunch sweetheart! I want a full report later!" he called after her.

And that was how Hermione found herself eating lunch with Narcissa Malfoy while knickerless. This wasn't like the St. Mungo's gala, where Pansy prohibited undergarments to preserve the line of her dress. No, this was her Denier of Orgasms's mother, and it was positively excruciating. As Narcissa questioned Hermione about her other charitable interests and her work with the clinic, Hermione

herself kept remembering his warning about leaving a wet spot on her dress. He had gotten her so worked up that she was almost certain she would, and by the time it was finally over she actually backed out of the room so Narcissa couldn't see it.

Narcissa gave her an odd look at her behavior, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to worry about it. She had to get out of there.

As soon as she was back in the gallery, she turned and fled to the Study, which was mercifully empty. Draco said dinner would be ready at six, so she had several hours. She floo'd home and made a beeline to her dresser for some new underwear, breathing a sigh of relief as she finally put them on. Then she chewed on her lip for a moment as she considered the other thing she might finally do today.

There were several rooms in the Manor she still had not searched, including the Master Suite which Narcissa still used, the Cellar, a few of the parlors and other public rooms, and of course the Sitting Room where she had been tortured. Hermione sensed that the last room would have some answers for her, but she hadn't been able to face it at first, and there were so many other places to search in the main house that she kept putting it off.

After her research about the Master's Hiding Place, however, she knew she needed to face her fears and just do it. This afternoon would be an opportune time: Draco was out for the next several hours, and she had already done her duty by Narcissa for the day. Nobody would disturb her, and she could take her time with it. Besides, Draco had made her exceptionally annoyed by being her Denier of Orgasms today, and Hermione rather felt she could channel some of that energy into facing her fears.

Stomach in knots, but decision made she took off the dress she had been wearing and put on her normal curse-breaking gear, which was much more casual than what she normally wore to the Manor. Today though, she gave herself a pass for it. She didn't think she would see anybody while she was working, and she just had a feeling she should be prepared. She donned her holster and wand and then

headed back to her living room to floo to the Manor again. As she arrived she saw a stack of muggle mail that had been pushed through the slot, and she took a moment to sort it, grimacing a bit as yet more bills appeared. She put them on top of the stack on her kitchen counter. She knew she should look at them, but she just couldn't bring herself to do it yet. She had to pay the ones in her nightstand first, and she couldn't do *that* until she was paid the following week. The Ministry only paid once a month.

Hermione really didn't know how she had allowed herself to go off the rails like this. Things had always been tight since moving into her flat, but she usually managed to break even and once in a while squirrel a tiny bit away. But once she fell behind it seemed to get worse and worse, and now Hermione had a hard time facing it.

Next week. I'll face it once I'm paid next week.

Hermione pushed these thoughts aside as she made her way to the fireplace. She had to focus and stay calm. Her bills were all muggle, and they could wait a few days.

She pinched some floo powder from the pot and sighed a bit as she realized she would probably have to get more soon. She had gone through it much faster than usual with her new assignment at Malfoy Manor. She checked the pot and thought she had barely enough to last her through the weekend.

Changing her mind, Hermione decided to apparate. It would take her a little longer, but it was free.

It took her a few minutes to leave her flat, walk to a discrete point she used for apparition, and then turn on the spot to land in front of the gates of the Manor. As soon as she did, Rosie appeared with a *CRACK!* and looked at her in confusion for arriving this way.

"Oh I'm just running low on floo powder Rosie, that's all," she said lightly.

Rosie gave her a knowing look, but opened the gates for her. "Miss Hermy must take some back with her. We is having lots of powder!"

"Oh I couldn't possibly –" she started, but Rosie gave her a look so reminiscent of her master that she just sighed. "Fine. I would appreciate that. It would save me a trip to Diagon Alley."

"Of course!" said Rosie, much happier now that Hermione was cooperating. "Is Miss Hermy staying at the Manor all afternoon?"

Hermione nodded. "Yes. There's a room I need to search, and I'll probably spend some time in the Library once I'm done. I'm meeting Draco at six for dinner."

Rosie gave her a little dip. "Then I is taking the floo powder to Miss's flat while she works, yes? Then Miss Hermy is not needing to remember. Master Draco is putting Rosie in charge of Miss Hermy!"

"Erm... in charge?"

"Yes, Miss. Master Draco is asking Rosie to help Miss around the Manor and with anything Miss is needing."

Hermione's stomach lurched a bit uncomfortably. "Oh Rosie, that's really not..."

Rosie's face fell and ears drooped, as Hermione cut herself off from anything anything more.

"Is Miss Hermy wanting a different elf?" she whispered in a sad voice.

Hermione winced a little as she hurried to reassure her.

"Oh! Of course not! I love it when you help me Rosie. I just thought Florrie..." Hermione trailed off awkwardly.

"Master is saying Florrie is having other duties. He is asking Rosie to help Miss Hermy instead. Rosie is calling books from the Library for

Miss Hermy, and she is helping Miss at the Manor or at her flat when Miss is needing it. Master Draco is saying Miss Hermy is coming to the Manor more often now."

Hermione stilled. She didn't *really* want her own elf, but then again she did need help with the Library. Perhaps Draco was right to assign a different elf that task. Hermione was awfully fond of Rosie, and Florrie had innumerable other duties that were more important than helping Hermione. Hermione realized she called Florrie rather often to help with the Library or to locate Draco or to bring her things from other rooms since Florrie could apparate and Hermione couldn't. She felt a bit guilty about it, but she was forced to acknowledge that she *did* use an elf whenever she was at the Manor. It was so bloody large that she found herself leaning on Florrie's help for things she had always done herself at her small flat.

"Alright Rosie, I would love your help, but on one condition."

Rosie looked at her a bit nervously. "What is the condition Miss?"

"I'd like to try to have lunch or tea together most weeks in the Elves's Lounge."

Rosie's eyes were large, and they started to water a bit as she nodded eagerly.

"Rosie is liking that Miss!"

Hermione relaxed into a smile, feeling less guilty now. She would treat Rosie like a colleague instead of a servant. "Excellent, Rosie. In that case, I would love your help."

"Then Rosie is taking floo powder to Miss Hermy's flat! Miss can call for Rosie whenever she is at the Manor!"

By now they were at the front door, and Hermione snickered a little as she opened it to face that unicorn painting she had seen on her very first day. "Thank you, Rosie. I would appreciate it."

Rosie gave another little curtsy and then disappeared, leaving Hermione alone in the long gallery that in any other house would be the foyer.

Hermione took a deep breath and started to walk toward the room she had avoided since her first trip here. As she approached it she slowed, and automatically her eyes went to the gold nameplate just outside of the door. Her gaze slid past it, and Hermione tried again. When it happened a second time, she knew what this meant: Draco had cast another notice-me-not charm.

Heart pounding, Hermione canceled the charm and just stared at the words she had somehow known she would find here.

Crucio Room

Memories from that day started to resurface and for a moment Hermione just let them. She had learned long ago that suppressing this didn't help. That's one reason she gave herself an entire afternoon for a room that Draco had assured her was largely empty now. He and his mother never used it for guests, not since the war was over.

She wasn't sure how much time passed, but finally she felt some of the memories clear, and she recast the charm over the small plaque. Nobody needed to see that. She glanced down at the bracelet that she had inexplicably kept on even after she changed at her flat. Hermione had been so annoyed by Draco that she almost took it off. But now that she stared down at the tiny lion she knew why she didn't: she needed her courage for what she was about to do. She was brave. She could do this.

She opened the door and slowly stepped into the room, the memories starting to swirl up again. The walls were still that deep purple that Narcissa favored in their more formal rooms. The damask sofas were still there, looking exceptionally elegant and cold with their dark carved feet and pristine cream cushions. There was an enormous fireplace outlined in black marble, and the walls had dark

paneling all around it. Hermione glanced at the paintings and blinked. Whereas the rest of the Manor now featured a whole host of wonderful creatures, these were all dark: there was a basilisk, an acromantula, a dementor, a lethifold, and over the fireplace was an enormous painting of a werewolf stalking prey.

Hermione shivered. She knew Draco hated this room. She could practically feel his fear, disgust, and self-loathing radiating from the walls in here. It felt like every bit of darkness in him had all been channeled to live in this one place.

It was only now that Hermione glanced up and saw a truly odd sight that confused her for a moment. The chandelier, which Draco had told her was broken and in one of the vaults at Gringotts, was in here, suspended over her head. It was lopsided, still broken, as though it had been hung without a single crystal being repaired.

Instinctively Hermione stepped away from it. She didn't remember the moment it fell on her because she was already unconscious from her torture by that point. But Harry and Ron had relayed the story to her enough times that she was definitely wary of any light fixtures that were large enough to crush.

Hermione contemplated the chandelier for a moment, and something about it told her the Manor had brought it here from the vaults, just like it had done with the paintings. The odd thing was the timing: this must have happened *after* Draco had checked for Lucius's hiding place. He was sure he had seen it in his vault the first time he went in there after Lucius's death.

Hermione wasn't *scared* of the chandelier, not exactly. She didn't have any memory of it. In fact she was more afraid of everything else she saw in the room. But it was still a bit disconcerting that it had appeared here at some point, almost as if it was waiting for her to arrive.

Curious. And a bit creepy.

Something about this place felt different. Just like that night in the Library and again in the Observatory, Hermione sensed that the Manor would have answers for her if only she asked.

Instinctively she closed her eyes and opened her magic, and for the first time in weeks she was able to touch Draco's magic again. This time it felt cold, hard, almost cruel. It felt as though the Manor was channeling the feelings he had to produce in order to cast the cruciatus curse himself.

As soon as she touched his magic with hers, she gasped. Something painful and sharp seemed to cut across her body, then again and again. It didn't hurt as much as the cruciatus did, but it felt like she was being sliced with a thousand tiny papercuts. She fell to her knees and thought to herself, *Show me your secrets. Please.*

Draco's magic seemed to answer her in that same, cold voice he used to use as a child when he tormented her. *Why should I show you anything, you filthy little mudblood?*

Hermione's scar burned, but instead of making her sad, it made her angry.

You are not him! That part of him was just a copy of Lucius! He's grown up!

I might as well be Lucius. I am everything my father wanted me to be. Why would I ever show a mudblood anything?

Because you want me.

You're a mudblood whore. You think that dipping my cock inside of you means I want you? At most I want power over you.

You're not him. You're a relic of Lucius.

And how would you know that? How can you be so sure?

It all hurt so much, the feeling of being cut open by a thousand tiny blades, the words he was saying to her even though she knew it wasn't him. She had no idea how long she was suspended like this, but she couldn't seem to release herself now that she was in it. Time had no meaning here, in this odd and terrible place. Some part of her knew she was arguing with the Manor itself. It was taking on the form of Draco that he hated most. When he performed the ritual the Manor had sensed it, extracted it, and then locked it away in this room that held such terrible memories for both of them.

I'm sure because you show me. You're kind to me. You're the most attentive person I know. You are making me take care of myself even when I don't want to. You have been thinking about me and dreaming of me for years. Did you know that we were together one night more than seven years ago? It was a one-night stand, and we didn't recognize each other, but you fell for me anyway. You looked for me for months. You made plans to protect me and keep me for yourself. You never forgot me. You thought I was a muggle, but you wanted me anyway. You aren't your father.

But I have to be my father.

For the first time Draco's magic felt uncertain, and Hermione's heart leapt.

You don't have to be your father. You're so much better than him. Let him go, Draco.

Something shifted again, and now the magic felt different – even colder, haughtier, more confident. She knew who this was, but she wondered how this was possible. His father's magic should have broken. Everything she studied made that very clear.

You shouldn't be here Lucius.

But I'll always control my son. You think he wants you? A mudblood nothing?

He does want me. I know he does. And you know it too. He was always better than you.

Instead of answering her, Lucius's magic started to close in on her, making everything darker, smaller. Hermione had always been slightly claustrophobic, and this felt utterly oppressive. The room was closing in around her, and she couldn't breathe. She couldn't *think*.

The only thing she could do was feel, and she felt angry now, so *angry* that the Manor had allowed Lucius to hang on, even just a little bit. And this, more than anything, confirmed her overall theory.

Now she addressed the Manor itself, not through Draco or Lucius, but as the semi-sentient place she knew it to be.

You must answer to him! You must answer to Draco, not Lucius! Draco is the Master!

The Manor seemed to pause as it considered this.

It takes two, it whispered back to her.

There are two!

Not yet, it sighed. *Not yet*.

Hermione knew it was right, and she scrambled to think of something.

Narcissa is still here!

She is not his.

Please. You have to answer to Draco. Lucius is dead. He's never coming back. Draco is your Master now.

Again, she sensed the Manor's magic contemplating this, almost as though it was turning her words over. Then she felt an odd sensation crawl across her body, and the pain finally started to recede, though

that uncomfortable sense of being closed in was still there. Hermione hated this darkness, but she grabbed her bracelet again and tried to be strong while she waited for it to come to a decision. The Manor's magic seemed to be examining her, judging her, as if trying to decide whether she was worthy or not.

Perhaps, it finally said to her. *But your first loyalty must be to him.*

Then there was a snap, and Hermione gasped as she was released from whatever spell she had been under, the room finally coming back into focus. She looked out the window and realized the sun was low. It was late afternoon now, nearly evening. She felt drained as she looked around this place she hated so much, but the magic felt slightly different, slightly less malevolent now.

She looked up and blinked. The chandelier had repaired itself.

Another wave of exhaustion hit her, and her stomach growled. She must have been here for hours. She was as famished as she was magically depleted. She stood up and cast a glance back at the chandelier that was twinkling innocently. She hadn't even begun to search the room before the magic took over, but there was nothing to be done about it now. She was too tired, and there was too much to think about.

She slowly made her way out to the gallery and quietly shut the door behind her. She was shuffling toward the Study, when Draco came strolling out, coming to a complete halt as soon as he saw her.

He surveyed her silently, seeming to take in every detail of her. Hermione suddenly wondered what she looked like. She stared at him, and she felt herself sway just a little.

He looked alarmed, as he jumped forward and steadied her.

"Sweetheart," he said quietly. "What happened?"

"I —"

Hermione cut herself off, trying to think of words to describe it. She just shook her head a little.

"I talked to the Manor."

He gave her an incredulous look.

"How did you do that?" he asked carefully.

She furrowed her brow. How *had* she done that?

"I'm not sure. I suppose it's classified."

The words just slipped out, and he gave her an odd, searching look but let them go.

"Tell me what you need. Anything you want, I won't tell you no."

She thought about this. What did she want? She sensed that her Denier of Orgasms was offering to finish her if she wanted him too, even though it was much earlier than he originally intended. And maybe she did want him to finish her eventually, but suddenly the things he had been telling over the last couple of days came back to her, the truth of them really hitting her for the first time.

You have to eat. You have to sleep. You have to take breaks to relax.

"What time is it?" she said suddenly.

He raised his eyebrows. "About five."

She nodded a bit absently. "I think... I think I need to take a nap until dinner. Then I need to eat. I want to eat outside if it's not too much trouble for the elves. Talking to the Manor made me very claustrophobic, and I think some fresh air would help me unwind after all of that."

She finally looked at his face, and several emotions crossed it: confusion, concern, approval.

“Say no more,” he said. “Come rest in my room. You won’t be disturbed.”

She let him lead her to his room, hand clasped in hers. As soon as they were inside he gently pushed her down onto the bed, and he knelt to untie her trainers and slipped them off her feet.

For some reason the gesture made her heart ache just a little, as he stood and helped her pull the covers back.

“Sleep,” he said. “I’ll be back to wake you when dinner is ready.”

Hermione yawned and nodded as she sank down into the pillows. They were fluffy and decadent and Hermione felt herself cocooning into them as she snuggled in.

She looked up at Draco, who was staring down at her with an odd expression on his face.

“I like your bed, Draco,” she murmured.

She caught the slightest heat in his gaze as her eyelids fluttered closed, and a moment later she fell asleep.

Three

Chapter 21: Three

AN: Third time's a charm.

Draco

Draco wasted no time calling Florrie and Rosie and demanding answers about what the hell had happened to Hermione that afternoon. The elves, however, had no answers because they had been at Miss Hermy's flat all afternoon, much to Draco's surprise. They did produce a rather astonishing list of all the rest of Hermione's things, along with a note about the condition of each.

"We is not knowing what Master is looking for so we is writing down everything," Rosie told him. "We is also making friends with Miss Hermy's kitty!"

Draco raised an eyebrow at that. The large half-kneazle was not an animal he could ever think of as a *kitty*, but he supposed it was good that Rosie had befriended it.

"Thank you Rosie. His name is Crookshanks. Hermione will need you to feed him this evening if she decides to stay with me tonight."

Rosie's ears flapped with some enthusiasm at this suggestion, as he stuffed five more checks into envelopes for the muggle post before sending the altered bills back with Rosie. He decided he would have Rosie check every couple of days through the rest of the month. He would reassess when November finally came around.

He checked his watch and saw he had thirty minutes before dinner, so he decided to use the time to post the rest of her bills and pick up the promised items from the goblins. He strode to the bottom of the lane and apparated to the point near the muggle post office that Ben had shown him earlier that day. He popped the bills in the box, which took no time at all, before making his way back and apparating directly to Diagon Alley.

The bell tinkled as he walked into the shop.

“Mr. Malfoy!” called the goblin. “We have just finished. Please come look.”

Draco made his way over and studied the earrings, turning them over in his hands. “This is much better,” he said. The goblin nodded knowingly.

“And the other,” he said, pulling out a small box to show him.

Draco lifted it up and carefully counted the tiny stones on it before looking at the goblin and smiling. “It’s perfect, thank you.”

“We’re always happy to assist,” he said.

Draco inclined his head. “There will be more. I’ll be back tomorrow with another.”

The goblin’s eyebrows flew up, but he looked pleased as Draco collected the items and left the shop. By the time he got back through the gates and up the lane, it was nearly time to wake Hermione.

He slipped upstairs and into his room, looking at his sleeping witch in his bed. Seeing her like this affected him more than he cared to admit. She was tiny, absolutely enveloped by a sea of pillows Florrie insisted upon using, but she had settled in as though she belonged there.

She does. She should be in my bed every fucking night.

Draco knew he couldn't insist on that just yet. Besides, he wanted to spend the night at *her* place too now and then. It was more private than the Manor, even with all of its rooms. But eventually, when his mother finally moved out and Draco could claim the Master Suite, she should be here just like this. Draco shivered a bit as he thought about it.

He sank down onto his bed and brushed his hand on her cheek.

"Hermione," he whispered.

Her eyelids fluttered open, and she looked confused for a split second before she seemed to remember where she was. She yawned again and looked up at him. "Dinner?"

Draco nodded and helped her sit up.

"How do you feel?" he asked, as she slipped on her shoes and tied them quickly.

"Starving, but much better than I did. I think I needed it."

He held out a hand for her to take, and he helped her up, leading her toward the door. "I'm glad you took a nap. I think you did need it. Now then, let's go see what they've set up, yes? Rosie was practically bouncing off the walls with excitement when I told her it was to be outdoors."

Hermione smiled a little at this as he led her down the stairs to the foyer, down a side hall, and then out some doors on the end that led to a side courtyard. They crossed it and walked through a small stone archway that opened to the back patio and gardens.

"Oh *Draco!*" she breathed, as she stared at it.

Draco turned to look at her in confusion. She was staring at the gardens, her mouth slightly open.

“What? Haven’t you seen the gardens?”

“No, but they’re so lovely. Oh my…”

She broke away from him and hurried down the steps to get a closer look. “There’s cornflower and chicory and lily of the valley!” she called back to him. “Oh and foxglove and lady’s bedstraw! Draco, it’s the wrong time of year for at least half of these! It must be the magic!”

She turned and laughed in delight, and Draco’s breath caught. The setting sun was illuminating her hair, and she looked free as her hand skimmed the top of the flowers. She was so lighthearted like this, so beautiful. Once again he was reminded of a nymph, glorying in the nature in which she found herself.

“You never said it was this pretty,” she chided him, as she surveyed the flowers before plucking one. She turned and made her way to join him again. “You’ve always sounded so cross about the gardens!”

Draco shrugged. “I grew up with hedgerows. This took some getting used to.”

“Well I think it’s absolutely perfect. I could spend hours out here, just enjoying them,” she declared. He smiled a little to think of this.

“I’ve been drying the ones you send me, but I’ll press this one for my scrapbook,” she added, showing him the perfect orange bloom she had selected. “I don’t have any from Wiltshire yet.”

She moved away and started to head toward the small table the elves had set up on the patio for them. Draco looked back at the field of flowers, that small smile lingering on his face. The gardens *did* look like Hermione. They were wild and colorful, and something about them reminded him of her flat. The formal decor his mother had used throughout the Manor rather clashed with the gardens, but Hermione’s taste would blend perfectly if she ever got a turn.

Perfect. She said the gardens were perfect. And she's perfect too.

Draco decided he would keep the gardens just the way they were.

"I cannot believe you all play Clue like this," said Ben, as he stared at the board and read the card Theo was showing him. "The Manor doesn't really have a Smoking Room does it?"

"Sure does," said Draco.

"And it's different from the Billiard Room?"

"They're next to each other, just off the main gallery," chimed in Hermione, who had been watching the game with Ben's wife Alyssa. "Though the Manor calls the Smoking Room the *Fumare Room* and the Billiard Room is the *Accio Room*. Everything got renamed after Draco took over."

Alyssa turned to ask her about this, looking very interested in what Hermione had to say about it. The two witches had hit it off instantly, with Alyssa being muggleborn too. Draco smiled a bit as he listened to them chat animatedly, with Ben joining in now and then as the three of them speculated about the Manor's magic.

After dinner Draco and Hermione floo'd to Theo's, where Draco introduced the rather nervous Ben Bershwick and Alyssa Huffington to the larger group. They were both a bit star struck to meet Harry, Ginny, and Hermione, but Theo's boisterousness soon made them relax, and they were now a few drinks in.

Soon after they arrived, Draco had pulled Alyssa aside and talked to her extensively about her experience with estate planning with entails and blood magic, charitable foundations, and engagement contracts. She had impressed him, and the fact that she hadn't grown up with all the pureblood trappings made her view things a bit differently than his current estate planner.

“We can contract around almost anything,” she said. “There are some limits to the law, but as long as both parties have capacity, many of the provisions you see in standard engagement contracts can be revised.”

“What about the requirement to have children within a certain number of years?” he asked.

“There is no requirement,” said Alyssa. “That term is standard because it’s *tradition*, but the law certainly doesn’t require it. In fact, I try to talk my clients out of using it. I think it puts a lot of unnecessary pressure on the couple and the witch in particular.”

Yes, Draco quite liked her. Draco hadn’t studied his engagement contract with Astoria very closely, but he did read it a single time before signing it. He remembered a few things that jumped out at him, and the provision stating that they would have children within five years was one of them. When he asked his current estate planner about it, the old man brushed him off and explained that was just how things were done. But after talking to Alyssa, Draco knew he was simply being managed again. It felt paternalistic, and Draco had had enough patronizing bullshit to last a lifetime.

“I’ve got it!” announced Pansy. “Corbin Yaxley killed Harry Potter with peacock feathers in the Tea Room!”

“That was more realistic than I care to admit,” muttered Harry as they checked the envelope and declared Pansy to be the winner.

“How does one die by peacock feather?” asked Ben curiously.

“Suffocation,” said Pansy promptly. “Lucius always liked this one, specific subspecies of peacock. Narcissa didn’t care for them, but even she has to admit their feathers are very lush.”

At this, Pansy rotated out and Hermione rotated in, and Draco decided to take his chance.

“Pansy, dear, I need a word.”

She followed him to a corner of the room where they spoke in hushed voices for a few minutes until Pansy finally looked at him speculatively.

“That’s not a bad idea, but it will be expensive.”

Draco waved her off. “Set up that side of your business as a separate company. I’ll seed it for you in exchange for ten percent. I can ask Ben or Alyssa to introduce you to a corporate lawyer for it.”

Pansy narrowed her eyes as she thought about this, but finally nodded. “Fine. You’re right. It needs to become more formal, and ten percent doesn’t give you any real control.”

Draco shook his head. “I don’t want control, I just want it buttoned up. I think it’s time.”

They rejoined the group, and Draco observed Ben and Blaise. They seemed to get along, but Draco would need to see how they behaved without the girls around. That always changed the dynamic, and if he did take Hermione’s suggestion and hired them both, they would be working together extensively. He made a mental note to host the wizards at the Manor sometime soon to see if this would work.

Finally, after Theo declared that Harry Potter had been killed by Alecto Carrow in the Ballroom using the house elves’ enchanted pruning shears, Draco pulled on Hermione’s hand.

“Come back to my place?” he whispered.

“You mean the Manor where Harry has just been killed a half dozen times in very creative ways? Of course,” she twinkled, as he grinned.

He pulled her through the floo, directly into his room.

“My bedroom only connects to a few places, but your flat should be connected by Monday, sweetheart.”

She blushed a little, but seemed pleased as he led her to the other side of the room.

“First up, a bath. Take a few moments for yourself, and then I’ll join you.”

She bit her lip, but nodded and disappeared into the bathroom, which Florrie had already prepared to his specifications. He listened to the rustle of clothing and then the splash that told him she had gotten into the tub. Finally he heard the clink of a teacup on a saucer, which told him she was settled in. He counted to one hundred before quickly stripping and pulling on one of the robes Florrie left out for them. He picked up the other one for her and carried it into the bathroom, where he saw Hermione sinking down into the sudsy water, with her eyes closed, a half-consumed cup of tea on the ledge next to her.

“This looks very inviting,” he said.

She opened her eyes to watch him as he let the robe fall. Her eyes roved over his naked body, widening a bit as she took in his full form for the first time. He smirked as he walked toward her and slipped into the water behind her.

She sat forward, and Draco pulled her back against his chest. It took a few moments, but eventually he felt her relax into him.

Good. She’s learning.

Draco trailed his fingers over her ribcage, wondering if he should bring it up again. He asked her about the odd thing that happened that afternoon during dinner, and she had been very vague. It made her tense up again so he dropped it, thinking he might be able to get her to bite if he arranged something like this tonight. Then again, something made him hesitate. It had taken time to get her mind off of

whatever it was that happened, and he didn't want to push her too hard too fast. This was still very new. Perhaps this was one of those times she needed a little space to think.

"I like Ben and Alyssa," she said suddenly. "I want them to come to the fundraiser for Hogwarts in a couple weeks, but Ben said that others in his firm always claim the tickets since he's a squib. And Alyssa gets cut out of her firm's tickets because she's young."

"I'll take care of that," said Draco. "You're going aren't you?"

She nodded. "Kingsley always gives me a Ministry ticket, and Pansy wants me there of course."

"Of course," said Draco, with a smile.

"Draco," she said a bit hesitantly.

"Hmmm?"

"Do you want to go with me? I can ask Kingsley for another ticket."

She sounded incredibly nervous, and he felt a sudden rush of affection for her.

"Hermione Granger, are you asking me out on a date?"

She shrugged a little. "I thought you might want to go. Since you're my... you know."

Draco let his fingers brush down her thigh at this. "Since I'm your what?" he whispered in her ear.

"My Denier of Orgasms."

He threw his head back and gave a shout of laughter.

"Tell you what, princess. Let me make it up to you. I'll buy a table for the fundraiser, and we can have the whole group come. Ben and

Alyssa too – I'm pretty sure they will give us ten tickets that way."

She turned in surprise. "Really?"

"Sure," he said. "You can give your ticket to Weasley or somebody else if you want. I can always owl Mortimer and make him give Ben a couple of their tickets, but I think this will be more satisfying don't you? We can surprise them all by letting him sit at our table."

She smiled broadly at this. "I like that idea."

"Then consider it done. Do you forgive me?"

"Hmmm, maybe. You were rather infuriating earlier though."

"Are you telling me you aren't into punishment?"

He let his hands drift up over her breasts and squeezed a bit, as she inhaled.

"I don't know..." she murmured.

"We can play with it and find out," he said as he started to kiss down her neck. "There are lots of things I want to try with you. You know I'll never do something you don't consent to. But sweetheart, that punishment looked so good on you. Even your little tantrum afterwards really turned me on. And when it was all over you still followed my instructions didn't you? Because you wanted me to reward you tonight."

She hummed a bit at this. "What about now?" she asked. "Are you finally going to give it to me?"

"Oh my greedy girl..." he said, circling his finger around her opening.

"*Draco ...*"

"You were extra good this afternoon. Remember what I told you I want you to do?"

“Eat, sleep, and take breaks,” she said.

“Exactly. And you did all three. I didn’t even have to prompt you. That’s exactly what I want you to do, and if you take care of yourself first, then I’ll take care of you too.”

He slipped his fingers in, and she groaned, the sound going straight to his cock. She felt so good, and she immediately sank into him, all tension draining away as she closed her eyes and enjoyed the feeling of Draco’s slow ministrations. He would speed up in a minute, but he knew how worked up she had been. And she had finally done precisely what he asked her to do. He fully intended to reward her more than once for it.

“So good...” she moaned, and he smiled a bit into her neck. She was beautifully honest like this, and he was struck with inspiration.

“I’m going to say some words and I want you to tell me the first thing that comes to mind.”

“Alright,” she breathed.

“Blindfolds.”

“I want it.”

“Bondage.”

“Hot.”

“Edging.”

“Frustrating.”

He laughed a little at this.

“Cock warming.”

“Oh my *God...*” she groaned, and Draco took special note of this. His own cock definitely twitched.

“Stripping.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Spanking.”

“Nervous.”

She didn’t say no. That was intriguing.

“Voyeurism.”

There was a pause, but finally she whispered, “Yes.”

“Kinky”

“Your ring.”

Draco was so surprised he almost faltered, but he forced himself to keep stroking her. He decided he had enough from her for now, though he would definitely be doing this again. Right now, however, it was time to reward his witch.

“You like my ring, sweetheart?”

“Mmmm....”

“You like it like this?” And then he twisted it around and pressed it into her clit, and she spasmed. He ground it into her a little bit, and she was groaning and wriggling, a little, water splashing over the edge of the tub.

“Draco, I’m gonna...”

“Come whenever you’re ready,” he whispered, pressing his fingers up into that spot she liked. She gasped, and he felt her shake, and

he leaned down and sucked on her neck as she started to fall apart. Gods she was so responsive, so lovely. She started to come back down, and Draco maneuvered a bit so he could slip out from behind her and stand. She opened her eyes to find his cock as hard as it had ever been, and they widened as she stared at it.

Draco just smirked and dried off before throwing on his robe, and then lifting her out too. He patted her dry and then put a robe around her that engulfed her.

“This is far too big.”

“No, it’s fucking adorable,” he said as he grabbed her hand and pulled her into his room. “Tell me, how many times have you come in one night before?”

“I’ve gone twice a couple times before.”

“Then tonight we’ll do three. You gave me the three things I want from you today, so I’ll give you three orgasms.”

He felt her stumble a bit. “Draco, I don’t know if I can...”

He shot her a look. “I’ll push you higher than that, but we’ll work up to it. You’ve gotten one already. Two more tonight for you.”

They made it to the bed, and Draco sat, opening his robe so it fell open. “Stand in front of me sweetheart and take that robe off.”

She looked a little shy, but Draco was pleased to see she looked more confident than the night before, and she untied her robe and opened it, letting it fall onto the floor.

He moved his hand to his cock as he surveyed her, taking in every bit of her. “You’re beautiful.”

She flushed with pleasure, and Draco tracked it all the way down her body. “Fascinating,” he said. “You blush all the way to your cunt.”

She inhaled.

“Turn around and put your hands on the chair right over there for me.”

She turned, and Draco studied her arse as she bent over. He nearly groaned. He could just imagine sinking his cock into that tight little...

Patience, man. You can tell she wants to be taught. Build up to it.

“Come back over here and stand in front of me.”

She made her way over, a bit uncertainly, but she approached until her tits were at just the right height to suck. Draco suddenly pulled her to him and started to lavish them. She groaned and arched into him, and her knees started to shake.

“I love seeing my marks on you...” he murmured. “You once told me you didn’t have any from me. And sweetheart, that was true then, but no more. You’re always going to have something on you that’s from me. Always.”

“Draco...”

“Are you wet again?”

She nodded frantically.

He pulled her close and let his cock slide against her clit. She gasped.

“You’re going to feel so good when I finally do this to you for real.”

“You can...”

“I know, but not yet. I just want you to imagine it.”

“It’s all I’ve been thinking about...”

He hummed his approval at this. "Tell me how you imagine it, and I'll let you come again."

"Fast, like that night against the wall."

"Where are you?"

"On the bottom, in bed."

"And me?"

"On top. Taking me. Telling me what to do."

Draco's heart sang at this. Even in her imagination she was fantasizing about him leading her, instructing her, helping her achieve that perfect release. And the power it gave him whenever she let him do it was nothing short of intoxicating.

"You're my perfect girl, did you know that?"

She keened a bit at the praise. "Draco, I want —"

He shoved his fingers inside of her again before she could even finish the words, and she started to shake at the intrusion.

"Come all over my fingers just like this for me..."

He rubbed a circle into her clit, and he felt that gush and stutter as she moaned and started to collapse inward. Draco gently lowered her to the floor in front of him.

She looked up at him with hazy eyes, and he watched as she suddenly focused on his cock. As if on instinct her rosebud lips parted, and Draco's cock jumped violently as he watched her in fascination.

"Draco..." she breathed.

"Yes, sweetheart?"

“Can I...?”

“Can you what?”

She just looked at him, opened her mouth and tilted her chin up.

He tilted his head as he studied her. “Do you want to suck me off?”

She nodded, her eyes huge and earnest, and Draco felt the precum start he stared at her. Here she was, naked and on her knees, and she looked so innocent she was practically angelic. Draco was quickly realizing that he must have his own kink for this particular combination. He wasn't sure if he had ever seen anything so perfect as this small watch begging him with her huge hazel eyes to let her suck him.

“Tell me why you want to.”

“Because I'm really good at it.”

At these words, hot jealousy rushed him, clawing up from his stomach all the way to his throat. He threw her a dark look, and her eyes widened in surprise. Draco forced it down. He had known she had done this before, at least with Weasley. She had told him that herself.

Don't be a hypocrite. Don't be a hypocrite. Don't be a hypocrite.

He was a fucking hypocrite. The thought of those sweet lips around any other bloke's cock was doing something to his self-control.

“How many?” he asked roughly.

She swallowed and looked wary. “Three,” she whispered.

Draco's jaw clenched as he stared at her hard. “Show me how good you do it then.”

Heat flared in her gaze now at the challenge he threw down, and she nodded, looking up at him through her lashes.

“Have you ever gotten on your knees like this before?”

She shook her head no, and some of the jealousy ebbed.

“Have you ever swallowed?”

Again, she shook her head no. It ebbed some more.

“Well then you’re in for a real treat sweetheart. Because I want you to stay just like that. And when you’re done, please swallow every drop.”

“Yes sir.”

Draco closed his eyes for a moment to compose himself. *That* was unexpected. Holy fuck did that do something to him.

He opened his eyes to find her staring at his cock with curiosity.

“Oh fuck me,” he muttered, and he laced his fingers through her hair and pushed himself toward her face. Her mouth dropped open, and he moved in, eyes rolling back for a moment at the feeling of her lips closing around him.

He looked down and almost came at the sight of her like this. She had opened her throat and was letting him pump into her gently, as her hands drifted down her own body.

“Spread your legs and touch yourself while I do this,” he said, and he thought he saw a smile in her eyes as she immediately did as he asked.

She was looking up at him, those big hazel eyes still so innocent despite the utterly wonton thing she was doing.

“Goddammit Granger, you’re letting me fuck that pretty mouth aren’t you? Going to send it all down your throat and give you some dessert.”

Her eyelids fluttered closed as he gripped her hair a bit harder. His flash of jealousy from earlier was melting away as he focused on her mouth, her tongue, her throat that was impossibly deep. She was letting him direct her in this. He controlled the pace, the depth, the angle, all of it. He was trying to be gentle, but he felt his self control slipping. He looked down to find her eyes open again, staring at him intently, and that was the end of him. He couldn't hold back any longer when she looked at him like that.

“Gonna do it now, Granger, hang on...”

Then Draco started to thrust, and to his astonishment she relaxed her throat even further and just let him do it, and a moment later Draco grunted, his spend going all the way down. He kept his eyes peeled and felt her throat engage as she swallowed, and he slipped his cock out, before lifting her up and kissing her hard. He could still taste himself on her, and he knew he’d be hard again in a few minutes.

He moved her around and pushed her back on the bed, climbing over her and using her knees to open her legs.

“That was beautiful, sweetheart. You did so good for me. And I promised you three, didn’t I?”

She just nodded, and her eyes fluttered closed, as he lowered himself to her and inspected her. “You did a good job getting started while you were on your knees. We’ll be there again before you know it.”

He gripped her thighs and buried his face into her, shoving his tongue in as far as it could reach and flicking rapidly. She started to moan and writhe again. She was already wiped from her two earlier orgasms and the demands he placed on her to achieve his, and he

was pushing her but he was sure she could get there. Besides, he was already craving those soft moments that would come once she was done with this. The more he pushed her the longer she would let him take care of her afterwards.

He continued to eat her, but she didn't quite crest, despite the delicious sounds she was giving him with her hands twisted in his hair and the sheets. That was intriguing, and Draco filed it away for later. He wondered if he could do this to her all night long, driving her mad like this. He wasn't taking any breaks, but she also wasn't getting that last little push she really needed.

Evidently Hermione Granger required penetration, and now Draco knew exactly what to do to send her careening. All it took was one finger up and his ring on her clit. Fuck, she loved that, and so did he.

She spasmed, and Draco felt her fall apart, as another tiny gush of wetness left her body and headed straight for his mouth. He licked every drop, closing his eyes a bit to relish it. She really did taste incredible, and Draco gloried in the small discovery he made about her tonight. Now that he knew that oral sex got her close but that it took something inside of her to finish, Draco would be able to exert even greater precision over the timing of when she came for him.

Gods he was becoming obsessed. He had dreamed of finding a partner whose body would respond to him like this, giving him that perfect control he wanted. He never thought he would actually find somebody like that, let alone here with the woman he had wanted for years. This was their third encounter together, and already he was addicted.

He lifted his head to find her eyes closed, breathing heavily, and utterly exhausted and sated. He just smiled broadly. She looked perfect like this, absolutely perfect.

He slipped out of bed and went to a spare dresser to pull out some new knickers and a silky nightgown he had sent Rosie to purchase for her while they were at Theo's in the hopes that they would end up

here tonight. He pulled his boxers back on and moved back to the bed, gently moving the underwear up her legs and over her bum and then lifting her arms to put the nightgown over her head.

"You keep doing that," she murmured.

"Doing what?"

"Dressing me after... you know."

"It's a rare pleasure for me."

She smiled a little. "It's very sweet."

Draco's heart sang to know she liked it. He liked doing it too. He wanted to know her needs were being met. He liked picking her night things for her and ensuring everything was placed just right so she could sleep. He liked to take care of her. He wanted it, *craved* it even more than he craved sex. And despite her independence and stubbornness, she accepted his care so readily in her post-orgasmic haze that Draco knew he would continue to do it. He wanted that brilliant mind of hers to make a thousand new, unconscious connections that told her he was safe. He provided. He supported her. He took her stress away. He wanted her to believe that her bed was here, her home was here, and her life needed to be lived right here with him. He wanted them to become so tangled up that she would never be able to run from him again, even if it was a bit messy sometimes.

"Will you sleep here tonight?" he asked.

She didn't respond but just yawned and nodded. "I need..."

"Everything you need is in my bathroom already," he said.

She stretched a little and slowly sat up as she padded to the bathroom, returning a few minutes later with an odd look on her face.

"How did you know what kind of toothpaste I use?"

He smirked. "I sent Rosie to snoop in your bathroom this morning."

Technically, that was true.

She rolled her eyes, but smiled a little as she slipped under the covers while Draco took his turn. When he got back he found her already burrowed in, and he smiled to himself to see it.

"Give me those earrings," he said.

"Oh," she said suddenly, only now remembering she was still wearing them. She sat up a bit to unfasten them and handed them to Draco, who opened his nightstand and dropped them in for later.

"I have something else for you," he added as he sat down on the bed next to her.

She looked at him curiously as he pulled out the small box with the charm in it he had picked up from the goblins earlier that evening and opened it to show her.

She gave a small gasp as he pulled it out and caught her hand with the bracelet still on it. He reached for his wand and tapped it to fasten the charm on the opposite side from the lion. It was simple: just a round disk cast in platinum with a smattering of miniscule gemstones set into it, seemingly at random.

"The light blue sapphires are days. The dark blue sapphires are months. The diamonds are years."

She examined it and finally looked at him with a beautifully open expression on her face. "It's the amount of time between the first time we were together and the second, isn't it? Seven years, three months, and fourteen days."

He nodded, and she put her hand on his cheek as she leaned forward and kissed him. "Thank you. I love it."

"Nobody but us will know what it means."

“That makes it even more special,” she said.

He reached forward and started to unclasp it, but she pulled it back and said, “No. I want to sleep with it tonight.”

He smiled softly at this and pulled her to him. She gave a contented sigh and settled in, tucked against his chest, head under his chin. He caught her hand and laced their fingers together, his thumb tracing the tiny stones from her new charm.

This was making him feel things. It was so lovely and warm Draco’s heart almost hurt from it.

“Sleep now. You need your rest.”

Sweet Salazar, I’m in love with you.

Problems and Solutions

Chapter 22: Problems and Solutions

AN: Hermione has a dilemma when she learns part of the truth, and Draco and his friends get some advice that's not strictly legal.

Hermione

Hermione made her way slowly down Diagon Alley clutching her paycheck in her hand. Payday had truly become her least favorite day of the month. It was so bad that Hermione made a point to dress up for it to try to show some strength. She had on a Pansy-approved dress, the bracelet from Draco, her grandmother's ring, and her favorite small hoop earrings, which he had inexplicably returned to her a couple days after he swiped them with a note that said, *I fixed them for you sweetheart.*

At first she didn't understand what he meant because they looked quite the same to her. He had done the same thing with the tiny gold balls too – he just returned them and said she could wear them now. But then she discovered a few dilapidated books in her flat that had been replaced by pristine copies. A further search revealed that none of her books were spellotaped any longer. She even discovered a few rare books slipped on her shelf that she was sure were from Maud and Tom's shop. They were books she had always wanted. This made Hermione rather suspicious, and one day she took those small hoops to a jeweler who told her they weren't cheap at all, but very high quality gold. She brought in the small gold balls the next day, and the jeweler told her the same thing about them.

Draco had 'fixed' them, alright. He had duplicated them for her and replaced them with something much more valuable.

Hermione was discovering that Draco had a sneaky side to him. She supposed it wasn't that surprising because he was first and foremost a Slytherin. He was also intentional - *very* intentional. Everything he did for her, every move he made seemed to be leading up to something. He hadn't talked to her about it yet so she was waiting until he did to bring up these small discoveries. While she waited, she started to think and turned the matter over and over in her mind.

Her feelings about the earrings and books were distinctly mixed. On the one hand, it made her feel seen, and it proved to her that he was observant and watching *her*. On the other, it was rather intrusive and underhanded.

Hermione thought she would have accepted those things from him willingly if he had just been upfront about it. She knew they were no financial burden for him, and she had read that book about love languages Lavender Brown brought to Hogwarts in fourth year when she went truly boy-crazy. Hermione wasn't sure exactly how accurate it was, but she had to admit that giving and receiving gifts seemed to be Draco's language. Hermione was more an acts of service type - or rather, she *wanted* to be an acts of service type. She had always scoffed at several of the other love languages and believed receiving gifts to be ranked dead last since it struck her as shallow and materialistic. When faced with a partner who seemed to communicate affection with gifts, however, she was reconsidering her position. Hermione was forced to admit that she liked it. She didn't necessarily *want* to like it as much as she did, but she couldn't seem to help it. It made her feel special. She could tell Draco took great pleasure in it too. And who was she to judge how one person conveyed affection versus another?

No, it wasn't the gifts that bothered her anymore - it was the fact that he was doing it behind her back.

Then again, *was* he doing it behind her back? Really? He wasn't secretive about taking and returning her earrings. He just wouldn't tell her *why*. The books she had spellotaped were in such disrepair because she used them often. Draco Malfoy was many things, but

stupid was not one of them. He hadn't told her what he was doing, but surely he was aware she would notice these things eventually. He was being sneaky, but he wasn't exactly subtle.

It was like the Mark revelation all over again - he was planting evidence around her flat of his interference and letting her discover it for herself.

Hermione didn't know how to feel about this, she truly didn't. She thought he cared about her. He certainly fussed over her. The gentleness and thoughtfulness he exhibited every time he dressed her for bed and tucked her in made her heart ache with longing. Draco was obviously trying to care for her in other ways too, but why go behind her back with it? Why not just tell her directly? She knew she was stubborn and independent, but surely she wasn't so stubborn and independent that she would turn down the things he tried to give her.

Or would she? Did Draco think she would dig her heels in and reject the things he wanted to do? Was there something else behind it?

Hermione knew she had to think about it. She didn't avoid him while she did it, because she no longer felt she could stay away. He had pulled something out of her that drew her to him like a moth to a flame, and she told herself she had plenty of opportunities to consider Draco's penchant for secrecy while she tinkered on the Playground or searched the Manor. She was sure the opportunity to talk to him about it would present itself eventually, and while she waited for it she watched him watch her. It was as heartwarming as it was perplexing.

Today, however, her mind was filled with other things: namely, payday.

She passed by Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes and caught a familiar sight of red in the window. She decided to duck in to give herself a few more minutes before she had to endure the uncomfortable situation she would find herself in soon.

“Hi Ron!” she said.

“Mione!” he said in surprise, coming up to give her a hug. She winced a little. She had never really cared for the nickname, but she had never told Ron this. The fact that he still used it after she broke up with him and hurt him so much was kind, and she had never been able to bring herself to explain that something about it irked her.

Sweetheart and princess should probably irk me too.

They didn’t though. She loved the things Draco called her. They felt special, like she belonged to him. Mione had always felt a bit lazy, like Ron just didn’t want to take the time to say the extra syllable in her name.

“How goes the shop?”

“Easier this time of year with Hogwarts in session,” he said, as he led her toward a few new things.

He showed her some bombs that made confetti explode when they went off, quills that were charmed to insult whoever was writing with them (“we got that from the Marauder’s Map”) and finally a small rack of invisibility cloaks.

“Demiguise hair?” she asked curiously.

Ron nodded. “Yes, layered with a few more concealment charms and an anti-summoning charm and such. I don’t think George and I will ever be able to recreate Harry’s, but these are as close as you can get for what’s on the market.”

Hermione had to admit she was impressed. “You’re right these are very close,” she said, as she pulled one off and threw it over her shoulders and looked down at her feet, which had disappeared. “It’s not as weightless as Harry’s, but you can’t see a thing.”

Just then the bell jangled, and to Hermione's surprise Draco strode in with Blaise and Theo.

"Oh hello!" she called. All three came to a halt as they stared at her in confusion. Ron shifted very uncomfortably next to her.

"Darling, you know I love that curly head of yours, but where is the rest of you?" asked Theo.

"Oh!" she said, laughing as she pulled the cloak off. "Ron was just showing me their new line of invisibility cloaks. They're quite good. Best I've ever seen outside of a certain family heirloom of Harry's. His will never be duplicated though."

The three of them walked forward, and Draco took it from her curiously. Ron gave him a bit of a challenging look, but Draco ignored it as he tried it on too.

"This is... surprisingly good," he said.

Hermione took one look at Ron's face and said, "What are you all doing here?"

"We were getting lunch and decided to stop in," said Theo. "I thought I might get some of that darkness powder. Luna wants to try sensory deprivation."

Ron almost choked at this, as Draco and Blaise smirked. Hermione, however, bit her lip as she thought about it.

Sensory deprivation.

It sounded a bit scary but also very intriguing. Draco, of course, caught her look, and his eyes flashed with heat.

Ron shifted uncomfortably, but started to move around the counter to get some as George came out from the back of the shop. "Hey Brainiac," he said to Hermione. He pulled her in for a quick hug, as he glanced at the Slytherins.

Hermione knew George and Ron had softened toward them since the war, but they were both still very cautious, especially around Draco.

"They're here for the darkness powder," said Ron.

"What's it for?" asked George sharply, looking at Draco specifically.

"Luna wants to have her wicked way with me," said Theo promptly, and Ron winced a little though George looked intrigued.

"Really..."

"You should invent some seventeen and up products," said Draco.

"You'd probably make a second fortune with it. You could have a section in the back for the parents, while the kids go to town in here."

Ron looked aghast at the suggestion, but George narrowed his eyes and studied Draco as he nudged Ron to ring them up.

"You think?" asked George thoughtfully.

"Sure," said Draco, as Theo passed a little gold over the counter and picked up his powder. "And if you need an investor for that line you can owl me. I have some very specific ideas."

Hermione turned scarlet at this, while Ron looked pained. But Hermione could tell George was thinking about it carefully.

Hermione quickly snatched the cloak from Draco and spun around to hang it up so she could hide her face. When she turned back around Draco was licking his lips a little and watching her with some satisfaction.

"I must be going," she said quickly. "Oh but Ron, George, I have an extra ticket to the Hogwarts fundraiser next week if either of you want to go. It's quite the bash."

"You aren't going?" asked Ron in confusion.

“Draco got a table.”

“She asked me out,” added Draco, as Hermione turned to glare at him a little. Draco smiled sweetly back at her.

Ron's face twisted at this, but he nodded and said, “I’ll take it for Lavender if you don’t mind. The shop is a sponsor so George and I have a couple tickets already.”

“Of course.”

Hermione arranged to drop the ticket off at the Burrow the following day before she turned to bid farewell to the wizards. Theo and Blaise both gave her pecks on the cheek, but Draco cupped her chin and gave her a peck on the lips in front of everyone. She squeaked a little, and he smirked.

“Have a good afternoon princess. I’ll floo over later.”

Hermione was bright red, but she gave a little nod and then turned and practically fled the shop. She did not want to witness the aftermath of that little scene.

Her pace slowed as she looked up at the marble edifice of Gringotts, her feelings from earlier suddenly returning with a lurch. She hated this, absolutely hated this, but she really had no choice. Every single month it was the same.

She walked up the steps, and the guard goblin recognized her instantly. He motioned for her to come inside, and as usual she was sent into a room for a thorough search with a couple of particularly rough-looking goblins. Her bag, her person, her clothing were all searched. They even frisked her, which always made Hermione very uncomfortable. Her face burned with shame.

When they were satisfied that she was carrying nothing but her wand and a few essentials in her handbag, the guard goblins escorted her

out of the small room and stood in line with her until she was called up to a counter.

“It’s you again, is it?” said the goblin a bit nastily as she passed her paycheck over the counter. The bracelet Draco had given her clanked as it hit the marble top, and the goblin glanced down at it before narrowing his eyes.

He said nothing, but studied it for a moment before pulling her check to him.

“How should it be split?” he asked in a nasal voice, which made Hermione look at him in surprise. Usually they harassed her a bit before finally letting her finish what she came to do.

“Eighty percent in pounds, twenty percent in galleons, please,” she said.

The goblin said nothing, but reached under the counter and pulled out the money, counting it quickly for her and pushing it across the counter.

She reached out to take it, and the goblin suddenly grabbed her wrist, making Hermione jump and look at him with a bit of fear. He turned the bracelet over and touched the new charm Draco had given her the week before.

“You may be wearing the baubles of your betters, but you’ll always be a little sneakthief.”

Then he released her roughly, and Hermione took a step back.

The familiar feeling of shame rose up as she shoved the money into her small bag and turned to leave the bank. Tears pricked her eyes, and she looked down and sniffed, trying desperately to make sure they didn’t fall. The goblins had always been subtle, but it was still cruel. They knew she was popular in the wizarding world, and anybody who saw her escort would probably think it was because

they were providing extra security for her. They made sure that the frisks always happened behind closed doors. The snide remarks and comments were said quietly so other customers couldn't hear. The secrecy, however, didn't make it any easier to bear.

This was payday every month. Every damn month they did this to her. She didn't even have a vault because they wouldn't allow her through the doors to the carts. She was one of just a few employees at the Ministry of Magic who still took her paychecks on paper and had to physically cash them each month. The previous year human resources passed around a memo saying that they were phasing out paper checks and would be going to direct deposit only in the near future, and it took an intervention from Kingsley to cancel their plans. Thank Merlin he liked her enough to do it without asking too many questions about *why* Hermione required paper checks.

It was positively mortifying. She knew that Harry and Ron would be angry if they knew just how bad it had gotten with the goblins, but Hermione was a grown witch and independent. She tried to keep it to herself. The goblins had always been suspicious of Harry and Ron too, but they were much less hostile toward them due to their heritage and because they were both well-situated now. Harry had always been treated the best out of the three even though he was the one who touched the cup first and released the dragon that day. His fame and family wealth guaranteed it. But Ron became a close second once he bought into Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. It was enough to make the goblins treat him cordially, if not warmly.

Out of the the three, Hermione had become the scapegoat. The only thing that made it tolerable was that she was only forced to come in once a month. If the Ministry had paid every week or every two weeks, she probably would have quit and gone into the muggle world permanently.

The goblins escorting her followed close behind until she was through the front doors, where she ran almost headfirst into Draco.

“Oh!” she said, coming to a halt. Theo and Blaise were gone now, and he stared down at her curiously and then with concern when he saw her face. His eyes were roving over every feature. Most of the time she enjoyed how observant and attentive he was, but there were other times when it was bloody inconvenient.

“Sweetheart, what happened?” he asked.

“It’s nothing,” she said quickly, glancing to the side and seeing the looks on the guard goblins’ faces. “I’m just running late for... something. I’ll see you later, Draco.”

She moved away and nearly sprinted down the steps to get away from there as quickly as possible. She felt a lump rising in her throat, and she forced the tears back. If anybody she knew saw her like this... if *Draco* caught up and saw her like this... No, she couldn’t allow it.

She looked behind her to see his blonde head turned in her direction, and she knew he was watching her every move. She forced herself to raise her hand as though waving to him, and then she turned on disappeared on the spot, landing in her usual apparition point near her muggle bank.

This part, thankfully, was much more comfortable because none of the muggles cared who she was. Turning over a chunk of physical cash was always a bit awkward, but they usually said nothing to her about it and just checked a few notes to make sure they were real before depositing them and handing her a receipt.

Breathing a sigh of relief that this part was over at least, Hermione headed back to her flat for a few minutes for the next thing she really had to do. She had told herself that she would finally open all of her bills and see what the damage was as soon as she was paid, and she couldn’t delay it any longer. She was due back at the Playground later on that afternoon to check on some cursed objects the muggle relations department had discovered, but she could take an hour to eat and finish this first. The Playground would help her mentally

recover from the way the goblins had treated her and from whatever bad news she was about to get when she finally opened her bills.

She went to her bedroom to get the past due bills out of her nightstand, then moved back to the kitchen to grab some lunch and the stack of current mail. Finally, she grabbed her small laptop and booted it, logging on to her bank's website and pulling up the billpay feature. She took a deep breath as she began.

Her shopping forays to make Pansy happy had become expensive enough that Hermione had just stopped paying attention to all the money she was spending. She really didn't want to know. She totaled up the most urgent bills that were past due on a scrap of paper and submitted them for payment from her bank. They had to be paid first, and it would feel like a relief to get those out of her nightstand.

Then she looked through the current bills and was surprised to see a piece of mail she had originally missed earlier that day among them. It was from her landlord, and Hermione opened it hesitantly, suddenly terrified they would try to take away the rent abatement she had been relying on for this.

She scanned the note quickly, and discovered that they were *not* taking away her abatement, but they were simply letting her know that her windows were due to be reglazed and the plaster was to be repaired in her flat. The property company that owned her building was notifying her that workers would be entering the premises per her lease to make the necessary improvements. She scanned the dates and times and made a mental note to be out of her flat those two days, but this was welcome news. The cracks in the plaster didn't particularly bother her, but the windows certainly did. Her flat got cold in the winter, and heating it was expensive. They were now well into fall, so the timing really couldn't be better.

Breathing a short sigh of relief that the abatement was still in place, she opened the first of the newer bills, her stomach clenching again as she waited to see the number on top.

To her surprise, it wasn't as bad as she was expecting, and she wrote down the amount on the same scrap of paper, carefully keeping track of the totals. On and on it went until she got to the very end, and to her surprise, Hermione was staring at the final number she had left with some disbelief.

Three hundred and four pounds. She had three hundred and four pounds leftover after all of her bills – every single one – was caught up and paid in full. She couldn't remember the last time she had ended up that far in the black. She knew it was all due to that rent abatement for October that let her get partially caught up, and now the one for November meant she didn't have to set aside any of her muggle money to pay rent on the first day of the month.

The next month she would be able to afford to buy better food. She could take a night out with her friends. She could heat her flat to a comfortable temperature, especially with the window reglazing that was due the following week.

Even the expensive shopping trips with Pansy wouldn't be a problem anymore. Pansy had surprised her with a contract the previous day, saying that her lawyer advised her to formalize their arrangement now that Pansy's business was getting noticed. The contract said that Pansy would provide styling advice, a wardrobe, and certain custom pieces at her discretion in exchange for Hermione's agreement to wear Pansy Parkinson clothing to public events and a quarterly photo shoot in Pansy's clothing. Pansy would have the right to use five photos per quarter for advertising, with Hermione to have the ability to advise on the photos that were to be used. Hermione had never licensed her image before like this, but she felt it was really more than fair, and in any event it was only for a year. If Hermione didn't like it, she could decline to renew it. Pansy was ecstatic and said Ginny and Luna had signed on too.

Hermione stared at the total again as weeks, no *months* of tension she didn't even realize she had suddenly drained out of her. And as it happened, Draco's voice seemed to echo through her head.

You have to take breaks to relax.

A truly odd thought crossed Hermione's mind as she pulled one of the bills forward. She hadn't studied any of them closely while she was paying them, but now that she knew she wasn't completely broke she found she had the courage to read it more carefully. Her eyes scanned the lines below the grand total on top. All of her shopping trips seemed to be there, or the ones she could remember at any rate. But some of the figures seemed low to her.

Almost unconsciously Hermione opened a new tab on her laptop and logged on to her credit card company's website. She pulled up her statement and saw it was considerably more than the print-off she was looking at on the table. She scanned her account for recent transactions and saw there was a credit to her account for the difference. The credit came from a bank Hermione didn't recognize.

Then she pulled forward another bill and logged on to that account too and saw exactly the same thing. Somebody had paid off part of her bills for her without ever telling her about it.

Draco. It had to be Draco.

It was the only explanation. He was the only person she knew who would behave that way.

Hermione started to spiral a little as she checked all of the other bills she had just paid. By the end of it she learned it was a couple thousand pounds in total - barely a drop in the bucket for the fortune he commanded - but he had done it behind her back *again*. She was both angry and grateful, frustrated and relieved. He had stolen her mail, but he had also taken away her stress. Money had turned into the single greatest source of stress for her since becoming an adult, and it had become much worse over the last few months. She had not properly relaxed until she saw the three hundred and four pounds she had left over.

Hermione didn't know if he wanted to slap him or kiss him.

She had to think. She knew she wouldn't be able to stay away from him while she did it this time, not really. But they would have to talk about this eventually once Hermione's own thoughts were straightened out.

Hermione stared at the 304 she had jotted down on the slip of parchment, and for a moment she just allowed herself to feel it without worrying about Draco's interference or the things he had done to make it happen for her.

She was caught up. She wasn't broke. She had a little savings now.

The tears she fought back earlier at Gringotts suddenly welled up again, and now Hermione let them fall. But this time they weren't from humiliation. No, Hermione knew was crying from sheer, blessed relief. And she knew exactly who was responsible for it.

Dammit Draco.

Draco

Draco was finding he really liked Ben Bershwick. He was sensible, sarcastic, and fit in rather well with Draco's oldest friends and Harry Potter, despite the fact that he was several years older than them. Once he loosened up around them Draco quickly discovered he could drink them all under the table ("That's because most lawyers are high-functioning alcoholics") and his language was naturally as foul as Draco's own ("Why the *fuck* do you have an *aviary*, Draco? Is it because of those fucking peacocks? I thought Pansy was joking the other night!").

Yes, Draco liked him, and his friends did too. And as Draco combed through yet more legal bills that had been sent to him for the most recent month, he was certain now that Ben was doing virtually all of his real estate work and getting no credit for it.

This was an unusual Friday night because instead of everyone meeting at Theo's, the wizards had come to the Manor while the witches were assembling at Ben and Alyssa's home to go over Pansy's plan of attack for the following weekend.

"Be prepared for a shocking few months now that Pansy has come into Alyssa's life," said Harry, as they all sat around a card table. They were in the Smoking Room or *Fumare Room*, much to Ben's amusement. They were enjoying some fine whiskey, expensive cigars, and a rather one-sided game of poker, thanks to Ben who was absolutely dominating the rest of them.

Draco felt very manly indeed.

"I learned a long time ago to just let Alyssa handle it," said Ben comfortably. "She's much better at that sort of thing than me."

"Speaking of our dear Pansy," said Theo carefully, "She told me her mother has set her sights on Adrian Pucey. Pansy's actually considering it."

There was a clunk as Blaise's glass dropped to the table. "*Excuse me?*"

Theo shrugged. "She's tired of waiting, mate. She told me that if you won't ask her out then she's going to move on and try the pureblood courting bullshit we were all raised with. It's worked for all three of her sisters."

All of the others were watching Blaise to see how he would react to this.

"But she can't! She's... she's... no. That's just... no."

"What are you afraid of?" asked Ben curiously.

Well this should be interesting.

Theo and Draco had asked Blaise this for years, but Ben didn't know Blaise very well, and unlike the others he was married.

Blaise gritted his teeth. "I'm not *afraid*. I just wanted to be more settled first. She's..."

"Expensive," said Harry.

"Demanding," said Draco.

"Completely in love with you," said Theo.

All the others turned to Theo, and he said, "What? She is! It's been obvious for years. And honestly mate, if you fuck this up because of some vague, 'maybe someday I'll be ready for her,' bullshit, I'm never going to forgive you. I do *not* want Adrian Pucey coming to my house every Friday night for the rest of my life."

To Draco's surprise Ben pointed at Theo and said, "That's solid advice right there."

Blaise slumped and said, "She's just... so much better than me. I've always thought she was out of my league."

Draco and Theo stared at Blaise in surprise. They had never heard him express this before. But to Draco's shock, it wasn't Theo or even Harry who spoke. It was Ben.

"Look, I've known all of you for a grand total of one week, so what the fuck do I know? But what I have seen as an outside observer is that *all* of the girls are better than all of you. I mean, Luna just has this incredible easiness and amazing worldview that I have never encountered before. It's wonderful. Ginny is fiery, and she is way scarier than Harry here, even with all the auror and Chosen One bullshit. Hermione is a certifiable genius, and Draco had better be laying the fucking world at her feet or he will never come close to deserving her —"

Thanks mate, I happen to agree.

“- and then you have Pansy, who is self-confident, running her own business, and somehow whips all of the others into shape. They’re *all* better than *all* of you.”

“What about Alyssa then?” asked Blaise a bit grumpily.

“Oh Alyssa was so far out of my league it was laughable,” said Ben. “I mean, there she was on the other side of the lecture hall, this incredibly beautiful and thoughtful witch, and I’m a squib. There is not one person in the wizarding world who would think I actually deserve her. But for some crazy reason Alyssa Huffington flirted with me one day after class, and I would have been a damned fool not to flirt back. I mean, I’d been staring at her for ages. She probably thought I was a creep. Then the flirting got more obvious, and I thought, ‘Well shit she might actually want to date me.’ That was incredibly surprising, but I took my shot and it worked. And then she actually slept with me? And fucking married me? It’s never made any sense at all, but she says I make her happy so who am I to question it?”

All of the younger wizards were staring at Ben in fascination, but he just took a drag from his cigar as he looked at Blaise.

“You have to understand that you will *never* feel like you deserve her, but that’s actually a good thing. It means you’ll treat her well, you’ll try to make her happy, and you won’t take her for granted. When you fuck it up – and you will because everybody does – you’ll actually listen to her when she tells you what you did wrong, and you’ll try your best not to do that thing again. And in return, you get to be with a witch who is way better than you. And let me tell you, that is a massive fucking ego boost. It never goes away. I’ve been married to Alyssa for nearly five years, and the ego boost whenever she makes it clear that she wants *me* for some mad reason? It’s the best damned feeling in the world.”

Draco was studying Blaise now, and he could see that Blaise was thinking about it – *really* thinking about it.

“Pucey can offer her more than I can...” he said quietly. But he said it as though it was a problem to solve, rather than an insurmountable hurdle.

“Irrelevant,” said Theo.

Draco glanced at Ben, who gave him a look that said, *I can't tell him*. Of course he couldn't, Pansy was one of his firm's clients now. But Draco knew and could tell him all about it.

“Theo's right. I saw Hermione last night, and did you know that Pansy has gotten her, Ginny, and Luna to agree to use their images for advertising? They signed on for photo shoots and everything. I seeded a new company for her that's witches' wear only in exchange for a small stake, but Pansy is running the show all on her own. It will become self-sustaining very soon, and she's going to be incredibly successful. She doesn't need the things Pucey can give her, and besides you never know where you will be in a year yourself.”

Blaise raised his eyebrows. “You mean with your accounts? I don't think the security is good enough, I've told you that. There have been too many breaches. And anyway,” here he glanced at Harry, “rumors are that the investigation is being reopened. Whoever stole that money is still there, and you should stay away until they're caught.”

Draco hesitated to bring this up since Harry and Theo were there, but he decided to throw caution to the wind and just do it. Harry and Theo could both be persuasive.

“I was actually thinking I might bring some things in-house,” said Draco carefully. “You know I don't like my financial firm, and I haven't been thrilled with the way some of my lawyers do things either, as Ben knows.”

He glanced at Blaise and Ben, and they were both staring at him intently.

“The thing is, I think I could save a lot of money and both of you could make a lot more if you came to work for me directly. I know you two can’t do everything. I probably need another person or two, and I would still outsource pieces of it when you two need help. But Ben, you can do magical and muggle real estate. That’s a huge chunk of my legal work, and you’re already doing most of it anyway. And Blaise, you’d have management over my other finances just like you would if I moved to your firm. I would just be your only client.”

They both raised their eyebrows at this, and then Harry chimed in. “That’s a really good idea.”

“That’s because it was Hermione’s idea,” admitted Draco.

Harry grinned knowingly.

Draco looked at the two of them and said, “Look, just think about it. I’m not going to pull work from any of my current firms until I know what this looks like. But I’m envisioning you two and a corporate lawyer. Maybe an accountant, but we’ll see about that. Lucius’s estate needs to stay where it is because we’re too close to the end to move firms, but my own estate planning will go to Alyssa. She could come in-house too if she wants or she can stay at her firm and make partner. I have to think that getting Draco Malfoy’s estate would improve her odds.”

Ben looked rather stunned, but he nodded slowly. “I... definitely want to think about it. But I could see that working, Draco. All of it.”

Blaise was nodding too. “Same. I want to think on it, but we can talk about it soon.”

Draco gave a relieved sigh. “Good. And Blaise, get your head out of your arse and ask out Pansy, will you? And please do it before she brings Adrian Pucey into our lives. Theo is right, he’s terrible.”

Blaise shot him a look. "You should talk with the way you practically melt around Hermione."

"Hermione and I are together."

"Are you?" asked Blaise. "Because last I heard she seems to think you two are 'very good friends.'"

Draco scowled. Sure, he hadn't made the final leap yet to actually *talk* to her about courting, but he was doing it, and it was working. He had a plan to tell her about it eventually.

"We're together. You know she asked me to the fundraiser next week as her date."

"And you got a table for all of us to come with you," said Theo in amusement.

"That's not *why*. She said she wanted everybody to come, so..."

"So you're group dating her," chimed in Harry.

Draco rolled his eyes. "Don't even get me started on *you*. Why haven't you proposed to Ginny yet?"

Harry turned beet red and mumbled something about kids.

"Theo?" asked Ben conversationally. "Are you also fucking it up?"

"Who me? No, of course not. I am presently getting my brains shagged out by one Luna Lovegood on a regular basis. She's nothing short of glorious, and I've told her I will do anything she wants me to do. Date her, marry her, whatever, I'm there for it."

Draco, Blaise, and Harry all stared at Theo. "You've told Luna that?" Harry finally asked.

"Yes, like Ben here said, I'd be a fucking idiot not to take the amazing witch right in front of me. Right now Luna just wants to date,

so we're dating. When she wants to get married, I'll marry her."

"Fucking hell," muttered Blaise.

Draco had to agree. As far as he could tell, Theo hadn't done *anything* to get Luna to come around, other than drop his pants on her command. Then again, Draco had to admit that he had been rather preoccupied with Hermione. Perhaps Theo had put more into it than Draco realized.

"Alright," said Ben, looking around at the others. "Theo seems to be doing well enough. But Draco, you need to get on the same page as Hermione. Blaise, please grow a pair and ask Pansy out. Harry, for the love of Merlin, just ask Ginny to marry you already. You should have done it a couple years ago."

There was a stunned silence, but Ben just raised an eyebrow and stared at them. Theo was nodding along too. Finally Draco exhaled and said, "Alright, fine."

"Fine," agreed Blaise.

"Yeah sure. You're right," said Harry.

"Good," said Ben. "I'll deal next."

Seeing Orange

Chapter 23: Seeing Orange

AN: It's all going great until it's not.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Draco

The past two weeks with Hermione had been nothing short of a dream. She was brilliant, beautiful, and she looked at Draco with that tantalizing wide-eyed innocence no matter how many times Draco made her come.

He'd spent the last couple of weeks getting her used to his hands and tongue, making sure she was comfortable being naked around him, collecting another pair of ruined knickers for his collection, and of course encouraging her to take care of herself. She was doing a better job of it too, and Draco watched the circles slowly disappear from under her eyes and the stress drain out of her. After that odd interaction at Gringotts he floo'd to her that night to talk to her about it. He wasn't sure what caused her mood, but her face had appeared pinched and uncertain when she saw him before hurrying off. When he arrived at her flat, however, he found her bustling around, throwing dinner together and already two glasses deep into the bottle of wine she opened for them. She immediately turned on him and gave him a suspicious look.

"Draco, just how sneaky are you?"

Draco's heart started to race. "Fairly sneaky I would say."

“Why is that?”

“Many reasons I suppose.”

“Can you tell me what they are?”

“I’m still figuring them out for myself.”

She had given him another calculating look, but mercifully she let it drop before her mood shifted abruptly, and she began extolling the virtues of her landlord to him.

“The property management company is going to fix my windows. They’ve needed reglazing for ages, and it’s just in the nick of time before it gets very cold.”

“I’m so glad to hear it, sweetheart.”

“You’re lucky my landlord isn’t a bloke. If it were, I’d probably be in love with him. The rent abatement helped me so much.”

Draco had wanted nothing more than to tell her she could fall in love with her landlord all she wanted, but to maintain the fiction he gave her a light punishment for teasing him about other men. He blindfolded her for the first time after dinner and left her on the bed naked for thirty minutes while he just watched her. Admittedly it wasn’t *that* much of a punishment – Draco was thrilled she was so happy about it – but he had to do something to respond to her cheek. By the time he finally let her come she was so worked up she practically exploded. They both won that way.

Her light interrogation of him and subsequent conversation about her landlord made the exchange at Gringotts slip his mind. When he remembered it later, he shrugged it off. Whatever it was it surely wasn’t serious because Hermione seemed to be in decent spirits later on that evening. Perhaps she had been running late for an appointment or remembered something at work she forgot to do. No, Draco wasn’t thinking about Gringotts anymore. He was dwelling on

the happiness and relief in her voice when she talked about her windows being reglazed. He was thrilled his plan was working, and now he was more sure than ever that he was in love with her. Why else would window reglazing be so gratifying?

True, he hadn't followed through on his promise to Ben just yet. He hadn't really *defined* things with Hermione. But Draco felt like he was still building up to it. He was afraid that if he named it for her then she would become overwhelmed again, and he still wasn't sure if she was in love with him too.

He had been dragging his feet about it so much he hadn't even shagged her yet.

He was working toward it, and he knew he would do it soon, perhaps even tonight. It had taken every bit of self-control he had not to take her the way he wanted to – the way she *begged* him to. But she was turning into such a perfect little submissive for him he was going slow and letting her feelings continue to build while he did it. Every encounter stunned him. She was a fast learner, Draco had always known that. But the things he wanted to teach her about her own sexuality still required a lot of trust and a willingness to get out of her own head. She was getting more comfortable with it, and Draco thought she was nearly there. She was learning to let him lead. She was learning that he studied her to get it right. She was learning that he would take care of her, *always* and in ways that weren't just sexual.

Yes, Hermione was almost ready for that step. Draco just hoped *he* was ready for it too. Something told him that once he did it with her, he would never be able to do it with anybody else.

Hermione and Draco now had a floo connection between his bedroom and her flat. The last two weeks had felt more private that way because Draco could floo to her to check in without ever alerting his mother or the elves that he was leaving. Hermione had slept in Draco's bed several more times, and he had slept in hers as well. He still sent her notes and trinkets and her daily flower through her box,

but having her at night was the thing he was coming to cherish. Draco absolutely craved the intimacy of it, and he hoped within a few months it would evolve to an every night thing.

In fact, Draco decided he would slowly move her into the Manor with him. Again, he hadn't talked to her about it, but he just started to do it. She had been a bit bemused to find a duplicate of every product she used in his bathroom, and he had started filling one of the empty dressers in his room with clothes for her, after asking Pansy to go on a shopping trip for him. Hermione could now bathe, dress, and sleep with him with no inconvenient trips back to her flat.

As for Hermione's flat, Draco intended to keep it for as long as she wanted it. It was a space that was all hers, and Draco knew she needed that. She needed a place to escape. The Manor, for all of its hundred-plus rooms, didn't have a place that was really like that for her, at least not yet. The Study might be the closest thing, but it was shared with Draco. And the Library was her favorite spot, but other guests saw it too. No, Draco envisioned Hermione's flat being *her* special place where she could think and where he would occasionally join her to play because it was completely private. But he wanted her living at the Manor with him. He was absolutely certain about this.

There were things he had to do before she agreed to it though. He had to fuck her. He had to keep courting her. At some point he would have to name the thing he really wanted from her.

Draco was most excited about that first thing, and he couldn't wait to see what Pansy came up with tonight. The Hogwarts fundraiser had become quite the must-attend event after the war. The damage caused by the Battle of Hogwarts had been so extensive that the Board of Governors hosted the first one in a desperate need to raise funds to repair the castle. It had been so successful that it had become an annual event, usually held in late October, where everyone who was anyone put in an appearance. The seventh year students were always invited too in order to help place them in jobs after Hogwarts.

Draco usually bought a table for his mother and her friends, opting to skip himself most years. But with Hermione in his life, Draco bought a second table this year and hoped that's what he would be doing indefinitely.

Blaise had finally, *finally* asked Pansy out, or rather he asked her not to go with Adrian Pucey to this fundraiser. Blaise wasn't taking anybody else either, and they were going to sit together tonight. Draco hoped they might finally start something and cease driving their best friends mad.

The wizards had arrived first, with their dates being held back fashionably late by Pansy because she wanted them to make an entrance. The look on Mortimer's face when he saw Ben sitting at Draco's table as his special guest was priceless, and it was made even more so when he recognized Harry Potter too.

"Ben, my boy!" he blustered.

"Evening Mortimer."

"I didn't realize you knew Draco so well!"

"Mutual friends, remember?" Ben deadpanned, and Draco struggled not to snort from laughter.

Draco met with Ben and Blaise separately over the past week for some long conversations about what his "family office" might look like with them in charge. When Draco discovered that Ben didn't take home even half of what he billed to Draco, Draco was utterly appalled. "The rest of it goes to firm overhead and profits for the partners," he explained.

Overhead, Draco thought, would not be an issue. There were rooms in the Manor that could be repurposed for their work, or they could take over one of the smaller commercial buildings Draco owned. Several had floors that were vacant, and Ben had identified one in particular that might work very well for it. It was actually a muggle

building near the visitor's entrance to the Ministry of Magic, and it would allow them to use something called a computer for their work, but still be close to a magical hub.

Hermione had thrown in her support for that idea, so Draco was preparing to go in that direction.

The three of them had all but decided to do it, though Draco knew it would still be a little time before their contracts were finalized. These had gone through Alyssa's firm so that Ben wouldn't be outed before he was ready to resign. Draco planned to pull his own estate planning work from Ben's firm the same day his resignation went into effect, and then Alyssa would be able to say she was the lawyer for Draco Malfoy's estate. Alyssa wanted to see what that would do for her partnership bid, but if she didn't make it then she would resign and join Draco too. She said the only thing holding her back from doing it in the first place was the fact that she would have to work with her husband.

"I love him more than anything, but I might kill him if I have to see him all day long."

Draco promised her a separate office on the opposite side of the building from Ben if it came down to it. Regardless, he was pleased that she was in too, and now Draco was excited about his job for the first time since Lucius died. He was finally doing things his way, and he had Hermione to thank for it.

As Hermione walked through the door, Draco knew he was luckier than ever. He saw the flash of cameras before he ever saw her, but she was truly a vision in the most unusual color for a dress that had ever graced the Great Hall at Hogwarts: orange.

Yes, Pansy Parkinson had dressed Hermione Granger in orange.

When Pansy came to beg jewelry off of him again – this time with no false pretenses that it was for Hermione – the only thing she said

was, "I need you to give me every single thing you have that's orange."

It was a very odd request because Draco didn't think they had *anything* that was orange, but he sent Rosie to Gringotts anyway to look. She brought back a single strand of orange fire opals and matching earrings, and he turned them over to Pansy to say that was all he had. If they weren't sufficient then Draco would have to get something rush ordered.

Luckily for Draco, Pansy declared them to be perfect, and now Draco saw that she was right. Hermione's dress matched the same shade of shocking orange as the fire opals, and the opals themselves flashed with hints of yellow and green in the light. Draco thought that Hermione looked like fall had come to life with her honey skin and amber eyes. The plunging neckline and low back made Draco hard the moment she walked in.

As for Ginny, Pansy had put *her* in red tonight, declaring that redheads could indeed wear red. Luna was in hunter green and Pansy herself was in gold, with Alyssa in a dark amethyst. The press photographed all of five of them together, and Draco heard Ben mutter, "Bloody hell," as he stared at his wife in amazement.

"Told you," said Harry from his other side. "Pansy's adopted Alyssa. It's going to be like this for the rest of gala season."

Draco knew that Harry was right, but he certainly wasn't complaining. His old friend was brilliant at this sort of thing, and the room was taking note. All five witches were more elegant, more tailored, and more put together than most of the others in the room, and Hermione in particular stood out.

When Draco reached her, he slipped an arm around her waist and leaned in for a kiss on the cheek. "I'm going to fucking ravage you tonight," he whispered. He pulled back to see her blushing a little, but she looked very pleased as his mother hurried up.

“Hermione dear! Just look at you!”

“Blame Pansy,” said Hermione, smiling a bit.

“I think I may talk to Pansy about my next dress. Bold colors have never been tradition, but I have to admit there’s something appealing about them. I’ve never seen an orange dress in my life!”

Draco knew that if Narcissa signed on too, then Pansy’s reputation as a designer would be secure. His mother set trends, she always had.

The evening progressed with the predictable litany of speeches, toasts, and dinner, until finally it was time to dance.

Draco pulled Hermione close and made sure the press got several shots of them, as his hands drifted down her lower back. Her dress was absolutely killing him. She was so sexy like this, and Draco didn’t want to take his hands off of her. He saw that *others* had also noticed how delectable she looked tonight, and Draco was both very jealous and unbelievably turned on by it. Hermione was his, and anybody who looked would know that only Draco could touch her.

Draco was almost certain he would finally fuck her tonight. Goddammit he couldn’t wait.

Eventually she broke away, claiming to need a rest, and Draco let her go back to their table a bit reluctantly while he was called away to chat with some business associates. He kept an eye on her, but saw she was deep in conversation with Pansy about something; she was totally ignoring the other blokes who were checking her out and waiting for their chance.

Good. Pansy will cock block them for me.

Then Draco looked around and caught Theo talking to his boss with a tight look on his face. Draco saw Harry was watching too, his eyes

narrowed as he took it in. Draco, Theo, Harry, and Hermione had met again recently, and the investigation wasn't going well.

"I've been looking into Estes," said Harry. "He's clean. I can't find a single thing on him. He has a reputation of being a hard-arse, but he's meticulous. I'm going to have to close the investigation if we don't turn up something soon. We still have more to investigate at Blaise's firm, but honestly their security protocols were so bad I don't know that the aurors will find the link. I'm not surprised the DMLE just fined them and closed it."

"I've had no luck with that last spell either," said Hermione. "It's frustrating that I can't figure it out, but everything I try... nothing happens."

"The only news on my end is a few new centaur deaths," said Theo. "A couple of herds were attacked and killed by a pack of transformed werewolves, but you know they're natural enemies. It's a bit unusual, but it's not unheard of."

No, it wasn't going well, and Draco wondered if they would need to give it up for now. The things Theo saw were certainly suspicious, but until something else turned up there was nothing to be done about it.

Draco wandered over to Estes and Theo, figuring it couldn't hurt to talk to Estes. Draco had known him for years, though he hadn't spoken to him since Lucius's funeral.

"Alan," said Draco, walking up and shaking hands.

"Draco, my boy. Hanging in there?"

"Yes, I've had quite a lot to do ever since Father died, but I'm sorting through it all."

"Shame about your father. I always thought he would make it out of Azkaban. Ah well, these things happen of course. I say, have you

met my nephew? Douglas Wilson. He went to Durmstrang.”

“Pleasure,” said Douglas, as he shook Draco’s hand. Draco noticed his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Douglas was just about to tell me about his job,” said Theo, jumping in. “He works in potions.”

“Oh I loved that class at Hogwarts,” said Draco cordially. “What do you do with them?”

Douglas shrugged. “Research mostly. I work for a small company that is always trying to improve commercial potions sold to the public.”

They chatted in this vein for a time until Alan asked Draco how he was coming along with the estate.

“I’m nearly there with an asset list,” said Draco. “I’m trying to consolidate as much of it as I can. Merlin knows it would be more efficient if everything was in one place.”

Estes gave him a sharp look at this. “Are you thinking of pulling out of Beavill and Pearson then? I know that’s who Lucius used for the gold.”

Draco shrugged noncommittally and decided to hedge. There was no reason to tell Estes those details.

“I haven’t decided about that just yet. Right now I’m trying to get all the property moved under one umbrella company. Each parcel is held in a separate entity of course, but Father never had a holding company for all of it. My lawyers seem to think it will be less confusing if everything is owned by a single holding company, and then I own the holding company. It’s been a mountain of paperwork getting everything restructured.”

All three of them looked a bit sympathetic at this, and Estes was just about to open his mouth to ask another question when Draco felt a hand on his arm.

“Draco,” said a female voice.

Draco turned to find Ella Vanity looking at him seriously. He cursed under his breath and excused himself from the group, pulling Ella aside.

“What is it Ella?”

“I must speak to you.”

“Not now, you can send me an owl if you must.”

“Dammit Draco, it’s urgent!”

He gave her an exasperated look. “Ella, I’ve been clear about this.”

“You owe me this,” she said harshly. “You know you do. Come on, we need to speak *now*. And we can’t do it here. Let’s go someplace more private.”

Draco felt a muscle in his jaw clench, but her words cast a shroud of guilt over him.

“Fine,” he snapped, as he followed her out of the Great Hall. He was so annoyed that he forgot to look behind him, and he didn’t even notice a pair of hazel eyes following him too.

Hermione

“Lucian Boles gave Tracy Davis a Lover’s Box today, that lucky bitch,” announced Pansy, as she dropped her drink next to Hermione at their table. “Salazar help me, my mother is going to be *impossible* now.”

Hermione had no idea what Pansy was talking about. “A what?”

“A Lover’s Box,” said Pansy impatiently. “You know, one of those magical paired boxes for courting. It is absolutely unbelievable! I mean, she’s so *annoying* and her hair is a flashback to the worst parts of the muggle eighties. Gods, I can hear my mother now. ‘She’s younger than you and already has her match secured!’ I mean, she’s only younger by four bloody months! But I swear to fucking Merlin, my mother keeps track of this sort of thing.”

Pansy wrinkled her nose and sank down into her chair next to Hermione. Hermione, however, barely noticed. This Lover’s Box sounded awfully similar to the thing Draco had given to her for her birthday.

“I’ve never heard of a Lover’s Box,” said Hermione carefully.

Pansy grimaced at her. “No, I suppose you wouldn’t have. They’re not all that common – it’s just the wealthy pureblood families who still use them. You used to see them at Hogwarts way back when, but eventually everyone decided that getting married at eighteen and nineteen really wasn’t a requirement. These days they start to make their appearances when a witch is in her mid-twenties. I doubt you would have heard much about it, being in Gryffindor and...” she trailed off delicately.

“And being muggleborn,” said Hermione softly.

Pansy inclined her head and gave Hermione an apologetic look.

“And you say it’s for courting?” asked Hermione. “Like what – some kind of dating?”

“In a way,” said Pansy. “It’s old fashioned. Plenty of wizarding families don’t follow the customs anymore, but those that do use courting to declare intentions. It’s a sort of public announcement that the wizard is very serious and the witch is considering an alliance with his family. It’s not legally binding like engagements are, but it’s

damn close. Courting used to be a way to allow a witch and wizard to get to know each other while safeguarding the witch's virtue. These days the rules are more flexible, but the families who still follow the customs consider dating outside of a formal courtship to be so casual it's practically meaningless. It doesn't become serious until the wizard starts to court."

Hermione was feeling a whirlwind of emotions now. Was Draco courting her? Surely he would have told her if he was. But then she reminded herself that there were a whole host of things Draco was doing that he hadn't told her about. Why would he give her that box if he *wasn't*?

"Dating outside of a formal courtship is so casual it's practically meaningless."

Hermione was so confused now because Draco hadn't said *what* he was doing with her. Unconsciously she started to play with the necklace she was wearing. Like last time Pansy presented it to her as her only option. Unlike last time Pansy was honest and said it was from Draco. Hermione had truly never seen anything like it, but she wore it tonight because she thought they were together now, even if it wasn't really public yet.

"Did Tracy and Lucien date then? Before they started courting I mean."

Pansy snorted. "No. They don't know each other that well, though I've heard Lucien had a crush on her. Still, their families probably arranged it for them because Lucien's on the older side to start courting, and Tracy's mother is a social climber. An alliance with the Boles is a huge social coup for the Davis's, but Tracy herself is well-bred and all that tosh, even if her hair is terrible. It's honestly a good match for both sides, especially since Lucien must actually like her to give her a Lover's Box. But it will kill my mother that Tracy got it done first."

“So what, they’re going to enter into some sort of serious relationship even though they don’t know each other well?” asked Hermione incredulously.

“Yes,” said Pansy. “It’s not that uncommon for families to match their children. And besides, most families that still court let their children do it for at least a year, sometimes two, before there is pressure to get engaged. Tracy and Lucien don’t *have* to know each other at all. They have plenty of time to decide if they’re entirely unsuitable. Courting is very serious, but nobody has to pay breakup fees if it doesn’t work out.”

“Breakup fees?” Hermione felt like she was in some sort of alternative dimension.

Pansy arched an eyebrow. “Of course. Engagement contracts usually come with settlements. And then marriages come with even larger settlements and lifelong financial commitments between the families. I’m sure you know wizard marriages are binding and are very hard to dissolve unless one person dies. Engagements *can* be dissolved, but there are usually damages to pay if you do it. That’s why wealthy families court first. Nobody expects the couple to fall in love exactly, but the couple has to be well-suited enough that there’s little risk of one of them getting cold feet and breaking an engagement. Not only are the breakup fees stiff, but it affects the reputation of the person who did it. When Draco broke up with Astoria it was a huge scandal. The only reason he survived it socially is because he’s a Malfoy.”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Hermione. This was so far out of her comfort zone that it felt almost unreal.

“So... does your family court?” asked Hermione delicately.

Pansy nodded. “Yes. Or I should say my family prefers to. One of my sisters actually liked her match so much she tried to elope with him.” Pansy grinned at this, and Hermione couldn’t help but smile too. “But

eventually Mother got her in hand and convinced her husband to court her for appearances.”

“God Pans,” said Hermione.

Pansy rolled her eyes. “I know.”

“Does Blaise do that then?”

Pansy hesitated. “I haven’t asked him. He’s from new money so he may not. And anyway, our thing is still so new. I mean this is our first date, sort of.”

“If he did though, would you go along with it?”

“Probably. I’ve fancied him for years, and he would be a really good match for me, especially once this new job with Draco starts. I think Mother would be in favor, even though his family isn’t as old as mine. But I’m honestly not sure how to raise it with him. Mother is convinced Adrian Pucey is the one for me, and Blaise will have play by her rules to convince her otherwise.”

Hermione snorted. “What about Theo and Draco?”

Pansy gave her a knowing look and Hermione sighed.

“Both of their families would expect it, though Theo can do whatever the hell he wants,” said Pansy. “Both of his parents are dead. Nobody will try to force a courtship on him unless he wants to do it himself. Draco though...”

Hermione felt her stomach sink.

“Look, don’t worry about it,” said Pansy firmly. “Draco has a spine.”

“It’s just... he confuses me,” said Hermione softly. Again, she found herself playing with the necklace. “In private he acts like we’re dating. But he hasn’t said *anything* about being in a relationship or this courting thing.”

Pansy gave her a sympathetic look. "Like I said, he has a spine. I'll admit Narcissa will have expectations, but with Lucius gone Draco can do whatever he wants. There's nothing anybody can do to force him into a courtship, not really."

Hermione grimaced a bit and fell silent as she thought about it.

Was the box in her room a Lover's Box? It sure sounded like it, but parts of it didn't really fit. There was no public declaration. There had been no discussion of courtship, though Hermione had to admit she wasn't sure she understood it very well. It sounded so old fashioned and odd to her. It was true Draco had been showering her with attention for weeks now, but maybe this was just a pureblood thing? Or maybe he was just doing it to make her crack?

He was clearly interested in sex with her, but Hermione was very cautious. She didn't engage in casual sex. She knew it, and he knew it too. What if he was just using the box to get in bed with her? Maybe he was trusting the fact that she wouldn't recognize it and leveraging it for that purpose? He could use it to flirt with her, give her things, and make her want him without risking his reputation in the pureblood world that way.

But Hermione wasn't sure if that was right either. She had begged him for sex ever since that first night together, and *he* had been the one holding back.

Hermione was terribly confused now. She had been calling him a 'very good friend,' because he hadn't named it anything else. In Hermione's mind though, they were dating. She certainly wouldn't sleep over with a wizard whom she *wasn't* dating. But once again Hermione was reminded of what Pansy said about casual dating.

"Dating outside of a formal courtship is so casual it's practically meaningless."

It was true Draco had kept certain things from her, but *surely* he would have told her if he was courting her. That meant the box in her

room might not be a Lover's Box at all. If it was then Draco was just using it to wear her down. And according to Pansy, if he *wasn't* courting her then it meant the things he was doing with her meant nothing.

Now Hermione was starting to spiral because it *wasn't* meaningless to her, not at all. She never would have done the things she had done with him unless she thought it meant something to him too. And how *couldn't* it mean something, after all the things he had done to find her when he thought she was Jeanine? But then again, why wouldn't he just ask her to be his girlfriend or his courting partner or whatever purebloods called it? Why wouldn't he tell her about the box? Why wouldn't he admit that he was replacing things of hers that were worn and paying her bills for her? Why would he keep so many secrets from her if he really cared about her?

Hermione swallowed a lump in her throat and forced herself to stay calm. She had to get back to her flat so she could think about this rationally. Maybe there was some other explanation for Draco's odd behavior. She could go now and give herself some time to really think carefully about everything she had learned over the last couple of weeks with him. The party would go on for another hour or two, but it would be socially acceptable to leave at this point. And then once she finally saw him she would confront him about the box and the other things he had been doing behind her back. She would make him come clean to her and force him to give her an explanation for all of the secrecy.

Coming to a decision, Hermione told Pansy she was tired and asked her to let Draco know she wanted an hour or two to herself before he came by her flat. Pansy gave her a knowing look but just nodded as Hermione turned to look toward the exit. She furrowed her brow. Draco's blonde head was leaving the Great Hall, and he appeared to be striding closely behind a witch Hermione only knew by reputation.

Hermione didn't know why she followed because she really just wanted space to think. But something about the set of his shoulders

told her she needed to. She went after them, and soon heard voices in an empty classroom just on the other side of the Entry Hall.

She approached silently and then came to an abrupt halt when she heard what they were saying.

“... really think I am Draco, and it’s yours.”

“I always cast the charm.”

“Not that night you didn’t.”

Hermione’s heart dropped to her stomach, and she felt her world start to spin. She knew in her heart what they were talking about. They didn’t even have to say it. Draco had slept with this witch, and she thought she was pregnant.

“Ella, you don’t look like —”

“Draco, it wasn’t that long ago, honestly. You wouldn’t be able to tell yet.”

Hermione’s heart squeezed harder at this. They had been sort of together ever since her birthday and flirting for weeks before that. When had he done this?

“But you haven’t made an appointment to know for sure?”

“You have to be far enough along to make appointments. I’m telling you, I’m late.”

Hermione felt blood rushing in her ears. St. Mungo’s only required a witch to be six weeks to make an appointment, but given the way pregnancy dating worked Hermione would have had the box when they were having sex.

The fact that Draco had never defined the relationship or named it or even asked for exclusivity was suddenly making Hermione sick. She

thought they were together. She thought that Draco was only being intimate with her. She thought they were exclusive.

She was painfully aware that he had never told her that's what he wanted. He had never told her what the box meant. He had never told her about the things he was doing with her earrings and books and bills. He had never told her any of it.

Suddenly Hermione snapped to attention as Ella's next words registered.

"...to give me your Lover's Box, Draco."

"Listen Ella, it's just –"

"No, Draco, *you* listen. We had an understanding. You made promises to me. The last time we were intimate it was all but settled. Besides, you know our families would approve, and I'm very likely carrying your heir. Give me the Lover's Box this weekend, and we can get on with it. It's not exactly proper, but a gesture like that would make the others overlook the timing."

"I... *oomph*."

Hermione felt like she was in a trance as she stepped into the room and found Ella Vanity kissing Draco. At the sight of them together she knew her heart was truly breaking. They looked so perfect together – both tall and blonde and elegant. Ella's shade of blonde was just a bit darker than Draco's, but it was straight as a pin and looked like spun silk down her back. She was thin and willowy, with flawless skin, and she was wearing a dark dress that accentuated her lithe figure. She had deep blue eyes that were practically cerulean.

And there was Hermione: short and curvy, with hair that had a tendency to go wild in a very common shade of brown. Pansy made her wear that orange dress that Hermione loved at first, but compared to Ella's elegant black she felt lurid, overly bright, and like

she didn't fit in here. Everything about her was the opposite of flawless, she knew that. Her mudblood scar tingled as she stared at them.

Still in a daze, Hermione reflexively pulled her wand out of her old beaded bag she had charmed to match her dress tonight. She wasn't really sure why she was doing this, but she had to know. She *had* to. Besides, she was a healer and could clear up any confusion about this.

"Conceptio revelio," she said in a flat voice as she pointed it right at Ella. They jumped apart, and all three of them stared down at the red glow around Ella's abdomen.

"You aren't pregnant Ella," she said as she turned around.

"Hermione..." breathed Draco, but she ignored him as she picked up her dress and started to run.

"HERMIONE!" he bellowed after her, but Hermione had a head start, and she knew all the secret passages in the castle.

Years of sneaking around under Harry's invisibility cloak came back to her in a flash, and she turned a corner, barely catching a glimpse of Pansy, Blaise, Theo, and Luna who were mingling just outside the Entry Hall. They called after her, but she didn't stop. She had only moments, seconds, and then she got there: the tapestry hiding the secret corridor almost no students knew about that would lead her to the nearest fireplace. She dove into it and heard Draco running past her. She could shave a few minutes off the chase this way – he would never catch up to her now.

She sprinted down the secret passage and emerged very close to the kitchens, where she reached up and tickled the pear. It chuckled, turned into a handle, and Hermione wrenched it open and nearly threw herself through it to make it to the fireplace. The house elves turned to her in surprise, but none of them stopped her as she

grabbed some powder from her bag that she had brought with her for the night and threw it into the fire.

She shouted out her address and a moment later was spinning away. She was thinking fast. There were things she had to do in the three minutes she might have before he came through the floo to find her. She needed the floo for her next tasks, so she couldn't just close the floo to lock him out. She quickly put together a plan.

Thanking her past self for her foresight to feed Crookshanks before the fundraiser tonight, Hermione grabbed a small scrapbook off her bookshelf and then pelted straight for her room. She opened her nightstand to pull out the charm bracelet and the ruby earrings he had given her and quickly unfastened the opals she was wearing. She put the notebook and all of the jewelry in the box and sent it through to his box on the other end. Then she grabbed the box itself off her nightstand and sprinted back to the floo. If she could do this before he arrived, she would be able to get to the place he would never find her, the place she could finally think.

She threw powder into the fireplace and floo'd to the Manor now, straight into his room. She dropped her box on top of his bed and then wrenched open the door to race down to the gallery and floo away from the Study. But as she approached it she heard frantic voices, and Hermione skidded to a halt. She thought quickly, then steeled herself, took a deep breath and turned toward the nearest room that she knew had a fireplace, which was the opposite direction from the voices coming toward her.

She forced herself not to panic as she wrenched open the door to the *Crucio Room*. She pulled her wand out of her bag, pointed it to the fireplace and whispered, "*Incendio!*"

Then she threw the last of her floo powder into the fireplace and called, "The Ministry of Magic!"

As Hermione spun away she heard the voices coming closer, but she was gone before they arrived. Five minutes later she was

locking the door to Hermione's Playground with a complicated little charm, and she finally let the tears well up and start to fall. She was breathing so hard she realized she was on the verge of a panic attack, and she slid down onto the floor and wrapped her arms around herself to try to calm down.

Draco had kept secrets from her. Draco had led her on. Draco had slept with some other witch recently enough that pregnancy had been a real question. He might be fond of Hermione, he might even be attracted to her, but he didn't want her enough to give up sex with other witches. If that box really was a Lover's Box, it didn't mean anything. He was probably using it to make Hermione open her legs for him. He was wealthy enough that none of the things he had given to her or done for her really mattered. And based on the conversation she had overheard, it sounded like he *had* discussed a more formal arrangement with Ella, when he had never said a word about it to Hermione.

Then again, perhaps he had seduced Ella too. He could seduce Hermione with gifts because she was poor and more susceptible to that sort of attention than she cared to admit. He could seduce Ella with promises because she was a socialite and wanted the lifestyle Draco would give her. He had let Hermione and Ella both kiss him tonight and hadn't pulled away from either one. Hermione was bitter as she was forcibly reminded that she had fallen for a man who sought casual sex from The Ruby Slipper. Despite his sexual history and lack of commitment, she had convinced herself that he wanted *Hermione* above everybody else.

God, she was so, so stupid.

Lip still trembling, Hermione forced herself to stand and go to her office. There was a sofa in there that she used for sleep on nights when she had to monitor something in her lab. She opened a small closet and pulled out some scrubs, a blanket, and a pillow and got ready for bed. She knew she needed to sleep, but instead she dissolved into another round of tears. She wondered if she would ever be able to sleep again.

AN: *Ducks*

Sorry! But please stick with me, we all know there needed to be a catalyst for some of these secrets to come out.

The Lover's Box

Chapter 24: The Lover's Box

AN: When Hermione runs, Draco follows.

Draco

Draco was pacing back and forth like a caged animal. Hermione had disappeared. Draco floo'd straight to her flat, but it took less than thirty seconds to run through the place and be certain that she wasn't there. So instead he floo'd back to the Manor, and now he was wearing a hole in the rug of the Study as he tried to figure out what on earth he was supposed to do.

Fuck Ella Vanity. *Fuck her.* Draco admittedly didn't know as much about pregnancy as he probably should, but after his futile chase he was pretty sure Ella had been lying to him from the beginning and was trying to trap him into something.

It had been several months since Lucius died, and surely Ella would be showing by now if she was actually pregnant. And if not, then surely St. Mungo's would have seen her. She wouldn't have waited *that* long. And besides, Draco had cast the charm. He didn't remember much, but he did remember *that*, or at least he thought he did. He was so blindsided by the things she was saying that when she kissed him he just froze.

Hermione had seen it. She had obviously heard the conversation too, because she cast that charm to prove that Ella was a lying bitch.

Draco's stomach turned when he remembered that she ran away from him, and he thought he heard a sob when she did it. He could

tell she was utterly heartbroken, and yet she *still* had the presence of mind to cast a complex medical charm that cleared up a great many questions for Draco before she fled. Draco didn't know if she had done it because she wanted to know herself or if it was to protect him from Ella, but either way Draco was grateful for it. Ella was a problem for the future – Draco was very prepared to destroy her now – but the immediate thing he had to address as quickly as possible was Hermione.

Draco heard the door to his study slam open, and Theo, Pansy, Blaise, and Luna came hurrying in.

“What the hell is going on?” demanded Theo. “Hermione was running through Hogwarts actually *crying* for fuck's sake, and now here you are...”

“Ella Vanity kissed me just now after telling me she's pregnant, and Hermione saw it. She heard everything,” said Draco shortly.

All of them just gaped, even Luna, which told Draco just how bad this was.

“She did *what?*” demanded Blaise.

“I know. I just... *fuck!*”

Draco flung himself down into his chair and put his head in his hands. This was bad. This was so bad. Every fantasy Draco had with Hermione was imploding right before him.

Draco heard a discontented voice and looked up to see Pansy glowering at him.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” she demanded.

Draco looked at her, and just shook his head.

“Is she?” asked Theo suddenly. “Is Ella...”

“No,” said Draco, and he looked up to see sheer relief on all four of their faces. “Like I said, Hermione heard it, and she actually cast a fucking detection charm to prove that Ella’s a liar before she ran away.”

“But you still kissed her!” insisted Pansy.

Draco was spluttering. “I did *not* kiss her! She kissed me!”

“Then why did Hermione run away like that?” said Pansy. “It must have looked like you were kissing her back!”

“Fuck,” he muttered, and closed his eyes. Then he opened them to find Theo glaring at him too. “Look, I *swear* I wasn’t. She had just finished telling me she was pregnant, and I couldn’t believe it, but then I started to worry that maybe she *was*. I was spiraling, and everything she was saying almost gave me a fucking panic attack! When she kissed me I just froze! It was only a couple seconds I think? I don’t know, I barely even remember it because I was panicking about everything else! I do *not* want Ella Vanity. Not at all, I swear it.”

“Could she have been pregnant?” asked Blaise. “I mean, you must have slept with her, but I thought you had a rule about that! That’s the entire reason you’re in the club! And you’ve been into Hermione for months now!”

Draco put his head in his hands again. “It was the night we buried Father. I was just... I was in a bad way and really drunk. She caught me and seduced me. It was one time, and it didn’t mean a fucking thing.”

“That was this summer!” said Pansy with disgust.

“I know!” said Draco. “That’s why I was confused! She said she wouldn’t be showing yet and that St. Mungo’s didn’t let witches see healers that early and...”

“None of that is true,” said Luna in a calm voice.

“Well I know that *now*. But like I said, I was shocked!”

“Did Hermione hear that part?” asked Theo suddenly. “The part where it was over the summer before you had met her again?”

Draco paused. “No... she said something about it being fairly recent and how I should give her my Lover’s Box because I made promises to her.”

“Oh Draco...” groaned Pansy.

Draco’s heart sank. “I can explain it to her! I mean, first of all the timing is a load of shit. It wasn’t that recent. Besides, she wouldn’t understand the Lover’s Box thing. She doesn’t know what it means.”

Pansy snorted. “Of course she knows what it means.”

Draco felt the pit in his stomach getting even larger, which was almost unbelievable given how terrible he felt.

“No... no, that’s impossible...” he muttered.

“She does,” insisted Pansy. “Lucien Boles gave his Lover’s Box to Tracy Davis today. She told me at the fundraiser just now. I told Hermione all about it. She was really curious.”

Draco slumped. This was bad. It was so bad he didn’t even know how to process it.

“What?” asked Blaise cautiously. “The comment about it being recent is the issue here.”

“No... no, I can explain that to her. The issue is the Lover’s Box.”

“But why?” asked Theo in confusion.

“Because Hermione has my Lover’s Box,” said Draco dully. “I gave it to her for her birthday, and I didn’t tell her what it was.”

There was a pause for a long moment and then Pansy screeched, “YOU DID *WHAT?!’*” Theo and Blaise looked gobsmacked too. Luna looked curious.

“Shit, keep it down will you Pans?” asked Draco, rubbing his ear.

“I WILL NOT, DRACO LUCIUS MALFOY! WHAT THE HELL WERE YOU THINKING?!”

“I want to court her!” he shouted back. “I want to court her, but how on earth do I explain that to somebody like Hermione? She has *no idea* what it means, not really! She has no context for it! What was I supposed to say? ‘Hey Hermione, I’m pretty sure I’ve been in love with you since we accidentally had sex with each other when we were seventeen! And now that I’ve found you again, I’d like for you to engage in some archaic pureblood traditions that tell the world you’re probably going to marry me and have my heir someday!’ How would that go over with her? I mean really?”

All four of them stared at him mouths gaping.

“You’re in love with her?” asked Theo quietly.

“You’re her muggle shag?” added Pansy.

“Yes, I was her muggle shag,” said Draco, looking at Pansy first. “We were both in disguise, and we only figured it out recently. And about the other thing...”

Draco trailed off, but he just put his face in his hands again.

“Yeah. I’m in love with her. I think I have been for years, but I had no idea who she was. I looked for her for months, but I thought I was trying to find a muggle and not a witch. She had some lingering feelings for me too, but they weren’t as strong as mine. So with this

whole courtship thing, I'm trying to get her to commit emotionally before I tell her about it and what I want from her. I gave her my Lover's Box so I could do it my own way very quietly. I wanted her to feel the same way about me before dropping all my goddamned traditions on her. I've been sending her things for weeks, and it was going great. Better than great. I'm totally blown away by her, and I *know* she was coming around to me too. I just never thought she would find out about what it all meant before I was ready to tell her. And I *certainly* never thought Ella fucking Vanity would try to claim my goddamned box by pretending to be pregnant!"

He was breathing hard, and the four exchanged glances with each before looking back at him. Pansy bit her lip.

"Draco, I wouldn't have said anything if I had known."

"No, of course not," he said deflating. "It's not your fault, Pans. The only ones who know about it other than me and Hermione are my elves. Hermione hides the box whenever you and Luna come over."

"Look," said Pansy firmly. "You're going to have to come clean to her. You're going to have to grovel. And I hope you can come up with something really good you can give her – some sort of gesture."

"I do," said Draco quickly. "But I don't know when I'll see her, and..."

"You should find her Draco," said Luna.

"But where? I went to her flat, and she's not there. I can feel the Manor's wards, and she's not here either."

Theo looked at him. "Have you checked Hermione's Playground?"

Draco's eyes got wide, and he shook his head slowly.

"That's where she'll be," said Luna confidently. "That's where she goes to think if she's not at her flat. She even spends the night there sometimes."

"I can't get in there," said Draco. "It's in the fucking Department of Mysteries."

Luna gave him a knowing look. "The Ministry of Magic is always open," she said.

"Luna's right. You can go there at night, and she can't hide in there forever," said Pansy. "Go send her a note in case she has some escape hatch to get back to her flat, and then sit outside of the door if you have to. Don't let her out without making her talk to you."

Draco leapt to his feet. "Right. You're right. I just... I have to go."

All four of them looked at him worriedly.

"You need to make this right, mate," said Theo.

"I will, I promise I will."

"And Draco," added Pansy, "I'm really annoyed with you. I've been trying to set you two up for ages, and then you had to go and fuck it all up!"

Draco scowled. "I didn't mean to. Honestly, I really didn't."

She pursed her lips. "Still. It's been months of work, Draco. *Months*. In fact, once you're done groveling to Hermione, you had better grovel to me too."

Draco's jaw dropped. "You're not serious."

"Oh I am *very* serious. I expect you to pull out all the stops."

She put her nose in the air, and Draco just sighed. He knew it would be easier to make it up to her than to wait Pansy out. She knew how to hold a grudge.

"Fucking fine. But I need to fix this with Hermione first."

“Damn right you do.”

Draco took one look back at his friends before he left to make his way to his own room, mentally composing the note he was going to send to Hermione. He walked past one of his least favorite rooms in the house and came to an abrupt halt: the door to the *Crucio Room* was open.

Draco cautiously walked toward it and saw there was a fire in the fireplace. Then he glanced up and saw the chandelier was installed and repaired.

What on earth?

He stared at it in utter confusion, but somehow he knew it was Hermione. She had been in here, recently enough to light the fire. She must have floo'd from this fireplace, trusting that it would be connected since Lucius always favored this room.

Feeling more discomfited than ever, Draco took one last look at the chandelier twinkling at him, before raising his wand to douse the fire and spinning on his heels. He had to get out of there. He *hated* that room, and he knew Hermione had been avoiding it. He didn't blame her. He had gone inside of it just once after his father died when he learned that the Master's Hiding Place had vanished. During that brief visit he had tried to remove the paintings of dark creatures, but they wouldn't budge. The Manor elves told him there was nothing they could do because the Manor wanted it that way. Between the creepy paintings and all the terrible memories, Draco had given up, closed the door, and decided he could manage just fine without ever going into that room again.

Hermione must have seen it though, she must have gotten here before he did. He hadn't felt her in the wards when he arrived.

Closing the door firmly on the *Crucio Room*, Draco hurried up the stairs and made his way to his own bedroom. He glanced around when he walked in and froze. There on the bed was Hermione's

Lover's Box. His own Lover's Box was glowing, and Draco opened it with a sinking heart to find her charm bracelet, ruby earrings, and the opals she had been wearing tonight. Next to them was a notebook. He had no idea how she had found the time to do this while running from him, but it was all here.

The pit in Draco's stomach was so large now he felt himself falling into it. She had given her jewelry and her box back. She was so upset that she returned everything.

Draco reached out with a shaky hand and started to flip through the notebook. It was all of their notes and letters. She had saved everything and scrapbooked them, going all the way back to her birthday. Draco's heart shattered.

He forced himself to breathe and not panic. This was so much worse than he expected. Pansy was right: he had to grovel, and he had to do it quickly. Hermione might have gone to the Playground to think, but Draco couldn't allow her to think about this for too long. This was even worse than the Jeanine and Mark situation. She would get so far into her own head about this that Draco might never be able to pull her out of it again.

A vague plan started to come together in his mind. He checked his watch. It was late. Very late. She was probably asleep, but he didn't dare wait until morning to try to find her now that she had returned everything.

"Florrie!" he whispered. His elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Florrie, Hermione and I had an argument."

Florrie's ears dropped, and she suddenly looked very worried. "I know. It's all my fault, and I need to talk to her. I'm pretty sure she's in her office inside of the Department of Mysteries. I have no idea if you can get in there, but can you try? If you can get in, please check on her and see if she's already asleep. Don't let her see you."

Florrie nodded and disappeared. Draco paced while he waited and a few moments later she reappeared. "I is finding elf wards, Sir, but you is one of her guests, and I is your bound elf. Any elf bound to her guests can pass. She is locking her door too, but I is apparating to the other side since I is your elf. She is asleep, Sir. She is..." Florrie hesitated.

"What? She's what?"

"She is looking poorly Sir. She is taking dreamless sleep potion."

Draco felt another shot of guilt. She had told him once that she didn't like to take dreamless sleep. She had used it too much just after the war, and she was usually very careful with it. He had driven her to it tonight.

Draco gave a grim nod. "Fine. Florrie, can you please go back to her room at her flat and return her Lover's Box to her nightstand? Put the letters and jewelry in her nightstand drawer, and please check to make sure Crookshanks has been fed. Come back when that's done."

Florrie's eyes widened, but she gave a little curtsy, gathered the items and left again. Draco quickly changed into something more comfortable while he waited for Florrie. A couple minutes later she returned. "Tis done Sir."

"Thank you Florrie. Now I need to know: do you think you can apparate me through her door?"

Florrie considered this for a moment. "I is thinking so Sir. You is allowed through the wards, and I is too since I is your elf. Miss Hermy is just locking her door, she is not adding new wards."

Draco nodded. "Excellent. Give me a few moments, I need to think about something. I'll call you when I'm ready to go to her. And *please* don't tell Rosie or the others about this just yet. I'm going to do my

best to fix it, and Merlin knows they would probably break their bond and poison me if they knew how much I fucked this up.”

Florrie nodded and disappeared again, and then Draco took a deep breath and reached under his bed for the thing that he had been saving for her that he had finally pulled out from his vault. He had kept it here ever since he kissed her again.

Draco made his way down Diagon Alley before turning down a narrow side street where the goblin shops were located. Goblins could make almost anything out of metal, stone, glass, or wood. Draco had always enjoyed the armory the most. That shop leaned rather masculine and contained a large display of armor, shields, and swords. Draco wondered if he should buy some now that the Dark Lord was preparing to take over the world.

But Draco wasn't going to the armory today. He was going to one of the woodshops.

The bell tinkled when he walked in, and the goblins immediately tensed when they saw they were facing the youngest Death Eater.

“I need to place an order. This is what I want you to make.”

Draco described it in detail: the wood, the details, the magic it needed to contain.

“Very well, Mr. Malfoy. May I ask who it is for?”

“Just a girl.”

“She is a lucky witch.”

Draco knew she wasn't a witch. But he couldn't risk it getting back to his father or the others.

“When I finally give it to her, I expect she will be very cross with me. I need something that will make her talk to me again.”

The goblin looked a bit confused by this, but didn't object and wrote down everything Draco requested.

A few days later Draco was back to pick it up. He chewed his lip as he waited for them to bring it out. He knew he had probably lost his mind for commissioning this. He had no idea where she even was. But when he found her again, he fully intended to make her his prisoner, and she probably wouldn't speak to him for days or even weeks. He needed a gift, a bribe – something that convinced her he was doing it because he cared.

Draco had already decided he would shatter the Statute of Secrecy and do magic for her. He would explain why he had to keep her as his prisoner, and he would keep her in a gilded cage, safely tucked away and with every luxury she could ever want. She could have anything she wanted from him except for freedom or his name. But surely she would understand this. She was a muggle, and she would be cared for by the scion of two of the most powerful pureblood houses in England. He might not be able to give her freedom or his name, but he could give her anything else. She could still be his, in their own little bubble, once she forgave him and let him have her again.

Still, Draco knew she was smart, and she was quick enough that she surely had a temper. He would have to prove his intentions to her by giving her something that was so lovely she would finally forgive him for what he had to do to her. That meant he needed this to be perfect, even though he didn't have a clear picture of it in his mind's eye when he ordered it. The goblins hadn't been perturbed by this and assured him that they could design something that would make him satisfied.

They placed it on the counter in front of him, and Draco almost gasped. He slowly rotated it and saw that everything was there, just as he specified. It was more beautiful than he had imagined, more delicate than he had imagined. It looked like Jeanine. It was perfect.

"A very beautiful commission, Sir," said the goblin. "I will confess, we were surprised by it. But our artisans very much enjoyed creating it for you."

Draco thanked him and brought the item home, where he stored it under his bed while he waited to find her. But weeks passed and then months, and then finally the war was over, and he had never found Jeanine. Just before he went back to Hogwarts, he stopped by his vault at Gringotts and placed it there, keeping it safe just in case. He knew he would probably never give it to her. It had been foolish. But he couldn't bear to get rid of it, so it would live here until some future Malfoy found it and decided to pull it out again.

Eventually Draco forgot about it, until he discovered that Jeanine was Hermione. He pulled it out at the same time as the Lover's Box, examining it for the first time in seven years.

He turned it around, still as pristine as the day he commissioned it. It was truly a beautiful thing. But now that he knew it was for Hermione and not Jeanine, there were a few things he needed to add.

It took him several weeks, but he eventually made his way back to the goblins.

"You probably don't remember this, but I finally decided to give it to my witch."

The goblin looked at it curiously.

"Indeed, I do remember it. It was rather unique at the time. Please tell me: what adjustments do you require?"

Draco explained the things he wanted to add, change, enhance. Finally, the goblin nodded and said, "Excellent. Your changes are most unusual, but we should be able to manage it. She is a very lucky witch."

Draco grinned broadly. "It's for Hermione Granger."

The goblin's eyes widened and then narrowed. "She robbed Gringotts."

Draco gave him a wry look. "Yes, she robbed a vault that became mine the very next day. She's welcome to go into it anytime she wants."

The goblin still looked a bit disgruntled, and Draco added, "The Ministry paid for the damage to the bank, yes?"

The goblin nodded a bit begrudgingly. "Yes, out of the reparations fund."

Draco and Lucius had both made significant contributions to the reparations fund as part of their sentences. It was a hundred million galleons between the two of them.

At the time, Draco had been resentful about it because the Malfoys' contribution was very outsized compared to all the others. But now that he heard it was used to repair damage Hermione caused, Draco no longer minded. He didn't mind this at all.

"I don't wish for this to become public knowledge among wizards just yet, but I plan to court Hermione. She has the Malfoy Lover's Box, though few are aware of it."

The goblin's eyes widened again.

"Suffice to say that she can have anything she wants out of my vault. But she's also the sentimental type, and there will be more commissions for her if we can all let bygones be bygones. I wish for us to remain friends."

The goblin gave him a shrewd look, and Draco breathed a sigh of relief to see it. Goblins weren't stupid. Out of all the magical creatures, Draco felt he understood goblins the best. They were strategic. They were sharp. They were proud. Every single one of

them would have been sorted into Slytherin House if they went to Hogwarts. Draco knew they understood each other perfectly.

"I take it the charms you have been commissioning from our neighboring shop are for Miss Granger too?"

Draco inclined his head.

"I understand those pieces are quite valuable," said the goblin.

Draco just raised an eyebrow. "Yes. And as I said there will be more, provided that I can continue to give you all business. It would be very inconvenient to switch to the goblin artisans on the continent for future orders, but I will if I have to."

At this the goblin's expression seemed to clear. "Of course. In any event it was really Mr. Potter who was responsible, was it not? I'm sure Miss Granger just played a... minor supporting role."

Draco admittedly didn't know much about their break-in, other than what was revealed in the papers and by Gringotts itself when he inherited Bellatrix's vault. But he was absolutely certain that Hermione hadn't played a minor role. In fact, Draco strongly suspected that Harry had the mad idea to rob Gringotts in the first place, and then Hermione figured out how to do it. But if that was the narrative the goblins wished to perpetuate to smooth things over, he would be stupid not to accept it. He wanted to be friendly with the goblins, but that meant they had to be friendly with Hermione too.

"Naturally," he said.

At this the goblin nodded and gave him a toothy smile, and Draco returned a week later to pick it up with the changes to it.

It no longer looked like Jeanine. Now it reminded him of Hermione.

He pulled it out and stared at it. He planned to finally give it to her if she agreed to let him court her publicly. But ironically, the original

purpose of the gift – as an apology to get back into her good graces – had suddenly presented itself. He stared at it, chewing on his lip as he wondered if this was the right approach. He had taken the advice of so many other people when it came to Hermione: Theo, Harry, his mother, and now Pansy. He suspected Pansy was right that he needed to grovel. No, he was *sure* she was right about that, at least to some degree. Draco had to find her, apologize, and explain himself. It was tempting to give her this too and tug on her sentimental heartstrings a little bit. Hermione was so softhearted that he was sure she would be moved by it. He knew this was exactly the type of thing Pansy envisioned when she asked if he could come up with something good for her, and when he groveled to *Pansy* he knew he had damn well better show up with a gift for her. But would it work for Hermione?

No, this won't make her forgive me.

He knew that now. He didn't understand this when he had it made for Jeanine. He didn't know Jeanine, not really. He knew he liked her, connected to her, hell he even fell in love with her for a time. But there were things he didn't know about her and wouldn't have understood at seventeen in any event. But he had grown up. He had loved, lost, gotten engaged, and broken up. His father was dead. The ability to give Hermione literally anything she wanted was now his. But of course he had fallen in love with one of the very few witches in the world who could never be bought. She could never be bribed. It wouldn't have worked seven years ago, and it wouldn't work now.

Pansy's advice to grovel and then give her something wasn't the right approach. Pansy didn't understand Hermione the way he did. Draco knew that when he gave this to her it should be to mark an occasion. He should stick to his plan to give this to her if she ever agreed to a public courtship or perhaps an engagement. *That* would be something Hermione would appreciate. After all, she *was* very sentimental. But she didn't need gestures or gifts when he fucked it up this badly. She needed an explanation and an apology.

Decision made, he slid it back under his bed and stood up.

“Florrie!”

Florrie appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Florrie, take me to her. But try to do it quietly so she doesn’t wake up.”

She nodded and pulled him through the darkness, until a moment later he found himself in the middle of the Playground, the lights dimmed low.

“She is in her office Sir,” whispered Florrie.

Draco nodded and headed toward her, until he slipped into her office and found her sleeping on a sofa. He grimaced. That wasn’t at all how he wanted her to rest. She should be in a bed.

He knew there was nothing he could do about it tonight though, so he took the moment to study her. Even in sleep he could tell she had been crying. Her eyes were puffy, and her makeup was streaked on her pillow. He moved toward her as if in a trance and reached out to stroke one curl. It was so soft. She was so soft, and he was absolutely aching for her.

He straightened up and got to work. She might kill him when she woke up, but Draco was determined to make her hear what he had to say. If she still wanted nothing to do with him afterwards then he would cross that bridge. But she wouldn’t be able to run from him, and she wouldn’t be able to avoid him.

He moved to the door of her office door and aimed his wand at his palm to slice his hand open. Once it was bleeding he began to mutter another spell at the door, and it started to glow. Draco smeared his hand on it, and the blood absorbed into it. He could get out, but she could not. He had effectively locked her in.

“Florrie!” he whispered. Florrie appeared with a soft *POP!*

“Florrie, if she calls you and asks you to let her leave, I want you to say no. Do not help her escape without me.”

Florrie nodded determinedly.

“Excellent. Then I need you to fetch me a blanket and pillows from the Manor. I’m in for a long night.”

Secrets and Truths

Chapter 25: Secrets and Truths

AN: Draco puts it all on the table.

Hermione

Hermione groaned a little as she started to stir. She felt groggy, fuzzy, like her head was full of cotton. She squeezed her eyes shut as she tried to remember why she felt this bad, and then it all came rushing back: learning that Draco shagged Ella Vanity very recently, watching them kiss, and then hearing all about that blasted box.

Hermione's heart nearly broke all over again.

She liked him so much. She knew she really liked him before this, but it wasn't until he hurt her so badly that she understood the depths of her feelings. She had been so sure he cared too — so sure. But how could he care if he could string her along like that? How could he manipulate her for sex after all of their history? It was mortifying, but more than that it was painful.

Hermione wished desperately she could go back to sleep, but it was impossible. Now that she was awake, her brain had turned back on, and she had thoughts crashing through her head.

Maybe she could avoid him. She could close her floo, ward him out of her flat, and just apparate to the Manor to finish the last of the rooms as quickly as possible. There weren't *that* many left. He had so many meetings that surely she could find a time to do it when he wouldn't be home.

There was nothing for it. She would have to go back to her flat and prepare it so he couldn't show up unannounced. And then she would avoid him at the Manor and Theo's until she had steeled her heart. Hermione had no idea how long that would take because her heart had always been rather soft. But she would have to do it, there was no other choice.

Decision made, Hermione finally made herself open her eyes and sit up, and then she swore.

"Shit," she whispered.

Draco was asleep on her office floor, using some blankets as a makeshift bed. He had fallen asleep right in front of her door. She would have to step on him to exit or somehow make him move. She had no clue how he had gotten in, but there was no mistaking that shock of platinum blonde hair.

She silently slid off of her couch and crept over to the door. Being closer now, she saw there was the smallest amount of space between Draco and her door. Maybe if she just stepped over him and cracked it, she could slip out if she made herself as thin as possible. She gingerly stepped over him and turned the handle.

Nothing happened.

Hermione swore under her breath again and started muttering various unlocking spells, but nothing worked. She stared in horror at her door, realizing that Draco had warded her in.

She thought quickly. He shouldn't have been able to get past her own locked door. He would have to apparate past it, but there were antiapparition spells on the entire Ministry. The only creatures who could apparate were elves, but Hermione warded elves out too. Or at least she thought she did. She had to confess there were things about elf magic she still didn't know. And she *had* adjusted her wards to let Draco in that one day...

Shit.

Hermione thought carefully about this. Both Florrie and Rosie liked her, but Rosie's level of admiration had reached something akin to devotion. Maybe, just maybe, Hermione would be able to call her.

"Rosie!" she whispered.

Nothing happened. Hermione swore again, though she had been expecting it. Rosie was bound to Draco through the Manor, she wasn't bound to him personally. Hermione had never tried to call Rosie when she was away from the grounds, and she was pretty sure Draco didn't call her when he was outside of the Manor's wards either. Hermione decided to try again.

"Florrie!" she hissed.

Florrie appears with an uncharacteristically quiet *POP!* presumably because Draco was asleep.

This is proof I truly don't understand elf magic.

She had *never* heard elves arrive quietly, but she suddenly realized they must be able to do it or how else would they stay invisible when their masters were sleeping or they weren't meant to be seen?

"Yes Miss Hermy?"

"Florrie, can you apparate me out of here?"

"No Miss Hermy, my master has ordered that Florrie is not to, until he tells me otherwise."

Hermione nearly groaned. *Typical.* The only elf who could answer her call down here was also the only one who was ordered not to help.

"What about this ward? Can you drop it?" she whispered.

Florrie moved forward to examine it carefully and finally stepped back and shook his head. "No Miss Hermy. 'Tis a blood ward from the House of Malfoy. Miss Hermy will need my master's blood to pass. And Florrie is not being allowed to help with this."

Hermione glanced back at Draco and was startled to find him awake and watching her with a wary expression.

"Thank you Florrie, that will be all," she said, without taking her eyes off Draco. The moment Florrie disappeared she said, "Let me out."

"Not until we talk," said Draco.

Hermione closed her eyes and forced herself to breathe. She wouldn't cry again. She *wouldn't*.

"There's nothing to talk about. You shagged Ella rather recently and kissed her last night, and I returned your things. That's all there is to it."

Draco's mouth thinned. "First of all, they're *your* things. I gave them to you. Second, she ambushed me. She absolutely insisted on having a word with me, and she said it was urgent. I had no idea she was going to spew those lies, and when she kissed me I was so shocked I froze. I don't want Ella. I have *never* wanted Ella."

Hermione bit her lip. She desperately wanted to believe him. She so wanted to believe him. But she knew what she had seen. He didn't try to stop her, and there was still the timing. Besides, there were so many other things he had kept from her. Why wouldn't he be keeping the truth about Ella from her too? Or even The Ruby Slipper?

Hermione didn't know what to believe, and she just needed to get out so she could think. She glanced longingly at the door and then back at Draco, so very conflicted.

Suddenly he said, "Stay here," and to her shock he shot to his feet, opened the door and closed it behind him before she could think to

follow him.

“DRACO MALFOY!” she screeched.

She was locked in here, and he had just *left* her? She was going to bloody kill him if she ever saw him again. To break her heart and then leave her here captive and then to just *disappear* without any further...

Her thoughts were cut off as the door opened again, and Draco slipped in quickly, closing it before she could dart around him to escape.

“YOU! YOU JUST.... JUST....”

She was breathing hard, struggling not to cry, and Draco grabbed her and pulled her to him, wrapping his arms around her.

No, she wouldn't hug him back, she *wouldn't*. She wouldn't let herself sink into him. She wouldn't breathe in that clean, masculine scent of him. She wouldn't let her head spin. She was too confused, too angry, too heartbroken.

“Come sit on the sofa with me sweetheart,” he murmured.

“Don't call me that,” she said, as she choked a little.

That term of endearment – the one that meant so much to her now – cut through her like a knife.

“You are though,” he whispered. “I just left to get some veritaserum from your lab.”

He held up the small bottle of clear liquid and guided her to the sofa. Hermione was so surprised by this she let him do it without realizing it.

“Draco, you don't have to —” she started.

"I do," he said, cutting her off. "You need to know I'm telling you the truth."

"But that lab is classified..."

"Fuck classified."

"But veritaserum is illegal..."

"We're in the Department of Mysteries. Harry says that all sorts of shit happens down here that would be illegal anywhere else. I'm going to take it, and I want you to ask me whatever questions you need answered. Ask me anything, I don't care. I want to fix this."

He opened the bottle.

"No more than one drop," she said quickly. "A few minutes is plenty."

Draco nodded, measured out one drop and placed it on his tongue. He shuddered and opened his eyes. They had gone oddly flat. He was silent, waiting for Hermione to ask questions.

She hesitated. She wanted to trust him to tell her the truth without veritaserum, but she didn't. Not really. He had kept so much from her that she couldn't trust him without it.

"Did you kiss Ella Vanity last night?"

"No."

Hermione felt something inside of her unclench.

"Why didn't you stop her when she kissed you?"

"She shocked me so much with everything she was saying that I froze. I barely even knew what she was doing."

"Have you shagged her?"

“Yes.”

Hermione’s stomach sank again, but she had known this. Ella would never have been able to make a claim about being pregnant unless they had shagged at least once.

“When?”

“The night I buried Father. Ella came to his funeral. I was in the Study, very drunk, and she came in and just started stripping. I woke up the next morning in one of the guest bedrooms with her. I barely remember it, but I was pretty sure I cast a contraceptive charm. I’ve never forgotten before, not even with alcohol. I was very confused when she claimed to be pregnant, but I was so drunk that night my memories aren’t clear.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. That was *not* what she was expecting, but she did remember his voice last night. He kept asking her about it, questioning her as though he didn’t believe it.

“Have you shagged her since that night?”

“No.”

“How many times have you slept with her?”

“Just once.”

Something inside of Hermione eased a bit. She and Draco hadn’t even reconnected yet when had been with Ella. She met Draco again *after* Lucius’s funeral.

“Have you ever kissed her or done anything else with her?”

“No, just the things that night. It was a mistake.”

“Did you make promises to her about your Lover’s Box?”

“Absolutely not.”

Even through the veritaserum, Draco sounded disgusted. Hermione's heart was lighter now.

"Did you give me your Lover's Box?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"I want to court you, but I didn't know how to get you to agree to it. Courting is an old tradition, and it's serious. I wasn't certain how much you liked me. I knew that however much you liked me, I still liked you more. I wanted to convince you I was good enough. I took the best parts of courting and decided to just do it in private. The Lover's Box is the easiest way to do that. I was hoping you would fall for me, and then I could do it publicly."

Draco's voice was flat, emotionless as he said this, but Hermione's eyes were huge. This wasn't what she was expecting. Maybe if Ella hadn't appeared the night before she would have considered this possibility. But once Hermione heard her lies and saw that kiss, all of Hermione's plans to think through the Lover's Box had gone out the window.

"So you do like me?"

"Yes. I like you a lot."

"Did you pay bills for me and replace things around my flat?"

She could tell he was surprised and now very nervous, but he was still under the influence of the potions as he said, "Yes."

"Have you done anything else like that behind my back?"

"I've replaced some expired groceries and refilled some staples for you."

Hermione blinked. She hadn't noticed that. She watched him and could see he was struggling not to say something.

"What else? What else have you done in my flat?"

"I'm your landlord," he suddenly blurted out, and his eyes closed with mortification as he said it.

Hermione was stunned, almost numb as she realized the implications of this.

"My landlord is a company..." she said slowly.

"It's a company that I own."

"So you abated my rent?"

"Yes."

"And you're repairing the plaster and windows?"

"Yes."

"Why on earth...?" she trailed off, feeling a bit faint.

He swallowed and looked at her dully, but she could see the seriousness behind his eyes. "There are a lot of reasons. The biggest reason is because I care about you, and I know how much you love your flat. I love your flat too. It's perfect for you, and I want you to be able to stay. Another reason is because I want to court you, and if I do that then I'm expected to treat you a certain way. Supporting you like this is part of it. And finally, there's the fact that I feel incredibly guilty, and I'm trying to make it up to you."

"Guilty?"

"Yes, it's my family's fault you became financially vulnerable in the first place. I had to fix it."

“Explain.”

He sighed, and even with the flatness of his voice, Hermione could hear the pain and guilt as he began to talk.

“My *father* was originally your landlord. He increased rents on all of his tenants, but I did a deep dive on it and realized that on a percentage basis *you* were the one who was hit the hardest. I think he knew you were living there. He couldn’t fuck with you directly while he was in prison, so he decided to fuck with you indirectly by bleeding you dry. That’s also why your flat hasn’t been repaired since you’ve lived there. I found letters from Father instructing the property management company to skip annual inspections of the building. I didn’t protect you from Bellatrix, and I didn’t protect you from Father, but fuck it if I’m not going to protect you going forward. I had to make it up to you.”

He looked at her, and even through the veritaserum she could tell he was begging for her to understand. For Hermione’s part, she was stunned that Lucius Malfoy had really been her landlord and had done those things intentionally.

“But going forward...”

“You are *never* paying rent to me,” he interjected. “I won’t accept it.”

“Because of your father?”

“Partially, but because of all the other reasons too.”

“But why couldn’t you just tell me that?”

“I was afraid you would refuse. I didn’t want to make you feel bad or embarrassed. I *really* didn’t want to tell you that my family had hurt you again. It’s terrible and mortifying. I was afraid if I told you about it then you would think I wasn’t worth all my shitty baggage and pull away from me. I just wanted to fix it for you. I would have told you by

the time the lease renewal came up again and probably much earlier than that. I just wasn't ready for you to know when I did it."

Hermione really wanted to talk to him about this a bit more, but she knew she didn't have that much time with the veritaserum. She had more questions she needed answered first.

"You said you want to court me?"

"Yes. I am courting you in a way. I just haven't made it public yet."

"Why haven't you made it public?"

"I didn't want to move too fast. Pureblood witches in my circle often expect to be courted by wizards they don't know well, but I didn't think you would agree to do that. You don't view a relationship or marriage as an alliance. You don't care about my fortune. You don't need any bloke to make you happy. I was sure you wouldn't agree to go public with it unless you were emotionally invested first."

"So you manipulated me?"

Hermione could tell he was fighting this question, but he finally said, "Yes."

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, but she had to press on. At least she knew her veritaserum was working.

"And do you regret it?"

"No."

Hermione was startled, but he was giving her an intense look now. "Why not?"

"Because my feelings are real. I regret not telling you about the Lover's Box or your flat sooner. I regret going behind your back to fix the things I had no right to fix. I regret hurting you. I *really* regret getting cornered by that bitch last night. But I don't regret using every

tool I have to try to make you fall for me. I fell for you weeks ago, years really, and all I want is for your feelings to catch up to mine. I meant everything I said and everything I did. Maybe it's manipulative to try to make you want me as much as I want you, but I can't sit back and just twiddle my thumbs while I wait for you to come around someday.

If I could do it again I would be more open with you from the beginning, and I am so, so sorry I wasn't. I realize now it was foolish of me, and my only excuse is that I was guarding my own heart. I was a coward, and I was afraid you would reject me if I told you everything from the start because what I'm feeling is big and fast and a lot. I know I really hurt you by never explaining myself, and I am so sorry for it. I never intended to do that. But I can't regret the things I've done to make you notice me and give me a chance. I've waited for you for *years*, and I desperately want your feelings to match mine. That's why I've been actively pursuing you, and if that's manipulative then so be it."

Hermione stared at him for a full thirty seconds as she tried to process what he had just told her. He was manipulating her by doing things to make her emotionally invested so she would want him. Was that *really* manipulative? Possibly. It might also be the most determined, romantic thing any man had ever done for her. He had set out to pursue her and sweep her off her feet so that her interest in him would be on par with his own. Could she blame him for that really?

The secrecy was a mistake, but he told her under truth serum that he knew that now. The reason he kept those secrets was to protect himself. Draco had put himself out there with gestures and attention, but he hadn't really used his words until now. He might want her more than anything, but his position relative to hers made him vulnerable, especially at the beginning. He didn't want to be rejected or scare her away.

Hermione found herself softening toward him on this. She could understand why he did it, and he knew he had made a mistake. He

had apologized under veritaserum. That meant he really *truly* was sorry and wasn't just paying her lip service.

Hermione said nothing more on this, but she filed it away to think about later as she pressed on. She had a few more questions she needed to ask before the potion fully wore off.

"Have you been going to your sex club?"

"No."

"When was the last time you visited it?"

"Before I shagged Ella. I went the day Father died, before his body was returned from Azkaban."

"Are you still a member?"

"Yes."

Hermione's stomach dropped a little bit.

"Why?"

"I thought you might want to go to a party with me. There are things we can do there that we can't do in private. Once I give up my membership I have to be sponsored by another member to get back in. None of the club members know who I am because I've always been anonymous when they met me. Father got me in originally, and if I give up my membership it will be hard to get it back."

Hermione blinked, in slight disbelief. She couldn't believe she was going to ask this, but her curiosity had always been insatiable. "What kinds of things?"

"Voyeurism. Exhibitionism. Things involving other people."

Oh. She suddenly remembered she *had* told him she was interested in at least some of that.

“Do you want to bring other people into our... thing?”

“Nobody else is touching you,” he said, and it was so harsh
Hermione jumped back.

“Then why...”

“Looking with your consent is different. It turns me on to know that other men and maybe some women want you, but you’re with me and only I can touch you. Seeing other men want you makes me jealous, but it also makes me feel powerful because I have something they can’t have. It turns me on.”

“Like last night...”

“Pansy knows me well enough to know how I am about this. I’m sure she put you in orange to seduce me. Every person in that room noticed you. Quite a few wanted you. It made me so jealous, but it also stroked my ego when you only danced with *me*. You only gave your attentions to *me*. You were wearing something of *mine*. It made me really want to fuck you.”

This brought up another thing Hermione had been wondering.

“Why haven’t you then? I’ve asked you a few times.”

“Because once I do it, I’m done. I’ll be so fucking done that I’ll never recover if you decide you don’t want me. I probably won’t recover anyway – last night proved that – but I was waiting until I was absolutely sure you wouldn’t change your mind about me, about us.”

Hermione realized she was gaping at him.

“Draco...” she whispered.

He looked up, and saw his eyes were almost clear.

“Is the potion done?”

“Nearly.”

She thought of a way to test this and suddenly said, “Were you my anonymous donor?”

The potion made him open his mouth, but he fought it and finally said, “That’s classified.”

Hermione exhaled and couldn’t help but smile a little at his response. He had metabolized enough that he was no longer under the influence of it.

She could see that he was still very nervous, but the slightest bit of hope spread across his face when he caught her small smile. He reached for her, and she hesitated for a split second and then leaned into him. She let him gather her in his arms.

“I’m so sorry for hurting you,” he said. “Please know that. I’m sorry I shagged Ella after Father’s funeral. I was so drunk I only remember flashes of it, but even then I knew better. She’s a social climber, she always has been. She’s been after my fortune for years, but it got much worse once Father died. I think she tried to start something last night because apparently Lucien Boles gave Tracy Davis his Lover’s Box yesterday, and the news worked its way through the crowd at the fundraiser. Ella’s jealous, and she’s getting desperate. That pregnancy stunt was a load of shit, and I’m sure she knew it. If she had waited any longer to tell me about it, it wouldn’t have been convincing. Fuck, it wasn’t even that convincing last night, but I hesitated because I don’t know that much about it. I think she heard about Tracy, saw me completely wrapped up in you, and then told that lie to get my box as quickly as possible. No doubt she would have told *everybody* the moment she had it and then would have surprised me with the news that she was not pregnant after all. Those boxes send a very strong message in my circle, and she thought it would make me socially trapped.”

Hermione nodded and nestled into him.

“I wish she would stop,” said Hermione in a small voice. “I wish they would all stop. She’s not the only one. There are a lot of witches who want you.”

Draco snorted. “You have your fair share of blokes after *you*.”

Hermione gave a noncommittal shrug. “I’ve been asked out a few times recently, that’s true.”

He gripped her harder at this. “Have you...”

“No, of course not. I’m with you.”

She felt him relax a little. “Can I call you sweetheart again?”

He sounded a bit nervous, but Hermione nodded into his chest. She felt him relax a little more.

“And your flat...” he said.

She sat up and gave him a stern look.

“I know,” he said quickly. “I *know* I should have told you about it. I’m really sorry I didn’t.”

“I should pay rent.”

“No,” he said firmly. “I told you I am never accepting rent from you.”

She sighed. “And my bills...”

“How did you figure it out?”

She gave him a wry look. “Those statements weren’t the only records. I ended up with enough leftover that it made me suspicious, and I checked my other records of it.”

“Oh...” he trailed off before looking at her nervously.

“It’s incredibly invasive, Draco.”

“I know! I know it is. I’m sorry I did it, I just...”

He looked so lost, so helpless, that Hermione felt herself crumbling a little.

“You just what?”

“I care about you so much. You’re mine, and the fact that you were struggling... I couldn’t stand it, Hermione. It cost me almost nothing to help, but it could mean everything for you. I have to take care of you. I don’t just want to, I *need* to.”

“Why?” she asked quietly.

He gave her a bewildered look. “I don’t know. It’s how I’m wired, I guess. Maybe it has to do with the fact that I need you so much, and I want you to need me too. You’re so independent, and I love that about you, but it means you don’t need me. But if I’m doing those things for you...”

“Then I’m reliant on you,” she said.

He frowned a bit at this, as though unsure if this was correct, but he didn’t object. Hermione pursed her lips.

“Draco, I don’t want to be reliant on you.”

He looked devastated by her words, almost resigned, as though he knew it already. She sensed he felt like he had failed her somehow or perhaps failed himself because she didn’t want or need his help.

Hermione felt a surge of guilt. She wasn’t trying to hurt him, she just needed to maintain her independence, at least until she was sure about him.

“I know,” he said softly. “That’s why I did it behind your back. I knew you didn’t want me like that.”

Hermione bit her lip as another shot of guilt went through her, but she had to stick to her principles on this. It was very invasive, regardless of his feelings about it.

"It's the bills that bother me the most."

He looked at her in surprise. "Why?"

She shrugged. "Hard to say. It feels like the biggest invasion of privacy I suppose. You had to open my mail and review my finances to do it. That feels a bit worse than replacing expired milk, though to be clear... having you or your elves sneaking around my flat to make notes of that sort of thing is also intrusive. You know I'm a private person."

He looked faintly sick now. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean —"

"I know," she said, cutting him off. "I'm just explaining it to you. I understand you were trying to help me, and you did. But please don't ever go behind my back like that again. I need to know that the things I keep private stay private."

He nodded. "I swear I won't."

"Not just bills, but food and other things too."

He nodded again before saying, "Erm..."

"What?"

"What if I want to surprise you with something?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I'm fine with surprises. If you're keeping it quiet to surprise me that's OK. But if you're keeping it quiet because you're pretty sure I wouldn't want you to do the thing you're doing, then no."

"Alright," he said. "I can follow that."

“And as for rent...”

He gave her a sharp look, and she hesitated. The truth was, the rent abatement — though it was the largest thing he had done for her — bothered her much less than the bills or food. He was trying to take care of her and wanted her to rely on him for it, that was true. But he also felt like he owed it to her because of Lucius. It was a bit more nuanced than the other things he had done.

“Fine,” she sighed. “I won’t pay you rent.”

Hermione saw relief on his face, and he sank back into the sofa as he exhaled. She was struck by it. She realized that by letting him give this to her she was giving something back to him.

“Thank you,” he murmured. “Seriously, I just wanted to *kill* Father when I realized what he had done to you. And fuck sweetheart, it’s not like I need it at all. If it helps you and makes up for what he did to you even a little bit...”

He trailed off as she put a finger to his lips. “I get it. And thank you. Also... thank you for doing it for the Browns. I’m sure you did that so I wouldn’t suspect, but they needed it too.”

He quirked an eyebrow at this, and she dropped her finger.

“That was part of it, but they aren’t the only ones. I’m going through all the leases and looking at them as they come up for renewal. We are doing a lot of abatements right now. I’ll admit your building is the only one I took to zero, but there are several others being cut in half before we go back to what’s market. Father was an arse, and I’m trying to make up for what he did to innocent people as best I can.”

Hermione gave him a soft smile at this. She realized he really was trying. He was a good man who had crossed lines and messed up, but he knew it. He felt bad about it. She believed him that he wouldn’t do it again.

“I’m glad. I forgive you, and I’ll give you another chance.”

He slumped with relief again before saying, “Thank you. And if you’re giving me another chance, then I need to talk to you about something. It might be too much after everything that’s happened, but in the spirit of being honest...”

Hermione studied him. He appeared rather determined.

“What is it?”

“I know I’ve been vague about defining our thing. But I want to be with you. I want it to be exclusive. I don’t care what you call me – your boyfriend, your lover, the bloke you’re in a relationship with – whatever. I just want it. This isn’t a friends who fuck sort of thing for me, and I really hope it’s not that for you either.”

Hermione blinked. “Are you just saying that because...”

“No,” he said quickly. “No, not at all. I’ve wanted it for a long time, and I thought that’s what we were doing for the most part. But some of our friends pointed out that you’ve been calling me your very good friend. They thought it meant we weren’t exclusive yet and that *you* thought we weren’t exclusive either. I’m fine with whatever you want to call me sweetheart, as long as we both know what it means. I just want to define it between us in some way so that we are on the same page.”

Hermione relaxed a bit, but then got a little nervous again.

“You want to court me then? Or something different?”

He gave her a serious look. “You have my Lover’s Box, Hermione. I’m not giving it to anybody else, and I want to keep using it to send you things. It can stay just between us for as long as you want. If you’re ever willing to go public with it, just tell me, and I’ll be thrilled to do it openly so the whole world knows. But for now it can just be ours, as long as it’s clear we’re together.”

Some of the tension drained away at this. "I think... I think that's a good idea. I'll admit I don't understand this courting thing or how it's different from dating. I've heard about it before, but I didn't really think about it until Pansy told me about Lover's Boxes yesterday. I need to understand it better before I agree to it."

"That's totally fine. But can I keep doing what I've been doing in private?"

Hermione bit her lip, but nodded. She had to admit it made her feel special and wanted. She would miss the attention if he stopped.

He exhaled and gave her a broad smile. "Good. Then take your time while you think about it. In the meantime, should we say you're my girlfriend?"

He looked so hopeful that Hermione couldn't help the shy smile that crossed her face. "Yes. Yes I suppose I am."

A surprisingly possessive look flashed across his face, as he threaded his hands in her hair and pulled her in for a deep kiss. Hermione sighed into his mouth and sank into him. She had a sudden insight: Pansy told her that dating without courting was practically meaningless in their social circle, but that was wrong. The things they were doing meant something to Draco, even if it wasn't as far as he wished to go with it. He clearly viewed it as a step in that direction, and he relished it. Heaven help her, but Hermione relished it too.

After a long while she pulled back. "Can you answer a few more questions for me then?"

He dipped his head in acknowledgment.

"How did you get in here?"

He smirked. "Florrie of course. You warded out elves, but you let me in. She's bound to me and can cross elf wards that permit me."

Hermione groaned. "I wondered if it was something like that. I really don't know as much about elf magic as I should."

He just gave her a small smile at this.

"And..." she hesitated. "Did you happen to go to your room last night?"

Now his expression darkened. "Yes. I saw you gave everything back to me. I sent Florrie to your flat last night to return them to their proper places, and then she brought me here."

She bit her lip. "But why? We hadn't made up yet."

He gave her an intent look. "They're yours. Whatever else happens between us, I want you to keep them. I want you to keep all the things I give you."

"The opals..."

"Keep them. They looked amazing on you. Mother and I didn't even know we had them. She said neither she nor my grandmother ever wore orange because the color was terrible on both of them. On you though, it was stunning. Your skin fucking glowed. I've never seen anything like it."

"Draco, you can't keep doing this for every fundraiser."

"Can't I?" he said.

She saw he was entirely serious.

"I'll tell Pansy to put me in orange again for the one in November and red for the holiday party at the Ministry."

"Ah, I thought you said that you have a contract with her that gives *Pansy* the right to dress you for these kinds of things for the next year. Sorry sweetheart, but I'm certain she'll side with me on this.

She's going to put you in every color of the rainbow, and I'll accessorize you appropriately. You know I can do it."

"You're impossible," she huffed, but she had to admit she was secretly pleased. He spoiled her terribly, but it was the kind of attention she had only ever dreamed of as a young girl. She never thought she would find somebody like this in real life.

"Fine," she said. "But the Lover's Box..."

"Keep that too. Nobody else can use it for the next ten years anyway."

Something inside of her faltered at this. "I... what?"

"It's blood warded to you. I can't get in, nobody else can get in. The ward expires in ten years."

She gave him an appalled look. "But if you wanted to give it to somebody else..."

"I don't want to give it to somebody else. If this doesn't work out for some reason then I'll be starting all over again. A Lover's Box isn't the only way to court, it's just the way I wanted to do it with you."

Hermione felt herself blush deeply, but now she had more questions.

"What about Astoria then?"

"She didn't get my box. I used a hands off approach with her."

"Explain it to me, please. I know it was long ago but..." She trailed off. She wasn't really sure what she was asking.

Draco sighed. "You know how hard I looked for you after that night. After the war was over I went back to Hogwarts, and eventually I realized I had to move on. I thought I would never find you, and even if I did I thought you were a muggle. After getting to know Ben I realize now how prejudiced I was, but back then I didn't think I could

marry a muggle even if I wanted her more than anything. I couldn't get you out of my head though, so I decided to just force the issue and court.

I picked Astoria because she was acceptable, proper, and she wouldn't expect grand gestures. Having it be known that she was being courted by the Malfoy heir would be more than enough for her. I started it right after Hogwarts. We had arranged meetings with our families, we had a couple parties, that sort of thing. It was all very formal, all very hands off. I did it for a couple years. I never used the Lover's Box with her because I didn't need to. I didn't want to. Those boxes mean something. They're intended to build feelings, and I didn't really care if she had feelings or not. I was pursuing her because of the duty my father kept writing about in his fucking letters from Azkaban. He would lecture me about it every two or three days, and he was *thrilled* when I told him I was courting a Greengrass the proper way. Eventually we got engaged, and then I shagged her. She was pretty enough, but there was no spark. And she had no fire. She was raised to be so fucking agreeable it was terrible. I still would have married her but..."

He hesitated.

"But what?" prompted Hermione.

"I learned she had a blood curse."

Hermione blinked, now remembering what Narcissa said to her that day in the hospital.

"You dumped her because of a genetic condition?" Hermione was suddenly very offended on behalf of Astoria.

"No!" he insisted. "Or at least not entirely. I dumped her because she lied about it. She kept it from me for more than two years just so she could secure her match with me. If she had told me about it from the beginning I think I would have gone through with it anyway. It's not her fault that she has it, but it was a pretty big lie, Hermione. It would

have affected my children and their children and so forth. She kept it from me until the wedding planning was well underway. Besides, by the time I found out about it, I knew I didn't want her. I had never wanted her, and I just started to court her to get over you. It was the last straw for me, and I just had to be done."

Hermione relaxed a little. She supposed she could see his point about it.

"Why did she finally tell you about it if she had kept it from you that long?"

He shrugged. "Astoria's not a bad person. She was just raised like I was, with duty being front and center. I imagine it was even worse for her because of this big secret she had. I think she felt guilty for lying to me about it, and she finally told me when she had too much to drink one night. The only other person who knows about it is Mother. I never told Father because he would have absolutely ruined her reputation for it. I never even told my friends because it's private. That condition isn't her fault, and I'm sure her family pressured her to lie to me for as long as she did. I don't resent her for it, but I couldn't marry her after I found out."

Hermione nodded, and she snuggled in a bit. She was glad she had asked about Astoria. It answered a lot of questions and resolved some hesitancy she didn't even know she had.

"Tell me about Lover's Boxes then. Clearly other families use them too."

He nodded. "They're traditionally used in exactly the way I'm using yours — to send notes and gifts to each other. They were devised as a way for a couple to get to know each other better so they could develop real fondness and feelings. They're faster and more private than owls, but they aren't large enough to send a person through them. So a couple can become close — they can even fall in love — without compromising the witch's virtue."

Hermione thought of her vibrators. "I'm pretty sure we used your box to compromise my virtue on the very first day you gave it to me."

He smiled broadly at this. "True. I don't think my ancestors would have expected muggle vibrators to be passed through those boxes. I was totally blown away when you actually did it. It was a shot in the dark on my part, and I was pretty sure you would tell me to fuck right off, but when you actually did it... *goddammit*, I was done for sweetheart. No Malfoy bride has ever been that perfect."

Malfoy bride.

Hermione's heart sped up, and she finally understood why Draco had kept this from her. Evidently he had already picked her as somebody who had the potential to fill that role before he ever gave her the box. If she let him court her, that's how others would view it too. Hermione had dreamed about it a little bit — of course she had — but she didn't realize he felt the same way or was so serious about it that he had already started the process with her. She felt slightly panicky when faced with that knowledge.

Breathe. He's just your boyfriend.

Hermione tried to pull herself together. "Your mother's rather perfect."

"She is, that's true. But you achieved higher scores on your O.W.L.s and N.E.W.T.s than she did. She finally told me she approves, you knows. Your scores in school were one of her many criteria."

Hermione couldn't help but smile a little at this. They were quiet for a while, and then Draco spoke up again in a hesitant voice.

"Hermione, will we be OK?"

She nodded. "I have a lot to think about with this whole courtship thing, and I'll have more questions for you. If there's a book or

something I could read about it, I think that would help me a lot. But yes, Draco. We're OK."

She felt the tension drain out of him. "Thank Merlin. We have some books on it, and you're welcome to them. Just keep in mind that some of the rules are meant to be broken. I've already broken a few of them with you."

She nodded. "Alright. But I think it would help if I knew what the rules were in the first place."

"I'll pull everything we have on it, sweetheart."

She nodded. Then he added, "Can I ask *you* one thing?"

"Yes, of course."

"How did you repair the chandelier in the *Crucio Room*?" he said in a soft voice.

Hermione sat back to look at him with wide eyes. "You know about —"

"You forgot to close the door," he said gently, "and somehow I just knew the chandelier was because of you. It wasn't in there the last time I was in that room."

Hermione swallowed and nodded. "It's strange. I finally decided to search that room one day when I was alone. Do you remember when I said I talked to the Manor? Well I did it in that room. The chandelier was back on the ceiling, but it was broken."

He gave her an odd look, and she just shrugged. "The Manor is a little sentient, you know that. For some reason it decided to put the broken chandelier back into place several weeks after the ritual. And then after I talked to the Manor, the chandelier was repaired."

Hermione bit her lip, knowing what was coming next. Sure enough...

"And what did you talk about?"

Hermione hesitated. "It was...difficult. I talked to the child version of you for a bit. And then I talked to Lucius and finally the Manor itself."

"Lucius?" asked Draco in disbelief.

Hermione sighed and nodded. "Look, I know I should have told you about this already, but it's awkward. It's just... I think I know why the Manor hasn't revealed your hiding place yet."

To her relief, he didn't seem to mind that she had kept this from him. Perhaps she was getting a pass for it because he had kept so much from her.

"And why is that?" he asked curiously.

"You're not married," said Hermione bluntly. She felt her face heat, and she picked at a stray thread on her sofa.

"But why would that –"

"It takes two to control the magic of the Manor," she said quickly. "There's the Master, but there's also a second individual, generally the person he is married to. I went back through old family records, and you're the first Malfoy who has owned the Manor before marriage ever since the Manor was rebuilt. Every other Master before you was married when his father died."

"So you're saying..."

"That Lucius's magic is lingering just a bit. It did break, but not completely because the Manor needs a second person to help control it. Evidently it clung to the former Master as its second because you don't have a spouse to help."

He gave her an appalled look.

"I know," she sighed. "I asked the Manor about Narcissa – after all, she was Lucius's second, and she's still alive – but the Manor said..." she trailed off delicately.

“The Manor said what?”

“It said she’s not yours. The Master always has primary control you know. That’s why so much *did* change when it became yours. But that second person’s magic affects it too, just not as much as the Master’s does. I think the Manor is acknowledging Lucius as your second, since he was the Master while he was alive. When you took over while unmarried, it effectively bumped Lucius down to second place and knocked Narcissa out entirely. I think that’s why the *Crucio Room* is even worse than it was when I was tortured there. It’s channeling Lucius’s magic as well as that part of you that was a bully when you were a child. And I think that’s why your hiding place hasn’t been revealed. The Manor is still protecting Lucius’s secrets, even though he’s not the Master anymore.”

Draco looked both fascinated and horrified. Then he got a thoughtful look on his face.

“But that chandelier responded to you.”

“Yes,” she said delicately. “That was... unexpected. But...” she hesitated again.

“But what?” he prompted.

This was so awkward, but given everything he had just told her about his own feelings she knew there was nothing for it. She had to just say it.

“Oh bugger. I think the Manor was evaluating me. It seemed to know who I was. I kept telling it that you cared about me, even while the manifestations of you and Lucius were saying some awful things. By the end of it, it seemed like the Manor was judging me. It felt as though it was trying to decide if I would be worthy.”

He looked spellbound by everything she was saying. “And what did it decide?” he whispered.

She shrugged. "It didn't. It said, '*Perhaps.*' But it did repair the chandelier, and I think that means it hasn't rejected me yet. I think that's also why I can call the Manor's magic now and then, even though it's inconsistent. I'm an option, but it hasn't decided if I'm really its mistress or not."

"Are you saying we need to get married to settle the question?"

Her head shot up, and she saw him watching her with an almost hungry look on his face. She blinked and stammered, "I... I don't know. I'm sure it would accept any witch you present as a wife."

"Would it?" he said slowly. "Would it really?"

"It always has before," she said quietly. "In all the previous generations."

"But the previous Masters assumed control of the Manor when they were already wed and bound, didn't they? The Manor had no... *opportunity*... to influence things with them. Those Masters had already chosen their own seconds when they performed the ritual."

She bit her lip, and his eyes dropped to watch it.

"What are *you* saying then?" she finally asked. "Do you think the Manor will reject any witch it doesn't approve of?"

Draco's silver eyes were shining now as he stared down at her. "I'm not sure I want to find out, do you? Imagine all the chaos it would cause if I showed up with somebody as ridiculous as Ella Vanity. The library books would probably fly off the shelves and chase her off of the premises for me, don't you think?"

"Well I suppose that would be one way of getting rid of her," quipped Hermione.

He smiled a little. "True. But I'd have to marry the bitch first."

"And you don't want to marry her," said Hermione slowly.

Draco shook his head. "No. I think I'd rather marry somebody the Manor already likes."

"I told you it hasn't made up its mind yet," she said softly.

"Hmmm. It did repair a priceless antique for you. But if you really think it's still on the fence, then maybe we should try to convince it."

And with that, Draco lowered his head to hers and caught her lips.

Hermione's Playground

Chapter 26: Hermione's Playground

AN: Relationships can't be all work and no play.

Draco

Relief.

Sheer, blessed relief that Hermione forgave him. Their fight hadn't lasted that long, but Draco had been terrified that he would lose her, and he didn't know what he would do if she turned away from him now. Fuck, but he was in deep. He was in so deep. He told her this, but he was certain she still didn't understand just *how* deep. Losing her would have sent him to such a dark place he couldn't allow himself to think about it. The moment she said they were OK, Draco thought he was about to levitate off the sofa with lightness.

He had been an idiot to go behind her back and pay her bills and replace things around her flat. He should have been upfront about the rent abatement and the meaning behind the Lover's Box. Instead of being scared away, she had eventually accepted the abatement and had taken the news about the Lover's Box rather well. Draco was thrilled to discover that she was actually interested in the history and customs behind it, and he was encouraged by the fact that she wanted to learn more. He knew he would have to answer her questions and explain his traditions to get her to cooperate, but maybe when she finally understood them he could take it public and send shockwaves through the pureblood world. Draco realized that this, more than anything, was the real reason he wanted to court her instead of just dating her. Hermione Granger would crush pureblood supremacy with his Lover's Box, he was sure of it.

Now she was letting him kiss her, and he knew he should be respectful, slow, romantic. He had nearly driven any chance of a relationship with her right off a fucking cliff the night before. It was only thanks to Florrie and the illegal veritaserum that he was saved.

But here he was, kissing her, and he was immediately brought back to his plans from the night before when he saw her in that orange dress that made him hard all night. She had looked like the setting sun in that color, and Draco had all but decided he would finally take what she would give him before it all went to hell. Now that they had made up, Draco knew that his plan to wait until she was in it as deep as he was was futile. He didn't have that kind of self-control, and in any event, it was pointless. She already had the power to utterly wreck him. Last night proved that to him beyond the shadow of a doubt. Surely having sex with her wouldn't make him any weaker for her than he already was. If anything, it might bind her to him even tighter.

That was really what he needed, tighter bonds with her. She told him she didn't want to be reliant on him, and he had to accept that for now. He hadn't intended to cripple her independence with his behavior, not really. He never even wanted her to know about some of it. Still, Draco had leaned on his resources too much when it came to winning her affections. Draco knew now that using his money to fix her problems would never make Hermione need him the same way he needed her. It was about emotions, *feelings*.

Draco needed Hermione to ignore the sprawling mansion that was fucking *judging* her and the room that was her place of torture and the fact that the pureblood witches would go feral when they learned the true nature of their relationship. He needed her to ignore all of that bullshit and just be with him. The Lover's Box had done an excellent job of getting her part of the way there, despite his missteps with it. Maybe sex would finish the job for him. Yes, sex might work.

Fuck he really wanted to have sex with her.

Draco felt his blood heat, and he was struggling with romance now. Romance was the Lover's Box. Romance was the thing hidden under his bed with an inscription set into gold for her. Romance was the wildflowers that the Manor somehow knew its next mistress would love.

What he was feeling right now wasn't romantic at all, it was burning. He wanted to fuck her. He wanted to fuck her until she looked at him like he was the only wizard in the world.

Her eyes were still a bit red and puffy from the night before, and her hair was coming loose, tendrils springing from the soft knot she had worn to the fundraiser. She still looked a little skittish, and she seemed surprised he was doing this right now. Draco didn't care. He could tame her. He could make her his. He could fuck every doubt or fear out of her.

He didn't even ask as his hand moved to the hem of her shirt, and he yanked it up over her head. Her eyes widened in surprise, but he didn't give her a moment to think before he was unhooking her bra and moving to her pants too.

"Draco, what...?" she started, but he just shut her up with a kiss.

If Hermione Granger had any flaw at all it was that she thought too much. She would always make Draco walk the line between letting her think and fucking it out of her. Draco decided that this morning called for the latter. Their discussion had been necessary, but long. They had made some huge emotional leaps. He had fucked it up, and then she forgave him. It was time to celebrate that instead of thinking about it any further.

He quickly stripped her pants and underwear off, and now she was gloriously naked for him, and Draco pushed her back on the large sofa that was big enough for sleep as he stood up and stepped back to study her. She was lying there, supine, looking up at him with huge eyes. Her breathing was starting to get shallow as a red flush moved from her cheeks down her neck and toward her chest.

Good. Get hot for me sweetheart.

"How does that pretty cunt feel?" he asked softly.

The words just slipped out. It was probably too fast, too much, but he couldn't help himself. She didn't say anything, but she inhaled with surprise, and her eyes did darken a little.

I can work with this.

"Open your legs to show me," he said.

Her gaze was fixed on him as she slowly did what he asked, and he licked his lips as he stared down at her.

"Make yourself wet," he said quietly.

Her hand started to creep, but he said sharply, "Not like that. With your thoughts. Think of what you want me to do to you."

Her hand stilled, and he studied her center and then... *there*. That silky center of hers was glinting now.

"Good girl," he said. "Now tell me what you're imagining."

"You may not like it," she said hesitantly.

Draco's eyebrows shot up. "Oh? And why wouldn't I like it?"

"It doesn't involve you," she said.

Draco had to admit she was rather brave to tell him this. He was sure she saw the flash of temper on his face at this news.

"Who?" he asked sharply.

"Just me," she said.

Draco's ire melted at this. "Ah," he said, now smiling a little. "So you're thinking of playing with yourself then?"

"Well this is Hermione's Playground, isn't it?"

Fuck me.

Draco licked his lips. "Are you telling me you used to get off in here sweetheart?"

She nodded a little. "You know I have two vibrators. The purple one was for home. The green one..."

Draco's cock was rock hard as he imagined it. "Tell me. Why was the green one at home with you that night?"

She shrugged. "You and Theo had come by the Playground not long before, remember? I took it home in case you wanted a tour and hadn't gotten around to bringing it back."

"Would we have seen it?"

There was a long pause and she seemed to consider her next words.

Finally she said, "Sometimes I keep it in my trophy case."

Oh my great Salazar.

Draco's cock was starting to drip.

"Let me make sure I'm crystal clear. You were fantasizing about your green vibrator doing such a good job that it earned a spot in your trophy case. Is that right?"

"Right," she said quietly.

"And can you tell me why?"

She shrugged and gave him a slightly challenging look.

“We’ve been doing this for more than a couple weeks now haven’t we? Maybe I want something a little thicker than your fingers inside of me.”

Draco felt a muscle in his jaw twitch, and then his self-control finally snapped.

He said nothing more but lowered himself to the floor beside the sofa and then moved his hands under her arse and gripped hard as he abruptly pulled her hips to the edge of the sofa. She gasped, but he ignored her surprise as he moved his face to her center and inhaled.

There. There it was. His amortentia mixed with her sex. It had only been a few days, but fuck, he had missed it.

He gave himself the luxury of a few small kisses on her inner thigh that made her quiver, but he truly couldn’t help himself. He buried his face into her. She immediately started to wriggle as his tongue laved her, and he groaned to taste her.

She was writhing for him, making sounds that were pushing the limits of his self control. He wanted to get her there. Closer... closer... and then...

He pulled back and she was shaking.

“Please...” she gasped. “I’m so close, I’m...”

Draco gave a slow, satisfied smirk.

“You’re so lovely when you beg for it sweetheart. But I thought you wanted something bigger than my fingers.”

She opened her eyes and looked at him with a bit of hesitancy and concern. Her thighs were still shaking, but he saw her swallow hard to try to control herself.

“Is that what you want too though? I don’t want to pressure you if you’re not ready.”

There it was, that surge of sweetness that made him fucking melt for her every damn time. She could move from saucy to earnest in the blink of an eye.

He reached up and stroked a hand down over her breasts and stomach until he cupped her center. She gasped a little.

“I’ve been ready to fuck that perfect little cunt of yours for more than seven goddamned years. If you tell me you belong to me, that’s all I need.”

“I do,” she said instantly. “You know I do.”

Elation leapt, and now Draco was in it. He was ready. It was time to take that thing he had been waiting for.

“Then tell me where you want it. Where do you want to play today?”

Her eyes opened with wonder as she considered it. “Can I have it in two places?”

“You can have anything you want sweetheart.”

“Well then... I’ve always imagined it in my dark books library. On the table. And also...” she hesitated.

“Also what?” he asked softly.

“In my curse breaking room. Under the spotlight.”

Fuck.

Draco said nothing, but quickly stood and grabbed his wand to slice his hand open and remove the blood ward around her door. Then he healed it and threw it back on the sofa while he leaned down and picked her up. She squealed a little, but he ignored her as he strode

out of her office and into the big open room for a moment before heading into the smaller room next door that was filled with her dark books.

As soon as Draco stepped inside he felt it, the power. These books contained secrets that were dangerous and could grow a wizard's power if he let them. It was almost tactile, and the sensation was heavy in the air. It felt exactly like the restricted section at Hogwarts, but multiplied by ten.

It made Draco unbearably turned on, and now he was sure she had used her green vibrator in this room more than any other.

He gently deposited her on the table and spread her out. It was the perfect height, and all Draco had to do was pull her bum to the edge. Draco yanked his shirt off with one hand and shoved his pants down before stepping toward her and opening her legs.

"Gods just look at you," he whispered.

He had imagined this so many times, this moment when he would finally have her again. Oddly enough, he had never imagined it like this, desperate and hot inside the Ministry of Magic. Something about it was perfect though. There was darkness all around them in these books she studied so carefully. But Hermione herself was pure light. It had always been like that, he realized. For years she had been his light in the dark, innocent and untainted by all the evil that had touched her, including his own.

Here she was, splayed out, and ready to be his perfect, sweet girl. Who else would just let him look at her like this while his cock slowly rubbed her inner thigh, surrounded by enough dark magic to wreck the world?

"How tight are you going to be?" he whispered as her hips wriggled a bit, waiting for him to do it.

"Very... I'm not sure you'll fit."

He laughed a little. "Oh I'm going to fit perfectly, but you're right it's going to be tight. In fact, I have a small confession to make."

"Oh?"

She looked slightly pained and sounded rather distracted. Draco knew she was more than ready to go, but she was learning: he took his time and did it at his own pace.

Draco ran one finger over her slit, which made her quiver. "I've only used two fingers on you because I didn't want to stretch you too much. You probably could have taken three, but I knew that when I finally got inside of you, I wanted you to be just as tight for me as the day I took your virginity."

She groaned, and her eyes were going hazy and dark. "Then do it. *Please* Draco, I want you. I've wanted this for ages..."

Draco leaned over the table and kissed her to quieten her. Then he leaned back and started to push in, and he nearly collapsed at the sensation.

He was instantly transported back seven years to the first time he had been inside of her. She was so tight, just like he had planned, and he was coming at her from an angle that enhanced it. Unbelievably, he felt his own control start to slip as she started to envelope him.

No. Absolutely not, I will not embarrass himself like this. Think of McGonagall in her tartan dress robes. Think of Dolore Umbridge's toad face. Think of... goddammit.

He was close to the hilt but not quite there yet. He had to come up with something else.

Longbottom's boggart with Snape in that dress. Weasley.... Anything with Weasley should do it.

He was fully inside of her now, and he could feel her muscles clenching all around him. He backed out and started to pump.

Hang on you bastard, you are stronger than this. The preparation method for salamander eyes is... shit that's not going to work....

The unicorns! Think of the fucking unicorns!

There. That did it. That sudden need to spend himself within five thrusts mercifully passed as he envisioned those sodding unicorn paintings scattered about the Manor. And now that it had, he could once again focus on the feeling of being inside of his witch, and the look on her face as she stared up at him.

She was looking at him with a kind of awe, like she had forgotten what this was like.

She probably had.

Draco suddenly knew his plan to fuck her until she forgot all other wizards could work, as long as he could maintain control himself. He could tell by the look on her face that she really wanted him to do it.

He started to move faster, harder, gripping her thighs to keep her in place and letting his ring dig into her flesh. She would have another mark there, just the way he liked it.

Hermione's mouth fell open and she started to moan, and before long she flung her arms out to grab either side of the table in an effort to hang on.

"Fuck Granger you feel so good... I've missed this so much..."

She was slick, hot, and she was starting to come apart.

"Give me one just like this Granger... all around my cock princess..."

She moaned and started to shake and then the moment she broke Draco licked his thumb and gave a punishing stroke right on her clit.

Her moan turned into a strangled cry, and Draco felt those perfect flutters all up and down his shaft as she crested. He hung on as long as he could before pulling out and leaning over to gather her up before she had fully come down from it.

“What...?” she started, but Draco didn’t respond as he strode into the large room, but this time he headed for the very middle. As he approached it, the spotlight automatically turned on, and Draco placed her on the floor directly under it and then sat back to look at her.

She tried to look up at him, but it was very bright, and she was squinting, unable to see him clearly. That was alright though. Draco didn’t want her on her back for this one anyway.

“Be extra sweet for me and get on your hands and knees.”

She looked a little surprised, but rolled to her stomach and got on all fours, and Draco took a long moment to admire the sight. There she was, under the fucking spotlight that was illuminating one of Draco’s favorite parts of her. He ran his hand along her arse, and instinctively she pressed into his palm. It was taught, firm, utterly perfect, just waiting for him.

He got on his knees behind her and lined himself up.

“This is going to be tighter sweetheart, but you can do it. I can’t tell you how much I’ve wanted to have you like this.”

He sank himself into her up to the hilt, and then to his surprise her back arched for him as she moaned.

“Oh *fuck*,” she said through it.

Draco’s brain short-circuited. Hermione Granger hardly ever cursed, and *never* while they were being intimate. He pulled nearly all the way out and sank back in, which elicited another ‘fuck!’ from her.

“You like that Granger?” he said roughly. “You like showing me that perfect arse while I fuck you?”

“Oh God...”

“Don’t talk to God, talk to me,” he said, and then he started to pump, and before long she was shaking again and slowly lowering her chest to the floor.

Unicorns, unicorns, unicorns....

Draco had to think of those unicorns to keep his release at bay.

Fuck but she was perfect, his sweet little submissive. Her arse was straight in the air for him, the spotlight still on it, and Draco dug his ring into it hard enough to place a small M right in the very center before stroking over it. The gold metal glinted in the light, and she gasped.

Unicorns, unicorns, unicorns...

“You like that, Granger. You like feeling that metal biting into your arse don’t you? You like having my marks on you? You like a little pain right there?”

She was nearly incoherent, and Draco knew this was building up to be a really good one.

“Come on Granger, come for me... show all my ancestors in Hell that your cunt is better than anything they ever had... you know they’re watching...”

Draco gave one last almighty rock, as he gently brushed the cleft of her arse, and she cried out as she collapsed face-first into the floor. Fuck but he wanted to explore that arse thoroughly the moment she would let him.

Draco pulled out because even the unicorns wouldn’t be enough if he continued to contemplate that lovely arse and all the things he

wanted to do to it.

Draco hauled her to her feet, and her legs were shaky, but she was still upright.

“You’re going to give me one more.”

“But we already did two,” she said faintly.

“Those were for you, sweetheart. This last one’s for me.”

He carried her one last time to the place he had fantasized about since the very first time he saw it.

“I hope your trophy case is reinforced,” he said.

“It is, but I —”

He cut her off with a kiss and pushed her against it. He pulled back for just a moment and looked down at her. She looked thoroughly wrecked. Her hair was wild, her makeup was smudged, and her lips were swollen. Draco thought it was perfect. She stared up at him with huge eyes, and he licked his lips.

“I’m feeling a bit nostalgic.”

He reached down and raised one leg and then surged into her, and something around him tilted as he did it.

This was familiar. She was gasping the same way, shaking the same way. Draco latched down and sucked on her neck the same way. She was coming apart for him just as she had seven years ago. Almost unconsciously he started to speak, the same words spilling out of him.

“I want you to come for me... come on sweetheart...”

“I will... I’m close... and you can come inside of me. I’m on that potion...”

Bliss. This was fucking bliss. And somehow, miraculously, she was still ridiculously tight. He had surely stretched her as far as she would go, but she was so much smaller than him that it kept the pressure firm around his cock. He had one hand on her arse and the other still holding her leg in just the same position as he thrust.

"Come on, my beautiful girl..." he murmured. "Fucking come all over me."

He felt her shuddering, and then suddenly he felt her orgasm rip through her, and it wrenched his own out of him. He pumped into her, before pulling out, feeling completely spent.

He grabbed his wand from the nearby sofa to clean her up and then pulled her to him, both still naked. She wasn't saying anything, and she was still breathing hard.

"Alright?" he asked, suddenly a bit nervous. He had gotten a little carried away with her. Maybe it was too much for her in light of everything else.

"Yeah," she said. "It's just..."

"Just what?"

"Surprising. That's all."

He chanced a glance at her, and she was giving him her shy smile again. His nerves melted away.

"Too intense?"

"No. I probably could have gone harder..."

Fuck me.

"... but I've just never done it... like that. Obviously."

He raised an eyebrow at her. "There are lots of ways to do it."

“Yes...” she trailed off, biting her lip, and his eyes narrowed.

“What’s wrong, sweetheart?”

“I just... I’m so green. I don’t know if I’m *good* at it and –”

She scowled at him as he started to chuckle and then laugh.

“You prat! I’m baring my soul to you and *oomph*.”

He just cut her off with a kiss before pulling back. She was giving him a petulant look that made him want to fuck her all over again. She was the cutest thing he’d ever seen.

“You’re amazing. You’re perfect. This is the best sex I’ve ever had.”

She blinked. “Really?”

“Really,” he confirmed.

“But you’ve done all those... *things*... in your club!”

“First of all, you don’t know what I’ve done in my club because we haven’t talked about it. Second, while it’s true I’ve had some kinky sex, that’s not enough to make sex amazing. Feeling connected to your partner matters a lot more. I’m telling you the truth that this is the best.”

“Oh,” she said, suddenly looking a bit bewildered and now even *more* adorable. Draco could hardly believe what she was doing to him.

He chuckled again and stroked her face a little bit. “We’ll try new things,” he said. “New positions, new... adventures. It will be fun. You don’t have to know what you’re doing. We’ll learn the things we like and the things we don’t. Think of it like one great experiment.”

“An experiment.”

He nodded. "Yes, like all those mad things you're doing in those labs of yours. You never know what works until you try things."

She furrowed her brow as she thought about this, and he struggled not to smile because he could tell she was very serious.

"What kinds of things?"

So many things. So many filthy, beautiful, depraved things.

Instead of telling her this, he just shrugged. "We'll just see won't we? You can be my sweet girl... or my dirty girl. Or both."

"Dirty, huh?" she asked, raising an eyebrow.

"As dirty as you want it. I'll try anything except sharing you with somebody else. Nobody but me is touching you like this. But other than that... sure. We can be as dirty as you want or as sweet as you want. Both. All."

"What's the line between dirty and sweet then?" she asked curiously.

Again, Draco struggled not to smile. She had the same look on her face she got whenever she was researching something.

"It's a fine line sometimes," he acknowledged. "But dirty is fast and hard. It's tying you down and doing whatever the hell I want with you. It's watching you get yourself off before I bury my face in your cunt. It's fucking you into a table after I pour wax on your tits and then peel it off again. Sweet is when I go slow and soft. It's when I tease you before I touch you. It's when I tell you how beautiful you are. It's when I kneel down and fucking worship every inch of you."

Her eyes were wide, and she was holding her breath. "And you want both..." she whispered.

"Yes," he said. "You're so sweet it makes me ache sometimes. But you have a dirty side to you too. You're my innocent little swot who owns multiple vibrators. If you want to role play, I'll role play. If you

want me to tie you down I will give you a selection of ropes you can choose from. If you want to go to The Ruby Slipper and watch other people have sex, I'll come with you and get you off while you do it. And if you want bubble baths and champagne, I'll draw a bath and open my best bottle for you. If you want to do it under the stars, I'll fill our observatory with pillows and those mad wildflowers. If you want to be treated like the priceless treasure you are, I'll fucking drape you in diamonds before giving you sex that is so slow and so sweet you'll be breathless. I'm here for all of it."

Her eyes were huge as he said this. "That all sounds so amazing..."

"All of it?" he clarified.

"All of it," she said. "But..."

"But what?"

"Well you like to control things. What if I want to tell you what to do once in a while?"

He smiled a little. "You want to top me? We can role play as Theo and Luna if you want."

She giggled a little at this and then quieted. "What I mean is, you always set the pace."

"I do, that's true. But it frees you up to enjoy it. You are so beautiful when you just turn things over to me and let it go. And I like it too because I like feeling in control. It's a power trip making somebody as gorgeous and brilliant as you do everything I say. But you can always tell me what you want, sweetheart. As long as you're taking care of yourself, I'll make sure you get it. It might not be exactly *when* you want it —"

"I'll say," she muttered, and he grinned.

"— but it will be what you want. I promise you that."

She seemed to relax at that and nodded. "That sounds good to me."

He smiled a little. "That's my girl. You're adventurous. I can't wait to go on that adventure with you."

She smiled at this before her brows furrowed again. "And this whole... *boyfriend* thing. It's not just about sex for you, right? I mean, I don't think it is what with all the pureblood courtship stuff and the whole Jeanine thing and –"

He cut her off again with another kiss before pulling away.

"You're thinking too much. It's not all about sex for me. I just happen to really like sex with you, and I have a strong sex drive. And you..."

He ran his hands up her naked side.

"You are a feast for the senses. I'm really into you."

Truthfully, I'm completely and utterly obsessed with you, but let's not get too carried away.

"Oh," she said, as though she was surprised by this. "Alright then."

Gods, she was being his sweet girl again, and he was feeling that familiar ache as he stared at her. And even though he had just fucked her and had even come inside of her a few minutes ago, she was looking at him with a sort of innocent wonder that defied all belief. It was an anomaly, this ability of hers to project innocence while sitting naked on his lap at the same time.

And now he had to get off of this sofa with her or else he'd spill his soul to her even more than he already had today. He didn't think she was really prepared to hear all of it just yet.

As if on cue, her stomach gave an almighty rumble.

He smiled. "Let's go get breakfast before our friends send out a search party," he said. "I can't have my girl going hungry."

She gave him that shy smile he loved so much and blushed a little, but just nodded.

He released her and watched as she started to get dressed again, while he retrieved his clothes from the previous night and refreshed them with a charm.

He caught her scowling at him. "What?" he said in amusement.

"You. How on earth do you spend the night on a sodding *office floor* and still look like you're stepping out of a magazine the next morning?"

Draco felt his ego inflate quite a bit. "It's my Malfoy charm, love."

She just rolled her eyes at this, but said nothing more as she finished getting ready.

Draco called Florrie to take them to the Manor for breakfast, and as soon as they arrived they found Theo and Pansy eating and waiting for them.

"Well?" said Pansy sternly.

"We're good dear," he said.

She narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips as she looked at Hermione. "And what did he give you to apologize?"

Draco suddenly felt very nervous because he hadn't given Hermione anything. Pansy would probably kill him when she found out. But to his surprise Hermione jumped in.

"Oh he gifted me those opals I wore last night and a rather unusual artifact for my trophy case at work."

Draco almost choked at that last comment, but he tried to look like she was telling the truth.

Pansy frowned as though thinking hard, and then nodded once and looked back at Draco.

“Fine. I suppose that’s the best you could do seeing as how you didn’t have much time. But like I told you last night, I expect you to grovel to *me* too. And it had better be really good.”

Then she took one last bite of her eggs and flung her fork back down on her plate before standing up and flouncing off.

Hermione gave him a bewildered look, and he just sighed. “Don’t ask.”

“Flowers and earrings mate,” said Theo. “That’s what I did the last time she was really pissed off at me.”

“I was thinking I could cover her first photoshoot,” said Draco.

Theo shook his head. “Not good enough. It needs to be something she can wear around you to remind you not to fuck it up like that again. Trust me, she was very clear about that when I was in your shoes. I expect she forgot to tell you because she’s so pissed off at you.”

Draco groaned, while Hermione looked very skeptical. Theo caught her expression and just grinned.

“It’s true, darling. Our dear Pansy can hold a grudge for ages. Draco’s going to have to get on his knees and beg, along with a physical token of his remorse if he wants to get back into her good graces anytime soon. She was quite angry on your behalf.”

Hermione’s lips twitched, as she glanced at Draco.

“Theo’s right. But if that bothers you...” he started, but Hermione just shook her head.

“Doesn’t bother me at all,” she said lightly. “But maybe I’d like to watch. It could be refreshing to hear *you* beg for once, and I’m sure

Pansy will put you through your paces before she forgives you.”

Draco’s jaw dropped, and Hermione smiled sweetly as she turned around and started to make a plate for herself.

“Minx,” he muttered, but he found himself grinning a little.

Theo gave him a knowing look. “You told her everything then?” he said under his voice as Hermione chatted with the elves.

Draco nodded and dropped his too. “Other than the fact that I’m actually in love with her, yes. I took veritaserum.”

Theo’s eyes widened for a moment, before he nodded. “Alright then. And you two are...?”

“She’s my girlfriend,” said Draco, grinning broadly. “We settled it this morning.”

Theo smirked at this as Draco turned to leave. “Good,” said Theo. “Don’t break Hermione’s heart again.”

“I won’t,” said Draco fervently.

Draco made his own plate and had just taken his first bite when an owl swooped in, bearing *The Sunday Prophet*.

There, on the front page of the society pages, was a picture of Hermione and Draco from the fundraiser the night before, with a headline that made Draco see red.

A Modern Day Mistress: How the Golden Girl is Digging for Gold

by guest columnist Ella Vanity

Lessons on Courtship

Chapter 27: Lessons on Courtship

AN: Pansy acquires the Holy Grail, and Draco attends the happiest of happy hours.

Hermione

A Modern Day Mistress: How the Golden Girl is Digging for Gold

by guest columnist Ella Vanity

When Hermione Granger stepped out at the St. Mungo's gala, rumors started to swirl that she had attracted the eye of Draco Malfoy, arguably the most eligible bachelor in wizarding England. At first, their association appeared to be just that: a light crush, perhaps some mild romantic interest, but nothing serious. The papers wrote about them and then rumors dissipated when they weren't seen together again.

But since that night this reporter has been digging to discover the true nature of their relationship. I have known Draco Malfoy for years, and he has never once expressed interest in Miss Granger before the night of the St. Mungo's gala. It gave rise to many questions, and I am sure you have them too, especially since they were seen together a second time at the Hogwarts fundraiser last night.

My research has led to one, indisputable conclusion: Miss Granger is pursuing Mr. Malfoy for his gold, and she is holding herself out as his mistress while she does it.

As a public employee, Miss Granger's salary is a public record, and her income should never have supported her lifestyle. She has no wizarding family or other source of funds outside of her job at the Ministry of Magic and a modest contract with St. Mungo's. And yet, for the last three years she has lived in a flat above Brown's Rare Books in muggle London, in a posh area of town near Mayfair.

I interviewed the shop owners who work below her, and they tell me that Miss Granger has bemoaned the cost of living for the last couple of years. She was contemplating moving to some place better suited to her station until a surprise announcement from her landlord informed her that she would not have to pay rent for the next year.

It took a considerable amount of digging for me to confirm that Draco Malfoy is her landlord. He owns the entire building and waived rent for her so that she would not have to leave. This reporter also suspects that he owns the ruby earrings she wore the night of the St. Mungo's gala and the astonishing fire opals that were around her neck last night. She has never been photographed wearing anything of that quality before, and Mr. Malfoy touched both pieces with great familiarity.

The notion that Draco Malfoy would court a witch like Miss Granger, let alone marry her, defies all rational belief. She is a war hero, it is true, but she is unfamiliar with certain wizarding customs, having not been raised in that environment during the course of her early life. Mr. Malfoy, by contrast, embodies everything about wizarding traditions that we as a society hold dear. The match, if it can even be called that, is so odd that this reporter cannot believe that it will become anything serious. No, the only explanation for their behavior is that Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy have an arrangement. Mr. Malfoy is providing the gold. One can speculate about what Miss Granger is giving to him in exchange, but discretion demands that I not put it in writing.

It is only a matter of time, however, before their alliance will fall apart. Mr. Malfoy would not be the first bachelor to stray in this way, nor will he be the last. The society mamas can rest assured that he is still

very much available, and their daughters will continue to watch and wait as this dalliance burns itself out. After all, no witch who would exchange her favors as Miss Granger has done would ever be worth the title of Mrs. Malfoy.

Draco had been rather on edge since the article written by Ella Vanity was published the previous week. Hermione tried not to let it bother her, but Draco was perturbed by the lengths Ella was willing to go to wreck Hermione's reputation. The thing that perturbed Hermione was how well-researched it was. Oh, there were still plenty of things that were wholly incorrect like the entire premise that she was after Draco's gold. But Ella had discovered where Hermione lived and interviewed Tom and Maud while posing as a customer. Ella's words about it still made Hermione burn with shame.

"One can speculate about what Miss Granger is giving to him in exchange..."

Hermione knew that Draco was responsible for her rent abatement now, but it wasn't meant to be public knowledge. Even their own friends had been unaware of it, though everyone knew now. The notion that Hermione was trading sex for rent was ludicrous, but it still made her feel dirty and tainted, as though she was doing exactly what Ella accused her of. She *wasn't*. She really wasn't. The rent abatement had been in place before Draco had kissed her for the first time.

Ella was clearly desperate, but she was also smart, despite the obvious lie she told the night of the fundraiser. Hermione knew that Ella probably had the article waiting in the wings, ready to send out if Draco was still wrapped up in Hermione that evening. It was unsettling.

Draco had taken action as soon as he read the article. Ella practically disclosed Hermione's address by naming the shop over which she lived, and anybody could find her now. Draco took one look at the article and assumed a positively thunderous expression.

"Why don't you spend some time in the Library today? I'll tell Rosie to call some books for you about courting. I have some rather urgent errands I need to run."

"What are you going to do?" asked Hermione worriedly. She could tell his temper was barely under control.

Draco leveled her with a serious look. "I promised you that you could have as much time as you need to think about public courting. All I'm going to do is make sure you have that time. Do not let this bitch's article rush your decision. I'll handle it."

Theo's mouth dropped in surprise, but Draco ignored him and strode out of the Breakfast Room without another word.

"Courting?" asked Theo, his eyes gleaming.

Hermione went scarlet. "I'm thinking about it. He's already doing it in a way, we just haven't let the world know. I'm truly not sure why it makes a difference. I want to do some research because I don't know much about it."

"It makes a difference because in Draco's circle, most of the things Ella is reporting would be perfectly acceptable and even expected if everyone knew he was courting you. Without it, some of the fussier, matronly types will look at you sideways."

"I don't care what they think. Most people don't do it anymore," she said.

"You're right of course, darling, but the Malfoys do. Frankly, the Notts do too. I'm having one hell of a time talking Luna into it, and I'm probably just going to scandalize my parents' old friends until I finally propose to her. The fallout won't be so bad for Luna and me. She isn't nearly as famous as you, and I'm not nearly as high in the instep as Draco. Our names get dropped in the papers now and then, but it's rare compared to you two. Ella's trying her best to ruin your reputation, but if the purebloods knew Draco had given you his

Lover's Box, most the shit Ella wrote about you would be ignored as the rantings from a jealous little girl."

Theo gave Hermione a lot to think about that day as she ensconced herself in the Library and started pouring over books about it. Rosie told her that Draco had given orders that Miss Hermy was not to be disturbed except for meals, and evidently Rosie had closed the Library to all visitors so Hermione could have the place all to herself. Hermione was grateful because she had a lot to think about, and the Library was her favorite place to do it when she had privacy.

She learned that there were various degrees of courting. The behaviors Draco described with Astoria were all rather prescribed and proper: chaperoned meetings and teas, a few dances, a formal statement of intentions and then extensive negotiations about an engagement contract. It sounded bloody boring to Hermione and very much like the strict rules that governed muggle society a couple hundred years ago, but evidently some wizards still followed it.

She learned that courtships almost always lasted at least a year, but two or even three years was acceptable when a couple started young. It was the wizard who always made the opening offer for an engagement contract, and they were fully negotiated and ready to sign before a formal proposal ever took place. Signing the contract was usually done publicly at the couple's engagement party, which was typically hosted by the wizard's family within a few weeks of the proposal. The witch's family hosted the actual wedding.

The updated guides cautioned that sexual behaviors shouldn't occur during a courtship, though they *may* be permissible after an engagement, provided the couple was discreet and all appropriate preventative measures were taken. Hermione realized Draco had followed that rule for Astoria but had absolutely shattered it for her.

More surprising was the news that it was acceptable for the wizard to provide a separate place to live for his intended while he was courting her or else give her an elf to guard her virtue if he moved her into his family's home. In cases like Hermione and Draco –

where one was much better off than the other – it was almost expected that the wizard would do this. Hermione remembered Draco's comment about courting traditions being one reason why he abated her rent in full. It actually fit the courting rules in a roundabout way. The only unusual thing about it was that he hadn't moved her out of a flat she already loved, he simply covered it for her.

Hermione had to admit that many aspects of it felt rather stuffy and patriarchal. It was always the wizard courting the witch and not the other way around. The updated guides acknowledged that it had fallen out of favor over the years because it hadn't been flexible enough to account for relationships where the witch was the one with all the gold and the wizard was impoverished by comparison. Hermione was a bit surprised to find a small volume that discussed how the rules might work for same-sex relationships, but there appeared to be no consideration for heterosexual couples when the wizard wasn't wealthy enough to play the game.

However, for couples like Hermione and Draco – where the wizard held the bulk of the assets, usually through entailments that consolidated everything in the oldest male's family line – they fit squarely within the rules. That meant Draco was expected to treat her a certain way if he was serious about pursuing her.

The chapters about Lover's Boxes were fascinating, and Hermione learned that they really did make a very strong statement. They were usually ancient family heirlooms, and they were given when a wizard had actual fondness for the witch, and he wanted to grow it. Even the families that had them didn't use them for every courtship because of what they symbolized. They were special, intimate, and just as Draco said they could help a couple fall in love without compromising the witch's virtue. Supposedly it was one of the strongest declarations a wizard could make, and it was a very high honor to receive one. Now Hermione understood why Ella was so desperate to get Draco's. They weren't legally binding like engagement contracts, but they carried plenty of social weight. It would have ruined Draco's reputation if he had presented Ella with a

Lover's Box and then failed to follow through with an engagement. The books cautioned the wizards to be thoughtful and careful before giving a Lover's Box to a witch. It would set a wizard on a course that would lead to social ruin if he ultimately changed his mind.

Hermione was finally starting to understand just how serious Draco was about her.

Hermione was pleased that Draco didn't seem so married to the rules that he was unwilling to bend them. The sex on Hermione's Playground had been intense and mind-blowing, and very much not allowed according to the rules. And he was breaking the rule about making public declarations because he knew Hermione was a private person. After reading about it, she wondered if any other wizards had ever given Lover's Boxes to their witches in private. Somehow she doubted it.

Hermione spent much of the day reading about it, breaking only for lunch, and she knew it would take some time to come to a decision about it. Part of her was tempted to just send an announcement to *The Daily Prophet* to tell them Draco was courting her, but she held back. She finally had some context for it, and it was serious. Draco had used words like "marriage" and "bride," when he talked about it on the Playground, and Hermione knew he wasn't overstating matters. Telling the world that Draco was her boyfriend was one thing, but telling the world that they were courting meant that they were on the verge of an engagement. Draco had evidently been thinking of Hermione that way since before her birthday, but Hermione hadn't really thought about it seriously until that very morning. She knew that Draco was right about one thing: she couldn't let Ella's article sway her decision. She had to come to it on her own time, and she was grateful that Draco understood this and didn't try to use the article to pressure her.

Later on that evening Draco finally reappeared with Harry in tow, and they told her they were going to re-ward her flat and make some other security enhancements.

“Kingsley gave all three of us blanket permission to cast any spell we needed on the property and the muggles who work there,” said Harry.

“But why?” she asked.

“Because like us, he’s concerned that Ella’s article puts your security at risk. Also, you’re his favorite,” said Draco.

“But he gave *you* permission too?” asked Hermione, looking at Draco.

She could understand Harry because he was an auror. But Draco made no sense at all.

“I may have told him in confidence about a special box that’s on your nightstand and described some of the more creative wards I know,” he said. “He seems to have come around to me.”

Hermione was forcibly reminded that Kingsley Shacklebolt was a pureblood.

They worked for several hours that night, with Draco in particular casting all manner of obscure wards Hermione had never heard of. He told her there was a reason the Manor was a veritable fortress. Warding was an art that passed through the Malfoy family.

Only then did Harry describe the other security enhancements they had planned that made Hermione look at him in disbelief.

“We’re changing the name of the bookstore below and modifying Maud and Tom’s memories.”

Hermione chewed her lip about it as she considered it. She didn’t love that idea, but she knew Ella had compromised her security. She had always been quiet and private about where she lived, both for her safety and so the media couldn’t find her.

Hermione finally consented to this plan, with the caveat that the false memory they planted would be a decision to rebrand. That way they didn't have to take old memories from Maud and Tom. They just had to insert a memory that didn't exist.

Draco and Harry agreed to this and Hermione found herself modifying their memories ever so slightly while they were in an enchanted sleep since she was most adept at memory charms of the three. Meanwhile, Harry and Draco worked under cover of darkness to change the name on the front of the building and all of their branded items in the shop itself. Draco assured her Ben would be able to handle the name change on the legal side of things.

Once the wizards left her flat it was very late, and just as Hermione was ready to fall asleep the latch on her box glowed.

She smiled a bit as she found her nightly flower and something else very small.

She reached in and picked up the charm from the box. It was in the shape of a three dimensional teardrop and encrusted with tiny diamonds. He didn't send a note this time. He didn't have to. She knew exactly how she had earned this one. And this time he must have had it made in advance, just waiting for them to cross that milestone. It didn't have the same time lag as the disc.

Draco was intentional, that much was clear. She realized now that he was the type to make plans and strategize his every move. She was certain now that his plans involved her, and he hoping she would have the same realizations about him.

Hands shaking slightly she pulled her charm bracelet out of her nightstand and tapped her wand to add it. All of her charms had gems on them, but this one positively glittered compared to the other two. She spun her bracelet around to look at each one: the lion, the disc, and now the drop. All three of them referenced an event that had taken place between the two of them: saving his life and then kissing him again for the first time since that night in the bar, and

now finally giving him everything she had. She didn't turn her body over to a bloke lightly, and she was sure he knew it. That was why he was celebrating their milestones this way.

Draco's tension around the "Ella situation," as Hermione had taken to calling it in her head continued for a few more days until *The Daily Prophet* finally printed a retraction of certain elements of the story, including the information about where she lived.

"We have learned that the original article disclosed a former residence of Miss Granger's and did so in a way that would have compromised her security if she still lived there. She no longer lives above Brown's Rare Books, and The Daily Prophet will no longer provide details of her current residence due to those same security concerns."

Hermione realized how brilliant it was because it wasn't even a lie. She *didn't* live above Brown's Rare Books any longer since Harry and Draco had insisted upon changing the name of the bookshop. It also had the effect of taking some of the poison out of Ella's pen, now that *The Daily Prophet* had implied her information was wholly unreliable.

Draco told Hermione he had also sent a scathing letter to Ella directly and employed his mother to ruin Ella socially. After everything she had done, Draco had had enough.

"I didn't trust myself not to murder the bitch if I went to her house in person, but I sent her a letter that told her she should consider leaving the country because she will have no prospects by the time Mother and I are through with her."

Draco had been following up with a howler each day since the article was published, and he told Hermione he had no intention of stopping any time soon. At least one howler had found Ella while she was in public, and to Hermione's slight surprise Rita Skeeter just so happened to be nearby and also heard it. The next day there was a

gleeful article about Ella's mortification, and Hermione was surprised to find Rita fairly neutral when it came to Hermione herself.

"I have a confession sweetheart," said Draco, when Hermione articulated her amazement to him.

"Oh?"

"Yes. You see, Rita might have been there because Mother heard from Mrs. Jessup that Ella was due to have tea at Fortescue's with Miriam Avery yesterday. Mother contacted Rita and took her to Fortescue's at the same time. You know Rita has always liked me, and she and Mother have a bit of an alliance. Mother has made it clear to Rita that she must be aligned with you too. She won't write nasty things about you any longer. She's so reliant on Mother's gossip that she will never cross the Malfoys."

Hermione supposed that it was true Rita had always liked Draco, ever since he and the other Slytherins gave her scoop after scoop on Harry and Hermione during fourth year. For the first time ever, Hermione was happy about it.

After the first public howler, Draco managed to secure two more, thanks to Narcissa's rumor mill and Ella's inability to keep her own mouth shut about her social life. It wasn't long before Ella Vanity's reputation was hanging on by a thread, as Rita printed article after article outlining her downfall.

"For all of Miss Vanity's accusations about Miss Granger, it is clear to this reporter that Mr. Malfoy is quite fond of Miss Granger. Miss Vanity, by contrast, claimed to be in a delicate condition the night of the Hogwarts fundraiser in order to attract his attention. It comes as no great surprise that those efforts were unsuccessful, thanks in large part to the cool head of Miss Granger — a registered healer — who caught Miss Vanity in the lie. The article published by Miss Vanity the following day reeked of jealousy and disappointment."

Rita always *did* have a way of conveying just the right amount of disdain through her writing. Hermione knew it would take some time before she was used to having Rita on her side.

Yes, by the time the end of the following week rolled around, Hermione's flat was secured, Ella's reputation was in tatters, and Draco's mood had righted itself. Draco, and especially Narcissa, seemed to have the press in hand, and *The Daily Prophet* had given Ella no real opportunity to respond to Rita's articles.

Pansy, however, still had not forgiven Draco, though she had to admit that the way Draco handled Ella's article had softened her a bit.

"Harry told me a lot of it was Ben's idea, at least when it came to getting *The Prophet* to print that retraction," said Ginny, as she picked at her salad.

Hermione, Ginny, Luna, Pansy, and Alyssa were all enjoying a Friday lunch at a cafe without any of the wizards.

"That doesn't surprise me," said Luna. "He seems quite strategic."

"He is," said Alyssa. "Ben would have been in Slytherin if he had gone to Hogwarts."

"That's why he fits in so well with Draco and Blaise then," said Ginny.

"Well I'm obviously pleased that Draco took that ridiculous article so seriously, but I'm still going to make him grovel in front of everybody tonight and apologize," said Pansy, as she patted her lips with a napkin. "I made him acquire a handbag I've wanted for ages. It's muggle, which makes it even better. I expect him to kneel while he presents it to me."

Hermione was in stitches at the thought, and she clapped her hand over her mouth to contain the giggles. Of course that made her bracelet catch the light.

Pansy reached out and grabbed her hand.

“Did Draco give this to you?” she asked curiously. “I didn’t realize you had one.”

Hermione bit her lip and nodded. “Yes, he started it on my birthday.”

“So what do they mean?”

Hermione blushed and deflected.

Her friends begged to know of course, as Ginny chimed in, “I’m actually surprised the press hasn’t noticed it.”

Hermione shrugged. “It’s not that flashy.”

“That one charm is *very* flashy,” commented Alyssa.

“Yes, well, he only gave it to me a few days ago....” muttered Hermione. “After we made up and finally...” and she turned so scarlet that Pansy’s eyes got wide.

“NO! You didn’t?”

Hermione made a face and just groaned as Pansy whooped.

“You DID!” squealed Ginny.

“Ohhh you shagged it out on the Playground?” asked Luna curiously. “I’ve never been there, but Theo told me it was just fascinating.”

Hermione just buried her face in her hands.

Then Pansy grabbed her wrist again and examined that specific charm very closely.

“You do realize he gave you a charm that looks like a drop of diamond encrusted cum to memorialize it? Bloody hell I always knew he was arrogant.”

Hermione couldn't help it, she burst out laughing at this and just nodded. Pansy looked positively gleeful.

"I can't *wait* to give him shit for that."

With the backstory to that charm disclosed, Hermione decided she could tell them about the others. The disc in particular made the other witches a bit misty-eyed, though Pansy insisted it was still not enough to make her forgive Draco.

"He gave you that one before he fucked it up."

And that was how Hermione found herself at Theo's that night, watching her boyfriend's pained face as he presented Pansy with a Birkin Bag in front of the entire group as all the other witches and wizards watched on in amusement.

"I want you to know I had a hell of a time obtaining this," he grumbled. "I had to call in all sorts of favors to get on top of some goddamned list. I had no idea muggle women were that insane when it comes to a sodding *purse*."

Pansy just smiled sweetly. "You deserve the inconvenience, Draco, and you know it. Now get on your knees and beg for my forgiveness."

Draco looked at her askance, but she just gave him a fierce look back, and he finally sighed.

"Fucking fine," he muttered, and he kneeled in front of her and held the bag up.

Hermione pulled out her camera and took a picture.

"What the hell was that?" he asked as he turned toward her in horror.

"Oh that's *my* apology gift," she said sweetly.

Draco's eyes flashed a bit, and later that night he edged her so hard Hermione was nearly in tears again before he finally gave it to her.

"You like seeing me grovel? You like seeing me prostrate myself? I'll make *you* beg Granger. You'll be begging for my cock before this is over."

Hermione decided that makeup shags were truly delightful.

Yes, now that Draco Malfoy was her *boyfriend* and they were openly shagging within their friends group while managing Ella's article, Hermione found herself more at peace with the world. One of the wards Draco had cast kept unwanted mail away from Hermione at her flat, so she didn't suffer from howlers and owls from jealous witches, and she was able to keep herself within a bubble that consisted of Draco, her closest friends, and her work.

The courtship question still niggled at the back of her mind, but she told herself she would take her time with it. Draco had told her to take all the time she needed the morning they talked about it, and he hadn't raised it with her again. If there was one thing Draco was very good at it was giving her space to sort these kinds of things herself. She couldn't rush a decision like this because she now had some context for just how seriously it would be viewed. She originally wanted companionship, maybe a boyfriend, and now she had that. She had to decide if she wanted all the things Draco could and would give her if she allowed him to take it further than that. She had to decide if she was ready to be permanently entrenched in his world.

Then again, she had to acknowledge he was already bringing her into it in his own way. She had certainly noticed his efforts to move her into his bedroom at the Manor.

Yes, Draco was courting her, *really* courting her, even if he kept the full extent of it from everyone, including her. She doubted much would change if they went public with it, and she had to admit his efforts and gestures were wearing her down. He was quiet and

subtle about it. He simply made note of the things she liked and ensured they were all around her. And while he did it, he endeared himself to her. He had slowly, but surely, surrounded her with things that reminded her of him. He made sure that the notes she read, the accessories she wore, the objects in her flat, even the way she smelled were all about him. She was still Hermione of course, but he was wrapping himself around her heart so thoroughly that she suspected she would never be free of him.

It was manipulative, yes, but he told her under veritaserum that his feelings were real, and he was trying to make her catch up to him. And because his feelings were real, she was surprised to find that his strategic plan to make her fall for him didn't bother her as much as she thought it would now that he had finally come clean. The *essence* of everything he was doing was still for her. He wasn't trying to turn her into somebody she was not. He was simply acting with an intentionality that was almost unbelievable for a wizard his age.

Hermione continued to think about it while working on the Playground for much of the following week, though she blushed whenever she eyed her trophy case. She was just making some notes about an auror raid that was coming up, when she was startled to see a patronus from one of the lead healers at St. Mungo's.

"Healer Granger, we need you in the emergency room urgently. A patient has presented with extensive injuries from what looks to be a werewolf and perhaps some other cursed object. He isn't going to last long."

Hermione's blood went cold, as all thoughts of courtships and Ella and even Draco left her mind. The full moon wasn't for another week. Hermione knew that could only mean one thing.

"Florrie!" she called, and a moment later the little elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Florrie, can you apparate me to my flat? I need to get my healer robes and get to St. Mungo's as quickly as possible. It's an

emergency.”

The elf nodded and pulled Hermione through the darkness to her flat. Within five minutes Hermione was striding down the halls of St. Mungo’s, lime green robes billowing, as she wondered exactly how this was possible.

Hermione was certain that Greyback was dead.

Draco

Draco had been invited to a happy hour at Beavill and Pearson Financial, and for the first time ever he decided to go. After all, he fully intended for it to be the last time he ever had to see those bastards for business, and he might as well enjoy a drink on them as a token of farewell. Salazar knew he had paid them enough for it.

The previous week a corporate lawyer in Alyssa’s firm had pushed the paperwork through to create several new companies, owned by one Draco Malfoy: DLM Properties would become the holding company for all of Draco’s real estate; DLM Investments would hold and trade his magical assets that were not tied to real estate; and DLM Management would hire Blaise and Ben, along with anybody else Draco found.

The corporate lawyer Alyssa had put on the file was excellent. He had assembled a small team to help with the Ministry of Magic registrations that would be required to get started, along with employment agreements for the management company and agreements between the companies themselves for services.

When Alyssa introduced him to Draco, the young man had been rather nervous, but he worked so well and efficiently that Draco was extremely impressed. Some careful prodding told him that Patrick Bennett was a muggleborn and had been passed over for partner twice, thanks in large part to the fact that the partners he worked for were territorial about their clients and refused to hand off client

relationships. His work, however, was fantastic, and he was a jack-of-all trades corporate type who did a little of everything that was corporate and corporate-adjacent. He brought in the specialists when he needed them, but Patrick could do a lot of it all by himself. And much like Ben, once he loosened up a bit he was quite funny, with a very dry sense of humor.

Draco was pretty sure he had found his corporate lawyer for DLM Management. Alyssa just smiled sweetly when he told her that.

Blaise was coming over first, and he had officially resigned that morning and signed a contract with DLM Management. Draco sent him a bottle of firewhiskey to celebrate.

Now all Draco had to do was tell the advisors at Beavill and Pearson to go fuck themselves, and he couldn't wait.

"Draco!" boomed the voice of Nielsen Moon, the financial advisor who had become the utter bane of Draco's existence ever since Lucius died the previous summer.

"Nielsen," said Draco, grimacing a bit as he shook his hand.

Without further ado Nielsen started to make the rounds, introducing Draco to his colleagues and contacts who had rented out most of the Three Broomsticks for this blessed event. Nielsen kept his hand on Draco's shoulder as he maneuvered Draco through the crowd, eventually settling in with the predictable group of sycophants, all of whom wanted a piece of Nielsen and his pet Draco Malfoy.

"So like your father, eh?" chuckled Nielsen, as he handed Draco a drink and raised his in silent toast. "I saw that article about you and your special friend in *The Prophet*, my boy. I must say, Lucius's taste for that sort of thing was always a bit more discreet than yours, but then again... Hermione Granger, eh? She's a pretty little piece of arse, I'll grant you that, though a bit too famous if you don't mind me saying so. It's best to keep your dalliances out of the spotlight. We wouldn't want to run off the eligible young ladies."

The others in the group all gave knowing smirks at this and chuckled a bit.

Oh I will fucking end you.

“She’s not a dalliance, Nielsen. I’m quite serious about her.”

“Oh nonsense my boy! You’re a Malfoy! You’re just young, that’s all, and you’re being seduced by her charms I’m sure. Right shame it was that Lucius died when he did because he could have told you all about it. He did well by Narcissa, and his occasional special friends were always out of the spotlight. No, you can keep your wench in style of course, but you shouldn’t bring her out with you. It’s a bad look, am I right?”

He addressed this last question to the others in the circle, and they all nodded knowingly.

“It’s true,” said Claude Koontz, who was nearly the same age as Nielsen. “And you have to be careful how you throw your money around. That donation to St. Mungo’s barely flew under the radar, Draco. You’re just lucky Ella and *The Prophet* didn’t put two and two together. Even for a Malfoy side piece, it was quite a bit of gold.”

Draco idly wondered if he could just murder all of them and be done with it. He rather thought Kingsley might give him a full pardon for it this time. Kingsley had come around to Draco ever since that blasted article was published and Draco made it clear that he was going to place so many wards on Hermione’s flat it would have to be re-registered as a magical building by the time he was done with it.

“Speaking of quite a bit of gold,” said Draco, “this seems like the perfect time to give you all some news, since all of you are here in one place.”

They all looked at him curiously, clearly eager for whatever it was he was going to say.

“I’ve decided to go in a new direction. My lawyers delivered my withdrawal notice to Beavill and Pearson just before I arrived tonight. I am no longer your client, you no longer have any authority over *any* of my accounts, and Gringotts has been informed as well. All of my files will be audited during the transition to my new account manager, and if I learn that even a single knut has been touched without authorization, I’ll turn every one of you over to the DMLE for prosecution. I will also personally inform the Minister of Magic that you referred to my girlfriend – who happens to be his favorite employee in the entire fucking Ministry – as a ‘pretty little piece of arse.’”

They all gaped, and Nielsen Moon’s face went pale as he learned that his biggest client – really, his *only* client – had just pulled the firm’s largest account from him in one fell swoop.

“I do hope that Beavill and Pearson survives the loss of the Malfoy accounts,” added Draco, “though given how much gold you all have sucked from my family over the last several decades, I suspect the ship will start to sink sometime next week. You may want to start looking, but you will get no recommendations from me.”

At this, Draco drained his drink. “Oh and the last thing, before I go,” and now Draco looked directly at Nielsen. “My father was a fucking bastard who wrecked the Malfoy name, destroyed his marriage, and encouraged his only child to join a cult where he was routinely tortured. Next time you put Lucius on a pedestal, you might want to remember that he’s circling around the drains of Hell somewhere. You should really know your audience better than that.”

Then Draco turned and made his way out of the Three Broomsticks, the buzz of Beavill and Pearson’s financial collapse already on the lips of those who overheard Draco’s little speech.

As Draco exited onto High Street in Hogsmeade, he looked at the sun lowering in the sky and smiled broadly. It was scary to do things his own way, but exhilarating too. He finally felt like he was gaining

control over his legacy by following Hermione's advice and bringing everything in-house with people he liked and trusted.

Draco turned and apparated back to the Manor, eager to see her tonight. They had something to celebrate.

A Bad Day at Work

Chapter 28: A Bad Day at Work

AN: Welcome to one of my favorite chapters in this fic. Hermione starts to learn that she doesn't have to do it alone anymore.

TW: Depiction of blood/gore in the italicized section at the beginning.

Hermione

"I've never seen anything like this before!" came Padma Patil's frantic voice. She and the others were trying to staunch the bleeding with their hands because none of the normal spells would work.

Hermione stared down in horror at the young man who had several long, deep gashes across his chest and abdomen, which were clearly the work of an untransformed werewolf.

"HERMIONE!" shouted Padma, and Hermione jumped to attention and started to cast a series of detection spells to see if she could discover why the bleeding wouldn't stop. Werewolf wounds certainly bled, but the curse was meant to multiply the pack – their saliva had coagulants in them for standard bites during a transformation, and for gashes like this the normal methods to halt blood loss should have worked. They were cursed wounds, but not deadly.

This, however, looked deadly. Hermione couldn't believe how much blood there was.

Spell after spell failed for her, which wasn't that surprising. Most cursed wounds couldn't be closed with a spell. The curse itself might be broken with a spell, but then potions were usually required for

healing. This time, even the best blood clotting potions they had were failing too, which was very unusual.

None of it was working, and Hermione had no idea what to do.

Hermione said, "Tell me what you know about him!"

"He was found like this inside a trash bin in Knockturn Alley," said Padma quickly. "No identification, but the clothes we removed from him were actually quite posh. It was sheer dumb luck he was found. One of Borgin and Burke's employees must have opened the bin to take out the trash just moments after he was placed in there like this. They heard suspicious sounds and found him thrashing around inside a trash bag that had been dumped. They managed to get him out of the bin, but he passed out while they were doing it. They brought him here right away."

"God," muttered Hermione, as she continued to cast spells.

"Anything?" asked one of the others frantically.

Hermione shook her head worriedly. "No, I don't recognize it. It's almost acting like a blood curse that strengthens, but none of the reversals are working..."

"What can we do? Nothing is working!"

"Pack him with gauze the muggle way. It's the best we can do until I can find something. He'll need to be monitored."

They started to do as Hermione suggested, but before long it became clear that whatever curse was causing his wounds to bleed was also dissolving the bandages they were applying.

"Shit, shit, shit!" hissed Hermione as she and three others looked around at each other in dismay. They kept at it, packing what they could, pouring blood replenishing potions down his throat.

"Just keep doing it, I'll be right back!"

Hermione stepped away and called "Florrie!"

The little elf appeared with a CRACK! and squeaked when she saw Hermione.

"Florrie I need you to take me to the Playground please."

Florrie grabbed Hermione by the back of the robes and pulled Hermione through the darkness. A moment later Hermione was standing inside the Playground. She had to admit, having an elf who could apparate her through all the wards saved a lot of time.

"Stay there! I need to find something..."

She ran into her dark library and searched as quickly as she could for several books that she thought might help. She pulled them off the shelf and said, "Take me back please."

Florrie pulled her back and Hermione stared at the unknown man, whose condition had gotten even worse in the five minutes she spent finding some books.

Hermione wiped her hands on her robes and flipped frantically through her books as the others tried to replace his blood fast enough that he wouldn't fully bleed out.

"We can't keep this pace!" shouted Padma. "He's bleeding too fast!"

"I'm trying... I'm trying..." said Hermione frantically. She finally landed on an obscure countercurse and ran over him to begin casting it, but before she could start, one of the other healers shouted as the wounds suddenly seemed to split, and blood sprayed them. Instinctively Hermione turned to shield her face, but she could feel it covering her face mask and neck. It even seeped through her cap and into her hair before she got her bearings and turned back to cast the countercurse anyway. She had no idea if it would work, but she had to try.

The patient's pulse was plummeting as she frantically muttered the string of Latin. Nothing happened, and Hermione's heart sank as he flatlined.

He was gone.

Hermione, Padma and the others stepped back and looked around. The room was covered in blood, and they were too. Almost unconsciously Hermione pulled out her wand and flicked it before she would no longer be able to do it. Her patronus came gamboling out, heading for Harry.

They said nothing as they started to clean up, and Hermione conjured a large vial to collect some of the blood for study. She had no idea what that curse was, but it was terrible. She felt herself start to dissociate, just like she knew she would.

She had no idea how much time passed, but eventually she saw the dark head of her best friend, looking horrified at the carnage in front of him. Hermione pulled off her bloody mask so he could hear her more clearly.

"It was obviously werewolf," she said quietly, almost robotically. "The patient's lacerations were definitely untransformed werewolf, but he just kept bleeding out. I have no idea why. It could be a curse or maybe even a potion, but nothing was working. Eventually something seemed to activate, and it was like his lacerations suddenly expanded. They crossed a major artery, and he just..."

She made a hand gesture like an explosion, and Harry blanched. "Christ," he muttered.

Hermione nodded, very pale. "It was... it was terrible Harry."

"We'll figure out who he was, Hermione. It's terrible he died, but you know this could be connected to Estes since it involves werewolves. The tracking spell was one thing and Theo's comment about centaur

attacks was another. But now there's this. The first two could be a coincidence, but three is a trend."

Hermione swallowed and nodded.

"Go home and get cleaned up. I'll let you know when we have an ID on him."

Hermione gave him a tight smile and turned to leave. She cast one last look back at the patient, memorizing him. She always memorized them before her mind left her.

Hermione stepped toward the floo. She was covered in the patient's blood, hot and sticky, the metallic smell of copper filling her nose. She had lost patients before, but never like that. She had never seen anything like that, not really. She was dissociating so hard she felt herself shutting down, and she realized she might actually be going into shock.

She turned and took a quick detour to one of the nearest potions supply rooms and grabbed a potion for shock. She couldn't take it on an empty stomach, but she didn't stock this at her flat. Maybe she should start if she was going to be seeing more of *that*.

God it was terrible.

She felt like she was in a daze as she finally got to the floo and threw some powder into the fireplace. Several moments later she stumbled out into her living room and paused when she heard a deep voice.

"I thought we were meeting for dinner tonight."

What?

Hermione was in such an odd place in her own mind that she barely recognized the voice.

Then something penetrated the wall she was building in her head.

Draco. Dinner. Late.

“Shit,” she whispered.

She flipped on the light and turned to look at him sitting on her couch. He took one look at her, his eyes got huge, and he leapt to his feet and strode toward her.

“Hermione? What happened? Are you OK? Where is it coming from? We have to get you to —”

“Not mine,” she muttered. “Patient’s.”

His clear panic subsided, but he was still watching her worriedly.

“Sweetheart, what happened?”

She just stared at him, the question not penetrating her brain. He looked even more worried.

“Hermione, try to talk to me. Tell me what you need.”

What did she need?

You need to eat. You need to sleep. You need to take breaks to relax.

“All three. And a shower.”

The words slipped out, but he seemed to know what she meant. He nodded firmly and called for Florrie, but Hermione didn’t register what he was saying to her.

He slipped her satchel from her shoulder and grabbed her hand, which was still clutched around the potion. He peeled her fingers back and took it from her.

“What is this for?”

She was silent.

“Hermione,” he prompted, raising his voice a little. “Try to tell me what this potion is for, sweetheart.”

“Shock,” she whispered.

He looked very worried and chewed his bottom lip as he turned it over and read the label quickly. “I don’t understand any of this. Can you take it?”

“Need food first.”

He nodded quickly and slipped it into his pocket.

“We’re going to the Manor. Come on, let’s floo together.”

She didn’t really hear him, but he gripped her hand and tugged. She followed him to the fireplace, and he threw some powder in, and she felt herself spinning away, clutching at him to stay upright.

They stepped out on the other side, and Draco immediately got to work, calling Florrie and Rosie and ordering them both about, though Hermione heard none of it. She just stood there, feeling numb, because she couldn’t let herself feel the thing she had just seen.

She barely registered it when he pulled her down on the floor and gently pushed her back to lie on a large blanket, knees raised to help her circulation. He pulled off her cap and unfastened her bloody robes, ordering Rosie to dispose of them once they were done. He coaxed her to lift her arms, and he slipped her shirt off, which was also stained. There had been so much blood that it soaked all the way through to her skin. He unzipped her pants and shimmied them down her hips, and then her underwear was last. He stripped down quickly too, and then he lifted her up and carried her into the bathroom.

He made her sit against the wall in the oversized shower, and something about the water pouring over her started to clear the fog in her head ever so slightly. She began to gain awareness as she realized he was facing her and was using her shampoo and a shower wand to wash the blood out of her hair and off of her neck and face. The water was turning pink as it went down her body and disappeared into the drain.

“Draco?” she said in confusion.

Something that looked a bit like relief flashed across his face.

“You’re alright,” he said gently. “We’re just getting you cleaned up first.”

“Oh. Ok,” she said simply.

She closed her eyes and just let him do it. The fog cleared further as he ran a rag down her body, getting all the vestiges of death off of her.

At long last he shut off the water, grabbed a towel and gingerly pulled her to her feet. He dried her off before shrouding her in one of those oversized robes he favored.

He made sure she was steady before he did the same for himself, and then he led her back into his bedroom, where the house elves had set up a simple dinner on a small table near the fireplace. He pulled his chair very close to hers and served her, watching carefully. The moment the first bite of food hit her mouth her stomach rumbled, and Draco got a grim look on his face. She had no idea what time it was, but she knew it was late. She had been nearly ready to leave for the day when she was called in for that patient.

The food helped even more than the shower did. It was simple, but wholesome — a hearty soup and crusty bread with a generous helping of butter. It was comfort food for her. She was finally starting

to feel more like herself, though she still couldn't think about it too much.

"I had a bad day at work," she said quietly.

Draco's spoon paused in midair, and he looked at her cautiously. "Do you want to talk about it?"

"Not yet. Tell me about your day."

To her relief, he didn't press her at all, but told her about firing Beavill and Pearson. "I think Nielsen Moon is being expelled from all of his social clubs as we speak," he said.

He kept it light and entertaining, but when she finally pushed dinner away, he paused.

"Hermione, do you want that potion?"

He pulled out a small bottle and showed her a potion for shock. She barely remembered picking it up before leaving St. Mungo's.

She thought about it, but then shook her head. "No, the shower and food helped. I won't sleep well if I take it."

He nodded and set it aside before pulling her to her feet again.

"We're going to take a little time to relax, and then you'll go straight to bed."

She nodded. She wasn't sure what he had in mind, but knowing Draco, he must have planned something while she was covered in that blood. It was a relief to turn it over to him and not think, not question it. She often let him lead her during sex and the moments immediately afterwards, but she knew she had a tendency to fight him whenever he tried to do it at other times. Tonight though, she had no fight left. She wanted him to take care of it, to take care of *her*. She couldn't remember the last time somebody had taken care of her in this way — probably not since she was a child.

Draco seemed pleased she wasn't objecting, and he pulled her to her feet and led her back into the bathroom. The lights were dimmer now, and at some point during their meal the elves had filled the tub, refreshed the towels, and set out champagne and tea.

"In you go," he said, untying her robe for her and pushing it off her shoulders.

"I'm already clean."

"Yes, and now it's time to relax."

She didn't object. Truthfully, a long soak sounded lovely. She didn't have this indulgence at her flat, being restricted to a shower only. And she had just decided she wanted to let Draco help her. Who was she to object?

She said nothing more, but she slipped in and immediately smelled that scent that was her perfume. She closed her eyes for a moment and sighed deeply as she sank into the bubbles.

To her surprise, Draco joined her too, but he didn't slip in behind her. Instead he sat on the other side, facing her.

"Champagne or tea?"

"Champagne feels too celebratory after everything that just happened but..."

"But you need a drink, and I know it's your favorite. Coming right up."

He poured her a glass and passed it to her. Hermione took a sip and the sharpness from the bubbles was oddly refreshing.

"Do you treat all your girlfriends this way?" she asked as she leaned back and closed her eyes again.

"I've had no other girlfriends except Pansy in sixth year and Astoria, which was practically arranged. That's one reason I fucked up so

badly when all of this started with you. I have very little experience with relationships.”

“Then how did you know what to do tonight? Nobody has ever done this for me before.”

He grunted with a little discontentment at that statement. “They should have. Even if Harry and the others weren’t romantically involved with you they should have made you slow down now and then to care for yourself and take breaks. As for how I know what to do, it’s because I pay attention to you. And you told me, remember? You wanted bubble baths and champagne, and I thought you could use it tonight.”

She nodded in agreement and continued to sip her champagne for a few moments. Then to her surprise she felt him pull her feet toward him, and he began to rub.

“Oh *God*,” she groaned.

It felt so amazing, so delicious. Of course she knew about foot rubs in theory but...

“Nobody has ever done that before,” she sighed, as he pressed into the arch of her foot.

Again he made a disapproving sound.

“What?” she asked. “I thought you didn’t want anybody else touching me like this?”

He seemed to consider this for a moment. “You make an excellent point. I don’t. I should be the only one to give this to you.”

He deepened it, drawing more eager noises out of her as she made it to the bottom of her champagne glass. She finally opened her eyes to find him staring at her intently, as though cataloging everything.

“You’re far too good at that,” she muttered.

He just smirked as he pulled her foot out of the water. "Your toes look like candy sweetheart."

"It's just nail polish."

"I know. The first time I saw it on you, your color choice gave me an erection."

This was so surprising she gave a little laugh, despite everything that had happened that day.

"What? Why?"

He shrugged. "It's just unusual. Most witches stick to red or pink. But your toes were green the first time I saw you without shoes on. And tonight they're purple."

It was true. Hermione liked color, and she allowed it on her toes where nobody would see it. But of course Draco had noticed.

"I wonder..." he added, "do they taste like candy too?"

She gave him a wry look. "No."

"Only one way to be sure," and then he popped her big toe in his mouth and sucked as he started to massage her calf.

Heat flooded Hermione, and she noticed Draco watching her carefully. This should not be so hot. It should not feel so good.

"My feet..." she objected weakly.

He released her toe for a moment and said, "They're delicious."

"But..."

"And they're clean. You've showered *and* bathed. And even if you hadn't, your toes are nowhere close to the dirtiest parts of you that I want to explore."

He resumed what he was doing, and Hermione's eyelids fluttered closed as she just let herself enjoy it. Who was she to question the things Draco liked to do, especially when they felt so bloody good? She had never met anybody who could turn her brain off like this.

She needed it. She really needed it. And the best part was he didn't try to do it all the time. She was the kind of person who had to think a *lot* to process her feelings. But Draco was getting better and better at identifying those times she could be left to think versus those times she needed somebody to intervene and shut her brain off for her. Tonight was definitely the latter.

She realized it might have been the kindest thing anybody had ever tried to do for her: to learn her mind and help her quiet it when she needed it. She had never been able to do it by herself, not really.

He kissed and sucked on every part of her foot, and it felt divine. Then he moved to the other and repeated it. At long last he was tugging on her and pulling her through the water to straddle him and settle in on his lap. She felt his hardness below her, but he didn't try to do anything with it. He just gathered her in his arms and leaned back, as she sank against his chest and let him rub her back in deep circles.

Goodness, but this was really lovely too. Hermione gave a contented sigh as she snuggled into his shoulder and neck a bit.

"Feeling better?"

"Mmmm."

"Want to play our bathtub game then?"

"Hmmm?"

"Word associations."

"Alright," she said.

“Harry.”

“Brother.”

“Theo.”

“Darling.”

“Pansy.”

“Pain in my arse.”

He chuckled at this a little and then shifted tactics.

“Sex.”

“Draco.”.

“Orgasm.”

“Also Draco.”

He hummed his approval at this.

“Shibari.”

“Beautiful.”

“Wax.”

Involuntarily Hermione’s thighs clenched. Out of all the unusual things she had read about in the Library, this was the thing that had intrigued her the most. Of course Draco noticed it.

“Wax?” he prompted again, as his hands gripped her a little harder

“Yes sir,” she whispered.

“Oh fuck me...” he muttered, and he turned her head and brought her in for a kiss. It was hot, but slow as his tongue teased her mouth open, and she sighed into his attentions. He was really far too good at this.

“You want wax?” he asked as he nibbled on her earlobe.

She just nodded.

“We can do that. In fact, did I tell you that George Weasley reached out? I’m investing in the adult side of Wheezes. I’ve given him several ideas, including a slight modification on traditional wax.”

“What else?” she asked in amazement.

“Oh it’s a surprise. But you’re very inspirational. And if there is anything you want, anything you’re curious about, anything you can imagine that hasn’t been invented yet... just tell me sweetheart. George is into it. In fact, I’m sponsoring him at The Ruby Slipper. He says he wants to do field research.”

“It feels dirty.”

“What did I say about that?”

He told her she could be dirty. He invited her to be dirty. He *wanted* her to be dirty.

But instead of answering him she asked, “What’s your dirty fantasy then?”

He said nothing, but traced the cleft of her arse and lingered a bit in a very surprising place.

“Really?” she breathed.

“I told you that your toes aren’t even close to your dirtiest part of you that I want to explore.”

“But why?”

“It’s hot.”

That wasn’t really an answer, but she wasn’t sure what she was expecting. Perhaps he sensed her hesitancy because he said, “Think about it.”

“Do I have to do —”

He suddenly pulled her back and looked at her seriously. “You don’t have to do anything,” he said. “Not ever.”

“But if you want —”

“I’m very happy with this. I’m thrilled, ecstatic. We never have to do anything else, and I’ll be perfectly satisfied.”

“But...” she prompted him.

“But you asked. At this point I only have one hard limit that I know about, and that’s sharing. I’ll do anything else, try anything else. That doesn’t mean I want you to be the same way. If you think about it and decide it’s a hard limit for you, I’ll never say another word about it.”

She bit her lip, a bit uncertain.

“Look,” he said. “If you came to me and said you wanted to bring in Theo or even Luna for a legit threesome where they could touch you, I would tell you no, and I wouldn’t feel bad about it. I’m not comfortable with sharing you like that, and I shouldn’t have to do things that make me that uncomfortable just because my partner is into it. The same rules apply to you. If I suggest something and you give it a think and decide it’s not for you, then that’s the answer. I love everything we’re doing, and you’ve already wildly exceeded my expectations. The fact that you let me direct your orgasms at all is just....”

He shuddered and gripped her arse, and settled back in around the column of her throat.

Something eased inside of her at his words. She knew Draco had trouble articulating his emotions at times, but he always knew what to say when it came to the physical side of their relationship.

Hermione sensed he was telling the truth. She could tell him no, and she wouldn't disappoint him.

She wouldn't disappoint him.

"To be clear, I'm not saying no," she said. "I've just never thought about it... ever."

He pulled back and gave her a teasing smile. "Should I find a book about it? Perhaps you would like to study it first."

Hermione blushed a little. "You have some rather explicit books in your library, you know."

"Hmmm did you find those? Have you been reading them?"

She nodded a bit, and he gave a dark chuckle as he moved back to her neck and started to palm her breasts.

"My perfect little swot," he murmured. "I'll find a book about bugging you and every other dirty thing you want to consider. But not tonight. It's supposed to be sweet tonight. Turn off that incredible brain and just feel it. Let me help you."

And with that he stopped talking and put his mouth to work on more important tasks. She turned herself over to him, and she felt that now-familiar bliss as her mind stilled, and she just let herself *be*. His hands were around her waist, drifting down toward her core. His lips were on her breasts, teasing them, licking them, suckling them. He was pulling something out of her tonight, and she wasn't sure what it was but she was giving herself over to it anyway. There was no resistance, no hesitation as she fell into his embrace.

When he opened her and slipped inside, she gasped of course, but it wasn't because of how it felt. It was because of the look on his face, which was both intense and ardent. She caught him in a moment when he wasn't trying to hide anything from her. She could tell he was still concerned about her, but there was also something else, something so caring and kind that she couldn't name it. As he studied every jerk and twitch of her face while he moved inside of her, the expression on his face convinced her that he was telling her the truth. She would never disappoint him.

Her eyes fluttered back, and that moment she was chasing was getting closer and closer. As it often happened when she got this close, the words started spilling out of Draco.

“... so perfect like this, goddammit...”

“... loveliest witch I've ever had...”

“... cunt is so sweet, Granger...”

“... could do this to you forever ...”

“... give it to me Granger, open your eyes and let me see you come...”

His last command penetrated that wonderful stillness in her brain, and she opened her eyes to find his own eyes dark and staring at her. She felt herself start to break, and he leaned in and captured her lips, swallowing her moan as she crested.

A moment later he followed her, and she felt him shuddering as he spilled inside of her. He was breathing hard, and he released her lips and just bent his head to touch his forehead to hers. They stayed like that a moment until his eyes opened slowly. The darkness had receded, replaced by that beautiful gray. They had never done it like this before, and she was shocked by how intimate it felt, clinging to him so closely.

Eventually he slipped out and let the water cleanse her as he stood and towed off before reaching his hand out for her. She took it, and he helped her out of the tub before wrapping her in a fresh towel, carefully drying every drop.

She knew him well enough to know what was coming next. He always seemed to take great pleasure in dressing her for bed, selecting her underwear and pajamas, all of which felt silky and decadent. He always fussed over her a bit, making sure everything was just right before pulling back the covers and encouraging her to get in.

As usual, he ended by removing her bracelet and grandmother's ring, which she realized with a jolt she had been wearing this whole time, along with those small hoops she liked. He didn't even ask if she was staying over tonight. They both knew she was. She didn't want this to end, and she thought that he didn't either.

He slipped in next to her and pulled her close, and Hermione realized the thing that had happened today was starting to come back into focus. She cautiously allowed herself to think about it. It was still hard to examine, but Draco had given her everything she needed tonight to begin processing it. And now, for the first time tonight, she wanted to talk about it, just a little bit.

"Thank you for helping me," she said quietly.

"I'll always help you," he said.

"I know, it's just... I don't do this part of healing very well."

"What part?" he said in confusion.

"The death part. The losing a patient part. It really affects me. It always has. After I lost my first patient during healer training I had a kind of breakdown. I seriously considered quitting and just washing out of the program. I guess I thought that after all the death I saw during the war I would be able to handle it in healing, but I couldn't.

You think of healing as being this wonderful career where you save lives. And there *is* a lot of that, but it can also be really mentally challenging if you're in a specialty where people die.

I was drawn to trauma healing because my instincts for it are really good. I got a lot of practice during the war. But after I lost that first patient... I realized I wasn't cut out to be a healer full time, and that's why I had Bill Weasley train me in curse breaking objects and buildings too and ultimately joined the Ministry. Losing patients is hard for any healer, but the really good trauma healers who do it all the time can dissociate from it enough to move on to the next patient, but not so much that it affects their work.

I dissociate *too* much when I see the sort of thing that came in tonight. It was a werewolf, Draco. And the patient had some sort of potion or curse I didn't understand where he just kept bleeding and wouldn't stop. We shoved so much blood replenishing potion down his throat that he lost pints of it before he finally died. It was everywhere. When it was over, Padma and the others took a few minutes to clean it up and process it, and then they moved on to their next patient. But I... well, you saw me."

She was clinging to him, and she felt oddly vulnerable for telling him this. Hermione Granger didn't fail. When she broke down and almost quit healer training and then had similar inclinations during muggle medical school a few years later, she felt like a failure. She eventually found a way through it, and she didn't regret joining the Ministry. It was a perfect job for her, and she was much better suited to it than full-time healing. But it had always bothered her that she wasn't as mentally tough as the others who finished the program and joined St. Mungo's or even muggle hospitals.

Hermione had never shared this with any of her friends, but then again none of her friends had ever seen her like this. None of them had washed somebody else's blood off of her and then pulled her out of herself so she could begin to process it. Draco had done that, and she was hit with the sudden realization that this might have been the worst patient death she had ever been a part of — but she was

recovering from it faster than she ever had previously. It was all thanks to him.

To her surprise Draco didn't comment on the werewolf connection, not yet. Instead he said, "Tell me how you handle it with the aurors. I know you're their trauma healer."

She nodded into his chest. "With the aurors it's a bit different. They're all highly skilled, and raids are planned carefully. They are so elite that they rarely die, you know, especially since we're not in a war. I go on raids with them, but I hang back in a safe zone, and there are protocols to bring them to me to stabilize if one of them is injured. It's usually broken bones, sprains, concussions, things like that. When they are hit with dark magic it's typically the unforgivables. When aurors *do* die, it's usually because of *Avada Kedavra*, and they die out of my sight and where I can't help them anyway. They all signed up for that job knowing it was very dangerous. And on my end, I know when raids are coming. I can mentally prepare for them a bit, and if something *does* happen to one of them on my watch...."

"It's somewhat expected," finished Draco quietly.

"Exactly," said Hermione. "True trauma healing in the emergency room at St. Mungo's is different from that. It's more varied, more chaotic, and your patients and their families almost never expect to find themselves in that situation. I'm rarely called in for traumas – it's only when they think there's some curse that's making it impossible for them to stabilize the patient. There are a few curses that are fast-acting like your blood curse was, but most are rather slow. They build, and I usually have a little time if I need to research something or think about it before I attempt a break. Curse-breaking on the fly in the trauma room is the worst possible scenario, and that's when my patient is most likely to die. It always feels like it's my fault when it happens, because they are calling me in to fix the thing they can't. I'm supposed to be the expert. I failed my patient tonight."

"Oh Hermione," he sighed, as he pulled her tighter.

“I’m sorry for dumping this on you, I’m just not as tough as the others and –”

Draco put a finger over her lips. “First of all, you never have to apologize for your soft heart. Your compassion is something I really admire. And as for your toughness compared to the others, I’m actually really proud of you for figuring out what your limits are.”

“I... what?” she said in confusion.

“Your limits. Everybody has them, right? We all have things that can make us break. You have a tendency to power through difficult things and keep going when you should stop. You rarely ask others for help. You’re so smart and competent that it means the world is always going to ask more from you than it should. I can’t tell you how happy it makes me to know that you realized full-time trauma healing wasn’t for you. You course-corrected on your own and built a career where you are valued and needed. Kingsley thinks you hang the fucking moon, and Harry tells me the aurors do too. Deciding to do that instead of working in a trauma room that gives *you* trauma isn’t weak. It’s smart.”

It was odd, but his words seemed to ease something inside of her that she hadn’t even known she was hanging onto. That lingering disappointment in *herself* for feeling too weak, too soft to be a real healer started to dissipate. Maybe he was right about all of it.

“I’ve never moved through the stages of losing a patient this quickly,” she said quietly. “I think you helped me a lot. It doesn’t happen very often, but when it does...”

He nodded. “When it does, I’ll help you. Can you tell me what the stages are?”

“First, I dissociate. I don’t think I’ve ever done it as badly as I did tonight, but it’s almost like being in a fog. Then eventually I come out of it and talk about it a little bit... I let myself remember what happened.”

“Who do you talk to?”

“Crookshanks. Or myself. I’ve never talked to another person.”

She was a bit embarrassed to admit that she talked to her cat about it, but it was true. And Merlin knew Draco had been so supportive tonight, something told her he wouldn’t judge her for it.

“That’s sensible, sweetheart. And what happens after talking?”

“Then I cry. By the time I’m done, I can usually move past it.”

He was quiet for a moment before he said, “It was really obvious tonight that something was wrong, but it sounds like it’s not always that apparent.”

“It’s not,” she said softly.

“In that case, whenever you lose a patient I want you to come straight to me and say, ‘I had a bad day at work.’ It doesn’t matter who I’m with or what I’m doing. Just find me and say those words, and I’ll know what it means. I’ll stop whatever I’m doing to help you, and I won’t ask you to talk about it until you get to that step.”

“Draco that...” she trailed off, absolutely dumbfounded that he would offer to do that for her. It was something she didn’t even realize she needed. He was giving her a way to tell him she needed him to do the same thing he had done tonight without losing face or embarrassing herself or eliciting questions from him she couldn’t answer right away.

She realized at that moment that she was falling in love with him.

“Can you do that for me, sweetheart? Just find me and say it? If you can do that, I can take it from there.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, I can do that.”

“Good. Now tell me... do you feel like you need to cry?”

“I –”

She paused, as she thought about it, and then she realized that she did. A lump rose in her throat as she just nodded.

“Then cry, Hermione. I’m not going anywhere.”

Hermione started to cry.

Time for Pictures

Chapter 29: Time for Pictures

AN: Draco has a bevy of lawyers and Hermione tempts him with photoshoot.

The end note has a chapter spoiler. I suggest reading the chapter first.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Draco

Draco sent Hermione another charm for her bracelet through the Lover's Box after that night she lost her patient. This time it was the St. Mungo's logo with the crossed wand and bone, decorated with lime green peridots like her healer robes. He sent a note to her at the same time.

"Find me if you ever have another bad day at work."

He was hesitant about giving it to her. He didn't want her to think he judged her or thought she was weak for struggling with patient death. But he finally decided to do it because she had opened up to him that night in a way that changed their relationship. Her bracelet was marking their milestones together, and that was a significant one for him. She had never been that vulnerable, that willing to let him help her before. It was the first time that Draco felt like she might need him as much as he needed her. It was a huge moment.

He was lucky that he had seen her right after it happened, and he knew that was why she had let him help — she didn't really have a

chance to stop him at first. She had been nearly catatonic, and it upset him more than he let on that she had always handled it alone before that night. But once her fog cleared, she let him keep doing it, and Draco hoped that she turned to him because she wanted to. He needed her to understand that being reliant on him didn't make her weak, and it didn't mean she was no longer independent. It just meant she had somebody to lean on, somebody who would support her unconditionally when life got tough, however that manifested itself. Draco really hoped she would keep her word and seek him out the next time it happened.

To his relief, she seemed to understand the message he was trying to convey with the charm. She was his, he was hers, and she didn't have to do it alone anymore.

Just as troubling as Hermione's breakdown was the identity of the victim. It didn't take them long to discover that the unnamed man was formerly employed by Blaise's firm and, in fact, worked three doors down from Blaise himself before Blaise resigned. It was no great leap to determine that he had been the person skimming money.

On the one hand it was a huge break in their investigation. Harry didn't think the werewolf connection was a coincidence, and the others didn't either. It gave him the excuse to keep the investigation open as he dove into the background of Tobias Raine, the man who had been killed.

On the other hand, since Blaise resigned the same day, several of the trainee aurors evidently found this suspicious.

Draco was meeting with Blaise, Ben, and Patrick, discussing the transition from Beavill and Pearson and a proposed acquisition of some remote Malfoy property in Northern England.

"They just approached DLM Properties to see if you wanted to sell it," said Ben. "We need to do some diligence of course, but if you're interested it's a pretty generous offer."

The four of them were discussing it when Florrie appeared in the Smoking Room, wringing her hands.

“Master, there is two trainee aurors at the front gate, Sir. They is asking for you and Mr. Zabini, Sir. They is wanting to talk about Tobias Raine.”

Draco and Blaise exchanged looks, and to Draco’s surprise Ben and Patrick did too.

“Do you know anything about...?” started Patrick.

“Yes,” said Ben, looking a bit nervous.

Then Patrick turned to him. “Draco, where’s the nearest floo that’s private?”

“The Sitting Room across the hall and two door down, but it’s creepy as fuck,” he said.

Patrick waved him off and slipped out as Florrie disappeared. Draco wasn’t sure what was going on, but it looked like Ben and Patrick had a plan. He hoped they did at any rate.

“Don’t say anything,” muttered Ben, who had gone a bit pale, but had a determined look on his face.

A few moments later Florrie entered with two young men wearing the distinctive red robes of trainee aurors. They flashed badges as one of them said, “We’re here to talk to Mr. Zabini and Mr. Malfoy about the death of Tobias Raine. If you could please come with us.”

Draco and Blaise were frozen, but Ben spoke up in a surprisingly authoritative voice, given how nervous he had looked moments earlier.

“They aren’t going anywhere.”

“And who are you?”

“Their lawyer.”

Oh fuck.

This was *not* a great plan. Ben practiced real estate, which was about as far from criminal defense as Draco could imagine. He was putting on a good show of bravado, but Draco really hoped Patrick had left to find reinforcements.

“They have something to hide then?” asked one of the trainer aurors suspiciously.

To his credit, Ben gave a truly phenomenal eye roll at this and said, “You show up at a private residence, without authorization, trying to detain my clients to question them about a death. Of *course* I won’t allow them to go with you. Besides, neither of you have a supervising auror with you. You and I both know you can’t do jack shit without a fully qualified auror here.”

Draco had to admit he was rather impressed, despite himself.

Ben then launched into a recitation of all the various protocols they were breaking, and Draco was suddenly feeling rather comfortable as he listened. He exchanged a look with Blaise which said he was feeling the same way. As long as Patrick showed up with a real criminal defense attorney in tow soon they would be just fine.

Patrick did arrive a few moments later with reinforcements, but he didn’t have another lawyer with him. Instead, the door to the Smoking Room slammed open, and an irate Harry Potter came striding through, with Patrick on his heels.

“Who are you?” asked one of the trainees, looking at Patrick in consternation.

“He’s their lawyer,” said Harry shortly.

“But *he’s* their lawyer,” said one of the trainees, pointing at Ben.

“Oh surely you don’t think Draco Malfoy has just one lawyer,” said Patrick, as he walked around and sat next to Draco. He put his hands behind his head and leaned back like he was ready to watch the show.

Harry ignored this and rounded on the trainees. “What the hell are you two doing here? I get a patronus from Alyssa Huffington to tell me that —”

“Who?” asked one of the trainees in confusion.

“Mr. Malfoy’s lawyer,” said Harry, as though this was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Bloody hell, another one?” muttered the other trainee.

“I have a wide range of legal needs,” chimed Draco helpfully.

Ben, Patrick, and Harry all gave him identical looks that told Draco to shut the hell up.

“*Anyway*,” said Harry, “I got a patronus from Alyssa who told me that two trainee aurors are here at Malfoy Manor to investigate the Tobias Raine case. And I think to myself, ‘Surely that can’t be right. Surely my trainee aurors are following protocol and working on the investigation the way I ordered them to.’ So imagine my surprise when I show up and find out that Alyssa was correct. Now please, explain yourselves. Because unless Mr. Malfoy has invited you to drink his whiskey or smoke his cigars, I cannot fathom why you are here.”

The trainees shifted uncomfortably, and now Draco and Blaise were both sitting back to enjoy the show too. Truly, Harry was rather scary like this, his green eyes flashing, and his not inconsiderable power flaring. For the first time ever Draco finally understood what all the fuss was about.

“Sir, we just had some questions about the cause of death and —”

“We *know* the cause of death. What we don’t know is who did it. Do you have some reason to believe there is a werewolf prowling the grounds?”

“We know that’s what Healer Granger said, Sir, but —”

Draco felt a surge of anger, and it was clear that Harry did too. “But *what?*” he demanded.

One of the trainees bit his lip and glanced at Draco. “But she’s involved with a Death Eater, Sir, and we questioned whether she’s reliable so —”

Oh Draco wanted nothing more than to *Avada* them both on the spot. He was pleased that Harry evidently felt the same way because he rounded on them both now, and they started to cower.

“Draco Malfoy took the Mark under duress on pain of death for himself and both of his parents when he was sixteen years old. The Wizengamot sentenced him to time served and fines, and that was the end of it. He has never been under suspicion since, and in fact he’s been nothing but cooperative in allowing the Ministry access to his properties and vaults for their review of Lucius’s estate. As for *Healer* Granger, she has saved my arse more times than I can count, and she has healed every bloody auror on the entire force! Furthermore, she’s Shacklebolt’s favorite — he will tell you that himself — and that means Hermione can do whatever the fuck she wants at the Ministry, whether it’s legal or not. She could come up with about eight thousand different ways to kill you on the Playground, and Shacklebolt would pardon her without a second thought.”

Harry continued in this vein for some time, and Draco and the others just sat back and watched. It was a beautiful thing indeed, watching Harry dress them down so thoroughly. By the time he was done, they both looked like they wanted to crawl in a hole and die from embarrassment, and Harry ordered them to turn around and vacate

the premises, with the promise to never do something so idiotic again.

As they were leaving, Harry looked at them all and said, “My apologies for interrupting you. I’ll be writing them both up. Patrick, it’s nice to finally meet you in person. I suppose you’ll be figuring out which Death Eater murdered me in the Manor’s Ballroom before too long.”

Patrick gave him a truly baffled look, but Draco just suppressed a grin as Harry turned and left.

“Thank Merlin,” muttered Ben, finally slumping.

“You weren’t half bad mate,” said Blaise fairly. “I had no idea you knew anything about criminal law.”

He just got a wry look on his face. “Who do you think did the actual *research* for Lucius’s appeals?”

Draco chuckled. “I probably owe you a raise.”

“We can discuss that after I tell Mortimer I’m resigning tomorrow.”

Draco just grinned. He was building an excellent team.

Hermione

Hermione swore as she checked her watch. She would be late for that blasted photoshoot if she didn’t hurry up. She had been buried in her magical lab for the past few days, analyzing Tobias Raine’s blood to see if she could better understand what had happened to him that night. Once his identity had been confirmed, she had a brainwave about that last curse on the list from Estes’s desk that she had never solved. What if *that* was the curse used on Raine? If so, then it was a curse that caused the patient to bleed. It had to be. But no matter how many times she cast it, even with wand movements

used by other curses that caused cuts or lacerations, nothing happened. She was starting to wonder if she was on the wrong track with it.

She *knew* the photoshoot was important to Pansy, and she had a contract to be there, but she couldn't bring herself to stop just yet. She sensed that figuring out what caused Raine to bleed so profusely was going to be critically important to the case, not to mention really valuable if the healers ever saw another patient like him.

She did not have time for photoshoots. She did not have time for Draco, as much as she wanted to see him. There was no time. No time. No...

Hermione bit her lip as she thought about the obvious solution to this. She hadn't used it since she graduated from medical school the previous spring, not even when work had picked up. Using it always took a lot out of her because her body felt those extra hours she was awake. Still, she had done it for a year when she was fourteen and two more years rather recently. She knew how to manage it.

She slid open the desk drawer and pulled out the small hourglass. She wondered what Draco would say if he knew she had it.

Probably ask for his fantasy first and then find some way to punish me for using it to do more work.

She bit her lip, knowing that this was the exact opposite of the "take breaks" edict he had given her, but this was important. She needed to figure out that curse that caused Tobias Raine to die. She needed to fulfill her contract with Pansy and not let her friend down. And finally, Draco had said he would be coming to watch the shoot. Hermione desperately wanted to see him and spend time with him tonight. If she did this then she could have it all.

Decision made, Hermione placed the time-turner back into her drawer and settled back down with her books. She could work all night if she had to; after all, she had all the time in the world.

Time-turning was an odd business, to be sure. Hermione did her best to follow the protocols when she could, and she knew she needed to be scrupulous about it tonight because she had taken a long break since her last turn. But now that she was ready to do it again, future turns – if there were to be more in the near future – wouldn't have to be so cautious.

The “don't be seen rule” was really for first-time turners, sporadic turners, or people who were doing it around others who had no idea that time-turning was possible. At some point in third year Hermione realized that McGonagall's stories about wizards killing their future or past selves were a bit histrionic for people like Hermione. Yes, she *tried* to stay out of her own self's sight for the most part, but she was time-turning every single day for class. Once in a while she caught a glimpse of her own bushy head from a distance, and she knew who she was. It wasn't scary or alarming when she saw herself that way.

When she time-turned with Harry in third year, they had to stay hidden for many reasons, but the biggest was because Harry himself had just learned about it just seconds before he time-turned with her for the first time. Harry's situation was precisely the one McGonagall was warning her about when she told Hermione all of those horror stories. Past Harry had no idea time-turners even existed, let alone the fact that there was a future Harry gallivanting around the Hogwarts grounds that night.

If future Hermione and Harry had been seen clearly by their past selves, then past Hermione would have tried her best to stop past Harry from panicking, but there was no guarantee he wouldn't have done something very rash and stupid. Even past Hermione might have been thrown off by seeing two Harry's. That would have been unexpected, and she may not have figured it out quickly enough to avoid a catastrophe. Besides, by the time future Hermione and Harry

had gone back into the past, she *knew* she hadn't seen herself for those critical three hours because she had no memories of it. Even when time-turning her memories were linear. So if she *had* been seen by her past self when she went back into time with Harry, it might have ripped the entire space-time continuum in half, and that was a scenario Hermione couldn't even begin to contemplate.

Seeing herself here and there around Hogwarts all culminated in that night when she finally slept with herself. It was a truly bizarre experience for her, not only because it was the first time she let herself be intentionally seen by her alter ego, but also because it was the first time she had ever slept with another person. That was the night Hermione learned that she snored very lightly when she slept.

When she picked up time-turning again for medical school, she was much better prepared to manage the rules that mattered and ignore the ones that didn't. While it was easier when nobody saw her, what mattered most was that *others* didn't see her. She was the one doing it so if she ran into herself at her flat or on the Playground, it wasn't that risky. It had occurred a few times during those two years, and she even had a code phrase to say to herself whenever it happened so that her past self would know it was a time-turned version of her future self she was encountering and not somebody using polyjuice.

She never went so far as to have actual conversations with herself, more than exchanging a few words in greeting. For one thing, she never knew if she should say "I," "we," or "you," when talking to herself, and for another, she always worried what it would do to the space-time continuum if her future self couldn't remember every single thing she had said to her past self. Still, running into her alter ego at her flat or the Playground had happened often enough that it wasn't that odd for her by the time medical school ended.

Tonight though, she needed to be careful. She hadn't time-turned in months, and her past self would have no idea she would be time-turning later.

One of the easiest ways to time-turn and ensure the rules were not broken was for the past self to stay in one place. It was always much harder to avoid one's past self when the past self was running errands or moving around, so when Hermione time-turned for medical school she did her best to keep her past self at the Playground and then time-turned her future self to go to Cambridge for class or labs. Nobody was allowed inside the Playground without Hermione's permission, and she herself rarely left it when she was at the Ministry except for lunch. It wasn't hard to avoid herself or other people that way, and it allowed her future self to do what she needed to do without remembering every single place her past self had visited while she was doubled up. Even when her past self was sent out for field assignments and she couldn't stay on the Playground, time-turning as an adult was easier than doing it as a student at Hogwarts. Hermione's field assignments had never come close to Cambridge's campus, so there was very little risk she would run into herself out in the wild, let alone when other people were with her.

Avoiding her past self at Hogwarts had been one of the things that drove Hermione mad about it that year, and when she did it again as an adult she truly wondered what the hell Dumbledore and McGonagall had been thinking to let a fourteen-year-old manipulate time in such close quarters with herself. While at Hogwarts Hermione usually only turned back one hour at a time so that she could sit two classes at once, but avoiding herself in the corridors as she moved from one class to the next was often like a chess game. Hogwarts was large, but it wasn't *that* large, and having two Hermiones floating around the castle for an entire year was far more risky than having one Hermione on the Playground and another at Cambridge.

Trying to avoid herself at Hogwarts made the mental strain from the whole experience much worse for her than when she did it for medical school. She had become exceptionally rigid in her third year, always taking the same routes and always going to the same places at the same time to make it less likely she would screw it up. It also forced her to study in the common room of Gryffindor Tower even while she was on the outs with Harry and Ron, because her other

self was always tucked away in the most obscure section of the library at the same time. There just weren't that many private places she could be at Hogwarts where she had little risk of somebody noticing she was in two places at once. Again, she had learned from this when she did it for medical school, and she made sure she had privacy at her flat, on the Playground, and even a nice section of the library at Cambridge so that she didn't have to worry about that part.

Thinking through it as she worked that evening, Hermione made sure to stay on the Playground and not leave until she was finally ready to turn back and go to the photoshoot. Once she reached that point she slipped out of the Playground and went to an empty closet across the hall Kingsley had set aside for her for this very purpose during medical school. It wasn't used by Magical Maintenance, so she had a secure place to turn back time at the Ministry without seeing her past self or dealing with the inconvenience of going all the way home to her flat to do it.

She turned back five hours, knowing she had been at the Playground for that entire time. She still hadn't found what she needed with that extra five hours of work, but she had eliminated a couple more possibilities. That was its own form of progress.

She stepped out of the supply closet and made her way to one of the main corridors, still full of employees who had not left for the day.

"Hi Hermione!"

"Nice to see you Hermione!"

"Hey Hermione, can we get dinner this weekend?"

That last voice she recognized as McLaggen's, and she shouted "No!" over her shoulder without taking a second look. Despite the fact that she had time-turned, she still had to hurry if she wasn't going to be late.

The photoshoot was being held in an old warehouse, which Pansy had selected for its lack of color and hint of grunge. Hermione and the others were modeling cocktail dresses and clothes for a night out, and Pansy wanted something that looked urban.

When she arrived, Pansy was running around, snapping orders. "Hermione! Finally! Go get dressed. No knickers."

Then she ran off to find Luna, and Hermione turned to find Draco watching her with a slightly hungry look on his face. Her body had an instant reaction to it, after the thing Pansy just said. He walked up to her slowly and ran a finger down her cheek.

"Stay in those knickers while you're getting ready for the shoot and ruin them for me, won't you? I want them for my collection. It's been too long since you've given me a pair."

She bit her lip, and he just looked at it and shook his head a little, as if to clear it before adding, "Pansy has promised me a copy of every photo I want. Make them good for me, and I'll give you some extra special attention tonight."

"How?" she breathed.

"It's a surprise. And I'm taking you to dinner first."

"Another date then?"

He nodded at this. "I have to make sure you're fed sweetheart. Remember: ruin your knickers while you're getting ready and then give me something at the shoot to take home."

She blushed, but he just gave her a promising look as she turned and made her way behind the stage where she was immediately sent to a chair for hair and make up.

She remembered the look on Draco's face, the special attention he promised her, and the fact that he would be watching her do this.

Hermione had never been in a photo shoot before, but she knew she would have to project confidence while she did it. Maybe she could flirt with Draco using her eyes and body since he would be watching. The prospect was making her feel damp, and she was well on her way to having a pair of well-ruined knickers for Draco's collection.

By the time her hair and makeup was done, Hermione was half-wrecked. She was sent to a dressing room to change into her dress, and Draco suddenly appeared, slipping in and pulling the curtain closed behind him.

"Let's see if you followed my instructions," he said, without further ado. He spun her around and stood behind her as they faced a mirror, and Hermione watched with bated breath as he unfastened the front of her pants. His eyes were dark as his hands moved down and swiped the outside of her knickers and then pushed them aside to dip inside as well. He hummed his approval.

"Very good," he said quietly. Then to her surprise he pushed her knickers back into place and massaged them into her. "I'm collecting every last drop from you. These have served their purpose, and you won't be getting them back. Now get ready and don't ruin Pansy's dress. I want it running down your legs before it touches any more fabric."

Good lord.

Hermione was unbearably turned on, but he stepped back and watched her change, holding his hand out for her knickers when she slid them off. He gave them a satisfied look before slipping them into his pocket, blowing her a kiss in the mirror, and then exiting to take a seat and watch.

Hermione slipped on the dress, and her turn was called. She could faintly see Draco watching her intently as she joined the set and waited for her instructions, though it was hard to see his face. The lights from the set were hot and bright, and she couldn't see his expression clearly.

When the photographer called her up and started to get her to move, Hermione took a deep breath and tried to put herself in the correct headspace for this. Pansy wanted her to look like she was confident and having fun, drawing people to her because of the clothing. The dress she was modeling covered most of her scars, but it was rather low-cut and very tight around her arse. The photographer took several photos of Hermione laughing as she leaned forward a bit to display just a hint of cleavage, and there were also quite a few shots from behind, when she turned around to give the camera a flirty smile and wink.

Throughout the shoot the photographer was coaching her, encouraging her, and somehow she knew it was driving Draco mad.

“Just like that, love, pop your arse a bit. There we go, give me a nice sexy smile. Hold it right there, you’re gorgeous just like that.”

On and on it went, and though Hermione couldn’t see Draco clearly, she could feel his eyes on her, watching every move, every pose, saying nothing as the male photographer – who was rather handsome himself – tried to pull her sexy side out of her. As she stared into the camera, she knew Draco was watching her too, and she played it up for him and the attractive young photographer who was giving her such praise. By the end of the session the photographer declared her to be unexpectedly brilliant.

“Sheer perfection love, we got some really hot shots. I can’t wait to photograph you again.”

Hermione stepped off the set as he was saying this, and she finally caught the look on Draco’s face. It was dark, jealous, hot, and feral. The rather obvious tent in his trousers told her that some part of him had loved every minute of it, but it was also pushing him to the edge to see her posing in front of another bloke. She suddenly recalled what he said that morning at the Playground when he was under veritaserum.

“Seeing other men want you makes me jealous, but it also makes me feel powerful because I have something they can’t have. It turns me on.”

Hermione licked her lips a bit and wondered if this was exactly what he meant. Judging by the appreciative looks from the photographer and the possessive looks from Draco, she rather thought it might be.

The shoot ended not long after that, and Draco made his way to her dressing room to meet her.

“Pansy says you can keep that dress. I want you to stay just like that, but I have to know something before we go to dinner.”

She gave him a questioning look, but he said nothing more as he grabbed her by the waist and turned her to face the mirror in just the same way he had before the shoot started. Again, he ran his hands under her dress, and he swiped at her core to check.

“That turned you on, didn’t it?” he breathed. “Posing like that for some other bloke and his camera while you knew I was watching you...”

Hermione said nothing, because it *had*. It absolutely had. The evidence between her legs was proof, and there was no point in denying it.

He said nothing more, but just pulled away and contemplated her in the mirror for another brief moment. Then he nodded and said, “Grab your clothes and let’s go. We have reservations.”

She was a bit surprised by this, but she just shrugged and shrank her other clothes to fit in her handbag. She emerged from the dressing room to find Draco staring at her, gaze still dark as he grabbed her hand, turned on the spot, and pulled her to a rather posh wizarding restaurant that had always been out of her budget.

They entered and were seated immediately, and Hermione couldn't help but notice that the eyes of other patrons were on them as they moved through the restaurant to their table. Draco kept a hand on the small of her back and threw slightly challenging looks at the others who were watching her, and when they were seated he pulled his chair as close to hers as he could get.

Hermione was starting to get worked up as his eyes continued to drift to her neckline and his hand settled just above her knee to trace patterns there. He was nothing but cordial to the waitstaff and one or two business associates who recognized him and came to say hello. He introduced her as his girlfriend, giving the back of her hand a kiss while he did it or her neck a small stroke. But when they were left alone, the things he was doing to her were making Hermione's senses scatter, especially when he grabbed her hand and put it into his own pocket, where she felt the knickers she had given to him earlier that evening.

"I had my hand in this pocket the entire time you were on that set, princess," he whispered.

By the time dessert hit the table, Hermione couldn't wait to be done and see what else he had planned for her tonight. She only started to second guess it when he saw her finishing her chocolate torte and said, "You know about safe words, yes?"

"I... yes," she said a bit nervously.

"Good. Then I want you to think of one because ten minutes from now I'm going to ask you for it."

Oh God.

They hadn't done *anything* that might prompt safe words yet, but it sounded like Draco was prepared to change that starting tonight. What could hers be? She had never even thought about it, not really. She thought frantically as he called for their bill. He looked perfectly comfortable as the waiter brought it over to him, but he also grabbed

her hand and placed it on the front of his trousers under the tablecloth so she could feel his hardness. Hermione gulped as her brain went into overdrive.

Maybe something like 'Harry?' No, that's too weird. What about 'Crookshanks?' No, he and Draco are starting to get along. I don't want to do anything that could mess with that. Maybe 'books?' Shit, I read about safe words from his blasted books, that won't work. 'Playground?' No, that would probably make Draco go harder. He loved having sex on the Playground.

He was pulling her up from the table, hand drifting toward her lower back as other patrons watched them move toward the restaurant's floo, and moments later they were stepping out into the Master's study at the Manor.

"Have you thought of your safe word?" he asked, as he tugged on her hand and started to lead her out the door and toward the stairs.

"I... no," she confessed.

His eyes flashed a little, and he turned to face her. "Then you have two minutes to get upstairs to my room, get naked, and lie on the bed. I'm going to ask you for your word when I get in there, and you better have one ready to go for me because I can't wait much longer to have you tonight."

She nodded quickly, her head spinning as she hurried up the stairs and slipped into his room. She quickly undressed and laid down, staring at the ceiling as possibilities swirled through her mind. Her two minutes passed very quickly because soon she heard the door opening and turned to find Draco coming in. His eyes immediately started roving over her naked form.

"Before I ask for your word, I want to know if you prefer silk or hemp."

"I... what?"

“Just tell me. Silk or hemp.”

“Silk I suppose?”

He gave a short nod. “Excellent. Then what’s your safe word, sweetheart?”

The answer finally came to her in a moment of clarity. Something short. Something she could remember. Something that was sure to stop him if whatever he was about to do became too much for her.

“Chimera,” she said.

His eyes warmed with approval. “Good. Don’t be afraid to use it.”

Then he raised his wand and pointed it at her, the silk ropes springing from it to secure her ankles and wrists to each of the four posters of his bed. Hermione took one look at the expression on Draco’s face and gulped.

Oh my God, here we go.

AN: Before anybody asks, this isn't going to become a time-turner fic. Nobody is going to go back years into the past to change the outcome of the war or anything like that.

My favorite HP book is Book 3, and one thing we learn is that in HP world being seen does not, by itself, rip space or time in half. I have started with that premise and expanded on it just a little bit in this fic. That being said, I am not a physicist. The amount of wine I have consumed and the number of brain cells I have killed while trying to understand magical time-turning is rather embarrassing, so please forgive any holes or inconsistencies. Most time-turner fics don’t get into the mechanics of it very much, but I kind of had to since I only put it into this fic for one reason

Angel

Chapter 30: Angel

AN/TW: We start to explore some other kinks, including degradation and objectification with a discussion of limits as part of it. If that's not for you, skip to the *** to read the sweet aftercare.

The note at the end contains a spoiler for this chapter.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Draco

She was here, and she was tied down. Draco wondered why the fuck he had waited so long to do this. He had developed a strong preference for bondage at his club, after one of his matches ran her hands over his chest and found his *sectumsempra* scars. Even blindfolded she had been able to tell something wasn't quite right when she felt the ridges under her fingers, and Draco was afraid his anonymity would be blown.

From that point forward he tied them down. Always. He could be in control that way. He could touch them, but they couldn't explore Draco's body. He could look, touch, taste, and fuck, and there was nothing they could do about it unless they said their safe word. Draco discovered he quite liked it that way.

Seeing Hermione tied to his bed was sheer perfection, though he had to admit it was different from the other witches he had like this. For one thing, she had never done this before, and she was already halfway to an orgasm based on all the lead up. That was a bit new. Even his most submissive partners usually took some teasing and

foreplay. Bondage was exciting, but being tied up was still just the first step. They all knew that. Based on Hermione's expression, it looked like she was nearly ready to peak.

For another thing, she wasn't wearing a blindfold. Draco had never been able to see his partner's facial expressions before, not really. That was different, and it was doing something to him.

She watched him a bit nervously, though still with such longing, those luscious lips slightly parted, as he walked around the bed, studying her from every angle. He would ease her fears eventually, but for the moment he thought she deserved to be a little nervous. She had fucked with his self-control so hard during that photoshoot, flirting with that photographer while he stroked the underwear in his pocket until he nearly wore a hole in it. She had teased him, taunted him, and then he found her wet after what she had done to him.

Draco loved it just as much as he hated it. The photographer wanted her, Draco was sure of it, and he had been both insanely jealous and unbelievably turned on as he watched her pose for him, her eyes constantly drifting to Draco's form while she did it. She had been performing for Draco just as much as the photographer, and the end result was going to be a whole stack of photos of her popping her arse and winking. Draco couldn't fucking wait to see them.

Dinner had served to work Draco up even further, though this time he was sure Hermione was ignorant about why. Draco was developing a sixth sense when it came to romantic and sexual interest thrown Hermione's way. She wasn't always aware of it herself, but Draco knew. Always.

As they entered the restaurant he instantly profiled three men and one woman who all watched Hermione with appreciation. That dress Pansy had put her in had been fucking incredible, and Draco bought it from Pansy before Hermione even left the changing room, because the moment he saw her in it he knew she had to keep it. He wanted to take her to dinner like that, showing the world how perfect she was while she was on Draco's arm. And sure enough, four separate

people had watched Draco with jealousy as he escorted Hermione through the restaurant and then sat so close to her he could see down her dress.

It was a power trip being the man with his arm around Hermione Granger's waist. She belonged to him, only him, and the rest of the world could watch but couldn't have her.

His reward for being hers, for winning at least some of her affections, for watching strangers lust after his witch, was spread out right before him. Her body like this was all for him, and he would never ever allow anybody else to do this to her.

"Do you know my family motto?" he asked as he moved around her slowly, eyes taking in every single bit of her.

"Sanctimonia Vincent Semper," she whispered.

"Ten points for Gryffindor," he said.

To his amusement she flushed a bit and her center started to glisten. Her praise kink was truly astonishing.

"Do you know what it means?" he added.

She just shook her head, and he looked at her in some surprise. He assumed his little swot would be curious enough to look it up, but as he studied her face he suddenly knew why she hadn't.

"You assumed it had to do with blood, didn't you?"

She just nodded slowly.

Draco paused as he considered this. "I'll admit that some of my ancestors have interpreted it that way, but there's actually no reference to blood. It means 'purity will always conquer.'"

She gave him a skeptical look, and he grinned a bit. "I know. Father interpreted it to mean blood of course, but I don't."

“Really?” she asked in confusion. “What’s pure then?”

“You,” he said simply.

“I’m not,” she objected.

“Oh princess, you are so much purer than me. Pure heart, pure mind...”

He ran a finger over her and then let it drift between her legs, which made her jerk just a little. “And a very pure cunt.”

She inhaled. “I’m not though. We’ve had sex.”

“You think I care about chastity? If I did I wouldn’t be doing this with you. No, I care that you are mine. That all this is mine. That your tits are mine and your cunt is mine and every orgasm you have is mine. I can’t even imagine another wizard fucking you anymore because it’s never happened. It’s always been me. My mouth, my cock, my seed. That’s what makes you pure. And like I said, you are *far* purer than me. You uphold the family motto perfectly, sweetheart.”

Her eyes were huge, and she was breathing in shallow pants.

“And tonight,” he added, “I’m getting something else from you, and it’s also going to be mine. I’ve wanted to tie you down for ages. I can do whatever the fuck I want with you like this, did you know that?”

She nodded slowly, her eyes riveted on his face.

“Once I start I’m not stopping until you say your safe word or you become incoherent, whichever comes first. Do you understand me?”

“Yes...” she breathed.

“Yes what?”

“Yes sir.”

Draco shuddered a little. "Good girl."

He walked a bit closer to her and started the slow tease he was sure she expected at this point, feather light touches ghosting over her skin, between her breasts and then around them, over her abdomen and down her sides. She was already straining at her bindings, hips starting to adjust of their own accord, her eyes dark and glittering as that slow flush started to creep all the way down her body.

He lowered himself to the bed as he continued to touch her and leaned forward and popped her right thumb into his mouth as he sucked.

She moaned a little, and he released it before sucking on the next finger and then the next. He took his time with each one before trailing a kiss down her arm all the way to the swell of her breast.

Then he stood and backed away for a moment as he undressed himself. He stripped down, fully naked, and her eyes widened a bit to see his cock released. He had never been so erect in his life.

He kicked his clothes away and walked to the other side of the bed and lowered himself to suck on the fingers of her left hand. But this time when he was done he kissed up her mudblood scar, tongue tracing the letters carefully.

To his surprise she spoke. "Do you ever call me a mudblood in your head?" she asked softly.

He glanced at her sharply and considered what he should say.

"When I'm awake, no. I do dream about it sometimes when I remember the war," he confessed.

To his surprise, she blushed. "Oh, alright."

"Why?"

She tried to shrug but couldn't through her bindings. "I don't know. I just... you call me Granger when you're really into it. I've wondered if you wanted to call me a mudblood too."

Draco was a little uncertain now. "I don't like that word."

"Oh OK," she said quickly, and then she blushed.

Fascinating.

Draco narrowed his eyes. "Do you *want* me to call you that?"

"I..." she was crimson and swallowed hard. "I don't know. Probably not. It's just when we're like this, you're so confident, so powerful, and..."

"You want me to degrade you?"

"I don't know. Maybe? I just..."

She trailed off, and Draco cocked his head to study her. She looked desperate, needy, confused. As Draco considered where this conversation was going, he suddenly knew he had found another line.

"I won't be calling you that word, regardless of how you feel about it."

"Oh?" she asked.

He raised an eyebrow. "The last time I said it was the night Dumbledore died. That word died with him as far as I'm concerned, and it's taken years for me to reconcile all of my feelings about it. It's a hard limit for me."

"I thought you only had one hard limit?"

He shrugged and watched her carefully as he walked around the other side of the bed. "The last time we talked about limits, that was true. I have never thought about this before, but now that I am it's

another hard limit. I told you we would be discovering new things together, didn't I? It's not just things we *will* do, but also things we won't do. I won't do this."

Hermione nodded, but she had a curious look on her face.

"What is it, sweetheart?"

"Just surprised," she said softly. "I'm not sure what I was expecting, but I thought if I raised it you would try it... even if you were a bit uncomfortable with it."

He lifted one eyebrow. "If you want me to call you other things when I have you like this, I'm game to experiment – but I will not use that word. I can't think of any other names I would refuse to call you at the moment, but we might discover some. You shouldn't be surprised, though. I told you I don't feel bad about telling you no if I discover a hard limit."

Her eyes were shining now. "That's rather comforting, actually."

"Oh?"

"Yes, it means I can do the same thing."

"You can always tell me no. I mean it."

"And you don't judge me for asking or...?"

He shook his head. "Of course not. You weren't raised hearing it around the dinner table like I was. You weren't indoctrinated with it like I was. You didn't weaponize it like I did. It's probably different for you than it is for me. There's nothing wrong with being curious about something I'm not into. I'm just not going to participate if it's a hard line for me."

She gave him a shy smile and nodded a little.

"Good," he said. "Now then... back to degradation...."

He placed his hand on her neck and ran it down her body, making sure she understood that he wasn't backing away from exploring this with her – he just wasn't going to do it in *that* way.

"You seem curious about it, but you're not sure if you'll like it. I think I know why."

"Why?" she asked, her eyes huge and luminous as she stared at him.

"For one thing, you have a praise kink, which is the opposite of degradation. Whenever I tell you how perfect your sweet cunt looks, you wet it for me."

Draco glanced down and saw her glistening practically on command. He smirked. "Precisely like that."

Her breathing was getting shallow, and he used one finger to trace patterns on her body, teasing her lightly while they had this fascinating conversation.

"For another thing, there's the question of *what* I would call you?"

"What do you mean?" she asked in a breathy voice.

"Just that the usual suspects don't really fit, do they? Should I call you my little slut? Or my filthy whore? We've already established that you're pure for me. And you like being pure for me, don't you sweetheart? You like that all of this is mine, and it's never been anybody else's?"

Draco gripped one of her breasts hard, and Hermione arched a little, as she closed her eyes and nodded.

"I'm not sure if degradation is really what you're after then. Calling you a slut or a whore would be inaccurate, and I know how much you value precision of language."

"I do," she groaned.

“In that case, it might not be degradation that turns you on, but objectification.”

Her eyes opened slowly to look at him, “What does that mean?”

“You’re asking me what that means when you’re bound to my bed? Under my control? Waiting so patiently to be my little fuck toy?”

He watched her carefully as he said this, and her pupils blew and mouth dropped. Draco licked his lips and exhaled.

“Alright, maybe you do like a *touch* of degradation too.”

She was practically panting now, and Draco moved his hand to place one finger inside of her and hold it still. She was wriggling her hips, trying to get friction, but he refused to give it to her.

“Every time I have you like this I think about your innocence, you know.”

“What?” she sounded dazed, confused, and she was still trying to get pressure from his finger, but he just held it place.

“Mmmm. You once asked me if you were a minor deity or royalty, and I told you that you were better than both. That’s still true. But when I have you like this you remind me of an angel: light, beautiful, up on a pedestal somewhere that I’m not supposed to touch.”

“Objectification...” she breathed, and her eyes closed.

“Precisely. You’re the object of my desires, the object of my pleasure. You’re the angel who fell from heaven into my bed. That’s why it didn’t fit the last time I used it. I wasn’t fucking you yet. You hadn’t given yourself over to me yet. I was still worshiping you from afar, but I hadn’t clipped your wings to bring you under my control.”

“Draco...” she groaned.

“You know I’m right. You’re not a slut or a whore. You’re an angel. You were so innocent until I took it from you. And every time I have you like this I take it from you again and again. You love it, don’t you? You love knowing that I pulled you off of your pedestal, debased you with my darkness, and now you’re just a thing for me to play with?”

“Yes,” she breathed, as her eyes fluttered closed.

Draco leaned in closer and licked the shell of her ear. “Alright then angel,” he whispered, and he withdrew his finger. She whimpered at the loss of contact, meager though it was.

Draco could hardly wait now.

“How hard do you want me to fuck you tonight?” he asked quietly, as he leaned forward to lick down her neck and toward her clavicle.

“So hard,” she groaned.

“How many times do you want to come?”

“Three,” she said eagerly.

“Then we’ll make it four.”

She gasped as he reached her breasts, and now he pulled her nipple into his mouth. She arched and protested because she couldn’t move like she wanted to.

“Draco...” she groaned. “I need to touch you, I need...”

He glanced up, and her hands were clasping and unclasping involuntarily, and Draco gave a wicked chuckle.

“No. You’re touching nothing, angel. I’m the only one who can touch you.”

He looked up to see her face, and she looked unbearably turned on as she wriggled her hips in protest. He kissed down her stomach until he reached her center, and he gave her one light lick that made her jerk.

“Draco! Please!”

“Please what?”

“Please sir, I need...”

“What I need is to taste this tight little cunt of yours,” he said softly. “It tastes amazing, did you know that? Your cunt is fucking delicious, and I love to play with it.”

He knew he was saying filthy things to her, praising her while degrading and objectifying her at the same time. It was working though, she was practically dripping for him. He gave her a few more licks to lap it up, and she was starting to shake.

“No other witch gets wet like this, Granger,” he said roughly. “I’ve had so many of them, and they were never like this for me. None of them were as dirty as you, as sweet as you.”

She rewarded him with yet more, and Draco started to eat her out in earnest. He loved doing this to her because she tasted amazing, but it never quite got her there. She always needed internal penetration to really come, but oral sex sent her to the very edge. He loved every moment of it, burying his face into her, knowing that it didn’t matter how long he did it because she would never come until he shoved his fingers or his cock or a vibrator inside of her. Staying on the outside of her like this was one, exceptionally long tease for her while he got to thoroughly enjoy himself.

He could do this all fucking night.

She was pleading with him, begging him to take pity on her, and finally he decided he would give her what she wanted. Because what

he wanted were multiple orgasms from her, preferably back to back, as fast as possible so she completely lost herself.

He didn't warn her, he didn't go slow, he just quickly moved up and shoved his cock inside of her as he started to pump.

She gave a strangled cry, and her eyes flew open, and not even a moment later she broke, all the teasing from the oral attention he had given her a moment ago pulling her over the edge.

"Oh *God*," she said.

"Your God is not here," he said, snapping his hips into her. "I've told you before Granger, you don't talk to God, you talk to me."

"So intense," she gasped, as her second orgasm rolled right into her first, and Draco's eyes sharpened as they roved over her. It was intense like this. He knew her orgasms would be harder, stronger when she was bound. That was her reward for turning the power and control over to him. But she had never done this before, and she could easily lose herself and forget her safe word.

It had only taken two rounds, and she was already hovering near that special place Draco wanted to send her tonight. Draco would get her there soon, but he gave her the briefest pause while he moved up to kiss her. She was shaking, twitching, rolling her hips into him for more, but he made her wait a few seconds. He wanted her to fly there at just the right time.

While he kissed her he reached over and opened the drawer to his nightstand and grasped blindly for one of her vibrators. Green or purple, it didn't matter. It wasn't going inside of her tonight, he was going to use it for something else instead.

Draco had spent a considerable amount of time playing with the wards around his room to figure out how to do this. Normally muggle electronics wouldn't work in the Manor because there was too much residual magic. He eventually figured out how to drop them in his

room on command. He created a small bubble of non-magic so they could work inside of it. He got the idea from Hermione. She once told him she had done the same thing for her muggle lab at the Ministry.

He pulled out the green one, focused on creating his bubble in the wards, and then turned it on. The buzz made her eyes fly open to stare at it in amazement.

“Did you ever get extra dirty and use both at once?” he asked.

She just shook her head, eyes wide, and he gave her a slow smirk.

“Then allow me to demonstrate, angel.”

He sat up and started to move his hips again and then pressed the vibrator onto her clit while he did it. Her eyes rolled back as she moaned and started to shake again.

“*Draco* I’m gonna... I’m... oh *fuck*...”

Once again that small profanity made something in Draco’s brain snap, and he suddenly stopped holding back. He moved harder, faster, the vibrator helping him along as he intentionally overstimulated her, and then he felt the familiar clench and flutter around his cock as she moaned loudly and let herself go.

“Fucking *come*,” he groaned. “Be a good girl for me and give me another. Nobody does this like you Granger, *fuck*...”

She was twitching involuntarily, and Draco knew she was nearly done. But he had promised her four, and fuck it all but he was going to give it to her. Once again, he didn’t stop, and he pushed her nearer to that final one without giving her any respite.

“*NOW!*” he demanded, and then he felt another one wash over her, and the sound she made was something between a moan and a mewl. Draco finally allowed her to pull him over too, and he spent herself into her, filling her completely.

Her breathing was shallow, her eyes were closed, and her cheeks were very flushed as she just laid there.

Draco wondered if he had done it, if he had pushed her into subspace. Fuck he hoped so.

He lightly touched one nipple, and she jerked and quivered, and Draco just smiled to himself. He had done it. *She* had done it. His perfect little submissive was truly out of her own head like this. She had trusted him. She had let him lead her to this place. She had even asked him to objectify her a little bit when he was exerting power over her. And this was her reward, some hazy twilight place that other partners had described for him where she could just *be*, for however long she wanted to stay there.

Draco was thrilled for her. She deserved to discover what that was like.

As for Draco, he felt high, almost giddy as he thought about Hermione Granger and the enormous effort it took to get her to this place. She was so thoroughly entrenched in her own head most of the time that Draco hadn't been sure if he would really be able to do it. But he had. He had studied her, learned her, trained her, and now here she was, fucking floating for him. Her breathing was still shallow, her eyes were closed, and Draco was sure that if he performed legilimency on her right now he would find that remarkable brain of hers completely still.

Making sure not to disturb her, Draco pulled his wand from the nightstand and vanished the mess and her bindings. She didn't move.

He crawled up to her and started to massage her wrists and arms, bringing her circulation back to her extremities. She just gave a contented sigh and turned toward him a little. She could visit that place for as long as she wanted, he certainly didn't mind. But he also knew he had to stay here with her until she returned to him. The

drops afterwards could be intense, and he suspected that hers would be bigger than others he had experienced since she didn't get to this place easily like some subs did. That was fine though, the trust she had given him tonight made him nearly breathless and gave him so much hope it filled him to the very brim. He would take care of her. Truly, he loved this part more than the actual sex.

Finally, slowly, she started to stir a bit, and Draco watched as her hazel eyes opened, blinking a little as she looked at him.

"Draco?" she said in a small voice.

"Welcome back sweetheart."

He stroked her face a little, and she looked a bit confused but also very content.

"That's never happened before."

He hummed a little. "Did you like it?"

"Yes... it was very dreamy."

"Good. Do you need anything? Water? A potion?"

She furrowed her brow as she thought about this with a very serious look on her face. It was a very serious question, but her expression was also fucking adorable. As usual, she appeared innocent, just like the angel moniker he had given her tonight.

"Maybe water."

"Coming right up."

He conjured a glass for her and filled it with water and helped her sit up to drink a little. When she was done, she nestled back down, and he pulled her close to him.

“How are you feeling?” he asked cautiously. He had to admit he was curious, even a bit nervous, about the kind of drop Hermione might experience. He was expecting tears at any moment.

Instead she said, “I’m OK. But I think I want to talk.”

Draco raised his eyebrows, but then he thought about it and realized he shouldn’t have been surprised by this. She *did* like to talk after sex. She rarely talked about the scene, but having sex with him seemed to open her up emotionally. She filled that void that was left when she came down from her time with Draco with questions, answers, words. Draco quickly thought back and realized that many of their most important conversations had happened just like this, after they had been intimate, and he was giving her aftercare.

He certainly wasn’t going to say no to *that*.

“Sure, I’d love to talk to you.”

She nodded and bit her lip a little. “Alright,” she finally said. “I’ve been thinking about the courtship thing and have some questions...”

Draco’s heart started to pound. Fuck, if tying her up would get her to ask questions about this, he would do it every single day.

“Of course. I’ll answer them if I can.”

“Well some of the books talked about this, and Pansy also told me that for families like yours there are settlements and engagement break up fees and —”

“No,” said Draco shortly. She closed her mouth and gave him an odd look.

Draco chewed on his lip to think about the best way to tell her this.

“Look, if we courted publicly and someday got engaged, there will be no settlements coming from you to me, and there will be no breakup

fees for you. If anybody is settling anything, we will do it in reverse, and I'll be giving assets to you."

She blinked at this. "Because I'm muggleborn?"

"No, sweetheart, because I'm a Malfoy. The rules are different for us."

She opened her mouth and then shut it again. Finally she said, "Why?"

He shrugged. "I told you we don't need settlements or breakup fees from the witch's family. They wouldn't add much to the overall fortune. And because we don't demand them, it's always given us... *flexibility* to be more selective in a partner. We can look for things other than money or property when pursuing a witch, and historically it's drawn interest from a wider pool. That's a major reason why Ella and some of the others are throwing themselves at me. Their families don't have the assets for large settlements or stiff breakup fees, but they know they don't need them if they can attract me."

She furrowed her brow. "But Draco, there's nothing I can offer you either, not really, I —"

He placed a finger on her lips, and she quieted. "First of all, that's not true. If I cared about finding a witch to grow the fortune I can think of a lot of ways you could do it without settlements."

She gave him a questioning look at this, and he rolled his eyes playfully. "Let's see, you could model products, endorse things, license your name and image and generate royalties that way. You could make Pansy actually *pay* you in galleons and not just clothing. Lots of other companies would pay you for it too. You're the darling of the wizarding world."

Hermione wrinkled her nose at this. "I don't mind doing it for Pansy, but that's because she's a friend. I don't think I want to see my face on the packaging for blemish cream or whatever."

He just chuckled at this and shrugged. "Alright then, not that. Let's see... you could influence legislation in the Ministry of Magic that's favorable to the Malfoy interests and our tax position. Shackbolt loves you so much you know he would introduce and support any legislation you wanted."

She raised an eyebrow. "You want me to create tax loopholes for you?"

He grinned. "Interfering at the Ministry is a family tradition."

She rolled her eyes, but he saw she was starting to smile. "I think not. You can afford to pay your fair share. Tell me what else then?"

"You could get me into business with others in your extended circle. Most of my business partners are other purebloods because Father and my grandfather cared about that sort of thing. They're the people I know. But it doesn't have to be that way. You could be my entry into half-blood and muggleborn circles."

To Draco's surprise, she didn't immediately dismiss this, but narrowed her eyes as though thinking about it. "What else?"

"You could help expand our muggle holdings."

The look of surprise on her face made Draco laugh.

"Muggle holdings? I know you have my building and your office building, but there's more?"

"Mmmhmmm. Are you prepared to be let in on a deep, dark Malfoy family secret?"

She smiled a little and nodded.

"Very well. The Malfoys own quite a bit of muggle London. It's just real estate holdings that generate rents, but it's lucrative. And I've wondered if there are other ways to participate in muggle businesses, but I have no idea where to start."

The look on her face was priceless. "Truly?"

He shrugged. "Truly. It's a byproduct of how old my family is. We acquired most of it before the Statute of Secrecy went into place. I have a muggle company that owns the properties and handles renovations and buildouts, and I also have a muggle property management company to handle the tenants for me. But all of the passive income feeds directly into the Malfoy vaults at Gringotts, and that's why Ben is so valuable to me. I don't invest in any muggle companies at all except for my own, but I have a *lot* of muggle real estate, and that's something Ben is licensed to do. I only learned about it when Father died. He would rather the wizarding world think we maintain our fortune through illegal means than let it be known that most of it is legal, but a lot of it is muggle."

"Good lord," she said in amazement. Draco just grinned.

Then she looked thoughtful. "There's actually a lot that could be done with muggle business investments. The muggles have come up with a lot of ways to invest easily, and muggles innovate much more quickly than wizards do."

Draco inclined his head. "I thought so. But like I said, I don't know much about it, nor would any other pureblood witch. Even Blaise doesn't know anything about muggle investments or finance. You, though...."

"So I'm valuable because of my connection to other muggleborns and half-bloods and because of my muggle knowledge, then?"

He shook his head. "No, that's not why. I'm just pointing out that if I cared to grow the Malfoy fortune, you could bring a lot more to the table than other witches would bring me in settlements or property."

She bit her lip and suddenly looked a little shy. "Why *am* I valuable then? If not for that reason?"

Draco was feeling a bit nervous now. They had never talked about this in detail, but he realized she needed to hear it. She needed to feel like she was a worthy choice. In the face of everything he had, she had to feel like she was giving him something back that other witches couldn't. He was getting the impression that she might actually help him grow the fortune, which would be an unexpected boon. But he was being honest with her that this wasn't the primary reason why he wanted her.

"You're valuable because you're fiercely loyal. Given who I am and the responsibilities I have, I need somebody whom I can trust implicitly. I need to know they're in my corner. I need to be able to confide in them. A lot of it is mundane – just business secrets and such – but you know as well as I do that I have things to hide that *aren't* just related to the Malfoy fortune."

She gave him a knowing look at this, and he nodded.

"Yes, exactly," he said. "The Malfoys have always valued loyalty in their witch above all other qualities. In fact, it was so important to my father that he ignored almost everything else when selecting my mother; though when he picked her, they both went too far with it."

"What do you mean?"

Draco shrugged. "My mother was raised to cleave to her husband's house when she got married. All the Black sisters were supposedly raised that way, but Andromeda was too independent and Bellatrix was too ambitious to really take those lessons to heart. My mother though... well, let's just say that her loyalty to my father went too far. She didn't try to stop him from joining the Death Eaters during the first war. She didn't question him when he brainwashed me with blood purity bullshit, even though her own viewpoints were softer than his. She didn't even try to stop it when I was Marked because she knew it was what my father wanted for me eventually. It's only been since the end of the war that she's really put her foot down about certain things. Her loyalty enabled my father's shitty decisions."

Hermione was listening with amazement, and he smiled a little.

“I want you to understand something, sweetheart. I do need a witch who is loyal. It’s very very important that she be willing to protect me, my children, my assets, and even my mother to some degree. But I’ve also learned lessons from my parents’ marriage, and I think it’s just as important that her loyalty to me and the Malfoy name not be completely blind. She needs to be willing to give me a good kick in the arse if I’m starting to turn into my father or if I’m doing something to fuck up my kids. I’m an arrogant, stubborn bastard. That means she has to be even more stubborn than I am to pull me back on track if I’m starting to do something she doesn’t approve of.”

“And you think I could fulfill that for you?” she whispered.

She was looking at him like she was having some sort of revelation, and Draco put his hand on her cheek as he nodded.

“I know you could. You already have. Who else would point out that I’m effectively owning slaves by using house elves without pay? Who else would reject financial help from me and tell me I royally fucked up when I tried to do it behind your back? Who else would manipulate the fucking Ministry of Magic to keep me out of Azkaban? Only you.”

“And you need that...” she said slowly.

He nodded. “Yes, I really need it. I need both the loyalty and the kick in the arse when I’m being an idiot. Astoria might have given me loyalty, but she would never point out my flaws. She was so ridiculously agreeable that she would have done what my mother did and allow me to turn into the worst version of myself. Other than you, Pansy is the only one who calls me out for my bullshit, but she’s loyal to herself first. I don’t blame her for it, but she would never stick her neck out to protect me, not really. You would. You *have*.”

“And the others...”

“The others don’t get it. They think being a Malfoy wife is about parties and jewelry and clothing. And yes there is a lot of that — I can give my wife almost any material thing she wants, and I’ll be happy to do it — but I need a lot from her in return.”

“Loyalty, you mean.”

“Yes, loyalty but also support. The estate is big. It’s a lot of stress, a lot of pressure. It sends me to a dark place sometimes. All of it is just a lot. *I’m* a lot. I have to ask for some pretty big things from my partner, and the others don’t understand that part of it. But you? Shit, you support me before I ever ask for it. You give me ideas like bringing my advisors in house to make it easier. You tell me you’ll decommission my father’s dark objects after the amnesty window closes so I don’t have to be stressed about it. You let me confess to fucking *murder* and don’t turn me in. I would be crazy to look for any other witch when you’re right in front of me and can give me everything I need.”

And let’s not forget that I’m completely in love with you.

Her eyes softened. “So that’s why you want to court me?”

He nodded. “Yes. It’s the tradition in my family. I know I could break tradition, but...” he hesitated.

“But what?”

He bit his lip. “But it’s expected. It’s how Malfoys have always done it, and everybody knows it. Being your boyfriend might be enough to keep some wizards away from you, but it won’t really deter the ones who court. The same goes for me – if I’m not courting, then my relationship is considered casual within the pureblood world, and I’m still fair game until I’m actually engaged. I don’t necessarily agree with it, but that’s how it will be perceived.”

She was nodding seriously. “Yes that lines up with what I read about it...” she said slowly. “And Pansy told me that a relationship outside

of a courtship is practically meaningless. I worried that..." she trailed off.

"It's not meaningless to me," he said quickly. "Not at all. But to others in my circle of acquaintances? She's right. There will be other Ella Vanities who want me, and as for *you*..." his stomach twisted as he thought about it. "Well like I said, you're the darling of the wizarding world. You're going to be pursued, *hard*, now that other blokes know you're willing to entertain a relationship. Your education and work has deterred it somewhat, but now that the papers are printing things about us they know you're ready. Our past baggage isn't a secret, and they'll think they can draw you away from me. I'm certainly not the only wizard who would give up settlements to have you."

She gave him a skeptical look. "I don't think that's true."

"I'm almost positive it is true. Have you been asked out recently?"

She opened her mouth to say no, but then paused. She turned red and just nodded a little. "This afternoon actually."

Draco felt a lurch of annoyance, but forced himself to hold it back. Instead, he gave her a knowing look. "See?"

She sighed. "Fine. We're both hot commodities then, until everybody accepts we're together, and it's serious."

He nodded firmly. "Yes, exactly."

"What does a courtship involve then, other than what you've already done?"

Draco's heart leapt at this. She was asking all of these questions because she was interested. He was sure of it.

"Not much would change from your perspective. It would just be known that we were seriously thinking of a future together. It would give me the excuse to shower you with attention in a more public

way, though I'm already doing quite a bit of that. Mother might throw a ball for you at some point to introduce you to our friends and acquaintances. You could also move in with me."

She gaped at him, and he smiled at her. "A ball?"

Draco nodded. "Yes, I'm sure you read that courtships are usually celebrated with a ball. That's still true. Sometimes there are joint balls to celebrate multiple couples at once. Ours would be just for us though."

Unless you would let me go ahead and marry you...

She gave him a wry look at this, and he just grinned. "Alright..." she said slowly. "And living with you? I read about that of course, but would you want it?"

He gave her a serious look. "I want you to move into the Manor. I'm sure that's no secret. But look sweetheart, there's no rush, and you can live at your flat as long as you want. I truly mean that. I've always thought it was the perfect place for you, and now that our floos connect we can both sort of live in both places. Besides, if you *do* officially move into the Manor before we're married I'm supposed to give you an elf to protect your reputation."

"Absolutely not," she said firmly.

He just gave her a teasing look. "Rosie's already assigned to you."

"She's not bound to me though, and the books said the elf would have to be bound."

He inclined his head. "That's true. I'm supposed to give you an elf that follows your orders and not mine. But instead of an elf, I can give you your own place that's appropriately warded. Your flat, therefore, is an acceptable substitute. It's one of my properties, and you're living there. You didn't even have to move."

She raised her eyebrows. "I suppose that's true..."

She bit her lip as she thought some more. "What about working? Or other social expectations? I mean, would your mother want me to become..."

"Her?" he asked in amusement. Hermione nodded.

"Not at all," he said. "In fact, she wants the family to modernize. She likes the fact that you have a career outside of the home. I'm not saying she won't try to force dance lessons down your throat or something –"

She wrinkled her nose at that, and he just laughed, as he continued, "–but she won't try to stop you from having a career, nor will I."

She nodded slowly and suddenly looked very nervous. "Kids?" she asked hesitantly.

Draco's stomach turned over, but he forced his face to remain impassive.

"There's an entail on the estate. I'm having Alyssa look at it, but unless she tells me she can break it I'll have to have a male heir. Otherwise the Manor and many of the other properties pass to Teddy Lupin when I die because he's my closest male relative. I can't do anything about it. I would also give him a fair amount of the gold to support the entailed properties because I think it's shitty to pass a property as large as the Manor on without the gold to back it up. It would bankrupt him."

She chewed her lip and nodded slowly. "So one boy. Any others?"

His heart lurched a little. "As many as you want. Boys, girls, I don't care."

She gave him a shy look. "Maybe three?"

Draco's brain suddenly vanished and reappeared some place seven or eight years from now, and he could see it. He could *really* see it.

"I would love that," he said instantly. "Or more if you wanted."

She gave him a wry look. "I'm not Molly Weasley."

"We can always cut ourselves off at six."

She gave him an exasperated look, but he didn't care. She was thinking about it. She was entertaining it. She was imagining it. He leaned down and gave her a long kiss.

When he pulled away, she looked at him shyly again. "And would all this end at some point? All this attention... the... *wooing*?"

He slowly shook his head no. "I plan to woo you for as long as you'll let me do it. I'll keep doing this for the rest of our lives if you'll have me."

Her eyes widened, and she pulled him in for another deep kiss. Then she released him and gave him one of the most intense, serious looks she had ever sent his way.

"Draco, I still need to think about this a little more, but..."

"But?" he prompted.

"But I'm not saying no."

He smiled broadly and kissed her again, feeling lighter than he could ever remember.

She wasn't saying no.

AN: Quite a few popular fics are exploring using the word 'mudblood' during sex. I want to be clear that I read those fics, and I enjoy those fics. That being said, they are often written as Hermione asking

Draco to do it, and he feels uncomfortable with it but does it anyway. That bothers me, because doms should be able to say no in just the same way that subs can. I also think that in a relationship like this, where one partner is very experienced compared to the other, it's important for the experienced partner to own their limits. Draco discovered one during this chapter, and I don't think he should be apologetic about it.

The Wizards' Parlor

Chapter 31: The Wizards' Parlor

AN: The Manor has more secrets.

TW: References to past rape and war crimes; depiction of magically-induced rape; depiction of self-harm due to medical necessity.

Hermione

Hermione started to time-turn again. She couldn't help herself. Once she started it was a slippery slope because she still had a mountain of work to do with the Malfoy estate, and she still hadn't solved the damn curse that afflicted the late Tobias Raine. Both things felt rather urgent, and Hermione was running out of time for it. So she simply created more of it for herself.

She knew she could do it. She would surely crack Tobias Raine eventually. It had finally occurred to her that the spell might be a layered curse — it would require one cursed wound before it would attach. Hermione got to work in her lab and, though she hated doing it, she conjured a whole cage of mice to try it. Sure enough, the spell did nothing on its own, but when she paired it with a *diffindo* or some other cutting curse it just bled and wouldn't stop, and it would cause the existing cuts to slowly expand. That was why Tobias Raine had died — he had cursed wounds from the untransformed werewolf, and the spell had something it could attach to.

Now that she knew what it was, she had to figure out how to reverse it. But spell creation was finicky and involved a great deal of trial and error. It could take her weeks, if not months. She didn't have months or even weeks, unless she created that extra time for herself.

Her justification for her continued time-turning was that it would be fairly short-lived. The end date for the estate was approaching, and once it was closed it was closed. She could keep this up for a few more weeks if she had to. She had done it for years in medical school.

The biggest problem with daily time-turning was the sleep factor. She still got eight or nine hours of sleep each night, but her body was awake for at least twenty hours at a time before she let herself do it. Sleep deprivation, therefore, came on more slowly than bouts of very bad sleep where she only got a few hours for several nights in a row. But it still built, and she felt those extra hours she was awake. She might be going in circles with time, but her exhaustion – just like her memories – moved linearly.

She had mitigated the sleep issue in medical school by ordering the sofa for the Playground. It fit her office and gave her a second place to sleep that wasn't her flat. Whenever it became too much she would turn back and sleep a second time, only unlike third year she didn't have to share a bed with herself.

It worked well enough, though it was imperfect. She could never get a *second* full night because her body just wasn't capable of sleeping sixteen hours in a row. But when she was tired enough she could go for twelve, and she could break it up into two six hour blocks that ran concurrently in time but consecutively for her body.

She knew she could time-turn for a couple more months to finish everything she had to do, and this time she had two real beds she could use because she could share Draco's. That would be more comfortable than her bed-sofa combination in medical school.

But she still hadn't told Draco about the time-turner, nor did she plan to. It was temporary, and he didn't need to know about it. She was sure he would be furious with her if he found out, so she was careful and followed the rules more scrupulously than she normally would.

Her personas were split in two. On the one hand there was Playground Hermione who was tucked away working on the Tobias Raine curse and decommissioning other odd objects that came in through the aurors or muggle relations departments. On the other hand there was public Hermione who went to the Manor, went on auror raids, attended functions, and saw her friends. It was tiring, but it was safe. There was no reason any of her friends - not even Draco - would ever learn what she was doing.

Hermione had gone back into the *Crucio Room*, with a tense-looking Draco by her side and performed a manual search this time. It didn't take very long, having been empty except for a few pieces of furniture left behind, and Hermione confirmed that Lucius's old hiding place had vanished. It was still her least favorite room in the Manor, but there was nothing there.

Then she moved to the Cellar only to find almost nothing at all. It was just a large, underground room with a stone floor, a couple of lamps, and a series of wooden racks lining the walls. Hermione saw a few bottles of wine stored in one corner.

"This was always our wine cellar, but the Death Eaters drank through most of the Malfoy stash while the Manor was the Dark Lord's headquarters," explained Draco. "Eventually the elves moved the wine that was still left out of here because the Dark Lord wanted to use it as a dungeon to hold prisoners. Mother and I never moved the wine back after the war because there weren't any good bottles left, and there was no point. Now that I'm Master, I'm starting to build the collection again, and I'm putting it back in the Cellar so everything can age properly. It's going to take years to rebuild it though. The Manor gave me the wine racks as part of the transition."

Something inside of Hermione eased a bit to learn that the so-called "dungeon" where Luna had been kept for so long was really never intended to serve that purpose. Seeing it as a wine cellar wasn't scary at all, and it was entirely expected and fitting that an estate the size of the Manor would have a cellar like that. She was pleased Draco was restoring it and told him as much.

Next, Hermione steeled herself to search Narcissa's room. She found another name plate under a notice-me-not, and this time it read *Imperio Suite*. She grimaced as she read it, remembering Draco had cast the imperius curse on Madame Rosmerta for months. She sighed and realized that between this and his *Sectumsempra Suite* the Manor had not given him very good choices when it came to bedroom names. She recast the notice-me-not and then dove in, again performing a manual search.

The Master Suite was truly enormous. Hermione's entire flat could have fit inside of it. There was a his side, a hers side, a door that connected them, and a palatial bathroom that was shared. The hers side also had a spectacular dressing area, and Hermione gaped as she saw the closet commanded by Narcissa Malfoy. She could hardly believe that this whole thing was a *bedroom*.

"Some Malfoys have slept separately from their wives, but I will not be doing that, sweetheart," he said, giving her a pointed look.

"So which side will you use for sleep?"

"Whichever side you want," he said casually. Hermione bit her lip, as she realized he was once again implying that *she* would be the wife he was sleeping with.

"What about the other room?"

He shrugged. "Maybe it could be your muggle library? Or we could turn it into our kinky sex room."

He smirked at this last suggestion, and Hermione blushed deeply. Still, as she thought about it Hermione ached for it — library, kinky sex, she didn't care. He said it so easily, like this was their future, and he wasn't contemplating anything else.

"And your mother?"

“She’ll be moving to the Dower House. You know she’s renovating it.”

Ah yes, the Dower House.

“Isn’t that unnecessary?” she asked. “The Manor is enormous. It seems crazy that...” she trailed off.

He shrugged. “Sure. But it’s the way we’ve always done things. It gives each generation some privacy and space from each other. The Dower House is reasonably sized, but it’s not huge. It’s only for the former wife if she’s widowed. There’s a separate home for the direct heir and his family to use while he’s waiting for his father to die. My parents and I lived there when I was a young child, while my grandparents were still alive. The wife usually updates any of the properties she happens to live in, so Mother has gotten to do all three. But...”

He trailed off a bit awkwardly.

“But what?”

“But the Manor usually gets its own settlements as part of the engagement contract. It’s much larger than the other two, and it’s updated each time it turns over.”

Hermione blinked at this, her mind swirling now.

“So all of this...” she said, looking around the Master Suite.

“It’s all my mother. She doesn’t have special settlements for the Dower House, but it’s small enough that she doesn’t really need it, and she’ll take quite a bit of the furniture when she moves in. She’s decorating it the way she wants to because once I’m married she knows the Manor will no longer be hers.”

“Bloody hell. It seems so excessive.”

“You’re right, it is. But it’s tradition. Besides, everybody uses the Manor when hosting more than a few guests for tea. It’s the only property on the estate with a ballroom.”

“Oh, of course,” she said, rolling her eyes at this.

It took three days to fully search the Master Suite due to the size of it and all the clothing she had to look through. By the end of it, they had found nothing to interest the Ministry.

“I wasn’t really expecting to,” said Hermione. “Narcissa surely would have come across it by now.”

There was just one room left in the main Manor to search now, and Hermione waited for Draco to be occupied before tackling it.

Hermione knew he had a long meeting with Patrick to bring him in house, so she saved it for the same day. First, of course, she spent most of that day working on the Playground, trying and failing to develop a countercurse. But once she worked a full day there she turned back several hours, and her public persona made its way to the Manor for the final room: the Wizards’ Parlor, which Draco had never used to Hermione’s knowledge.

The Wizards’ Parlor was on the first floor, where all of the public or semi-public rooms were located off the long gallery. There were many of these rooms of course, but the Malfoys didn’t use all of them. The *Crucio Room* had been closed off, and this one had too, though Hermione didn’t know *why* because Draco clammed up whenever she asked him about it. At this point Hermione wasn’t terribly surprised to find her eye sliding past the nameplate. She had never noticed it before, and she had walked past it dozens of times. Besides, Draco was so oddly silent about it that she knew something terrible must have happened here or he would use it whenever his wizard friends came over.

The original intention of the Wizards’ Parlor was to complement the Smoking Room and Billiards Room. All three were traditionally used to entertain wizards without their witches. The corresponding

witches' rooms were on the opposite side of the gallery and consisted of the Witches' Parlor, the Tea Room, and the Card Salon. To this day, Hermione knew that Narcissa frequently entertained her friends on the witches' side and Draco tended to entertain his friends on the wizards' side, though Draco mixed it up now and then. The Sitting Room, where Hermione had been tortured, was traditionally neutral ground and was one of the rooms intended for mixed company, along with the various dining areas and the Ballroom.

Draco refused to talk about the Wizards' Parlor, but Narcissa told Hermione it was for intimate meetings, usually ten or fewer wizards at a time. Many a Malfoy business deal had been struck there before celebratory cigars were smoked next door. Hermione wondered how many wizards Lucius Malfoy had recruited for the Death Eaters in that room.

When Hermione approached it she canceled the notice-me-not, and her heart sank to see the nameplate.

Avada Kedavra Room.

Almost unconsciously her mind was transported back all those weeks ago when she was sitting on Theo's window seat with Draco.

"My next two were together... I caught them in the Manor one day planning to do the same thing to Lovegood because they heard she was a prisoner in our Cellar. I was listening at the door, and they were talking about how to get into the Cellar to find her. I just... walked into the room and Avada'd them both on the spot so they couldn't do it."

It had happened here, she was almost certain of it. He had killed Jugson and that unnamed junior Death Eater in here. They had been doing what wizards had done for centuries in this parlor: entertain themselves with stories and plots and plans and schemes, and Draco had eavesdropped. He heard their plans for Luna, and he walked in and killed them before they could do anything else to her. Then Florrie – sweet Florrie – had dumped their bodies for him. And

even though Draco may not have felt that bad about it, the act had damaged him. Hermione doubted that he had ever come into this room again under his own volition.

The Manor knew it too, and it pulled that piece out of him when he performed the ritual. As much as she loved certain parts of the Manor now, there were still times she really resented this place for the reminders of the past.

Hermione took a deep breath and muttered an unlocking spell to slowly open the door. Just as Narcissa said it was very masculine with full wood paneling. The furniture was dark, covered in rich velvet, and it was larger than she was expecting. There was an open space in the middle of the floor and chairs arranged in a loose semicircle around the perimeter, almost as though the people who would sit there could watch something in the center of the room. Hermione had been expecting a more intimate arrangement of furniture that suggested conversation, but what she was seeing implied a show. There was an enormous rug that covered most of the room, and Hermione saw a slightly darker area in the middle of it, as though it had been stained and the elves couldn't quite fix it.

The paintings were different too, and Hermione nearly gasped as she walked around the room, studying them one by one. Whereas most of the Manor was whimsical, with the exception of the *Crucio Room* that featured dark creatures, this place was different still: the paintings were all muggle, and several of them were quite famous.

Surely that's not the real 'Rape of the Sabine Women,' thought Hermione.

But as she stared at the Rubens painting she had seen a dozen times in the National Gallery in muggle London, she thought it looked awfully real. And truly, it wouldn't surprise her at all if the Malfoys owned the original and simply used *geminio* to duplicate it for the muggles.

Then she recognized *The Rape of Europa*, which was also a rather famous painting that Hermione thought had been in America. Then another painting titled, *Mythological Scene of the Rape of Proserpine* that Hermione also recognized from London's National Gallery.

God they are all muggle rape paintings, every single one.

Which Malfoy had collected them? Hermione had no idea, but a couple of them were extremely famous if they were real. They were all *beautiful* of course, compositionally-speaking. They were painted by true masters: Rubens and Titian and Giordano and others. Hermione had read a few books on muggle art and of course she was the type to read every placard in a museum. She knew that mythological rapes and prisoner rapes had been very common artistic subjects hundreds of years ago, but it was still shocking seeing them all here, in the same place.

Hermione suddenly had a strong suspicion about the purpose of that open space in the middle of the room.

Hermione had assumed Maria Davies died in the *Crucio Room* where Hermione was tortured, but now that she really thought about it she knew that probably wasn't the case. The *Crucio Room* was for mixed company after all. Hermione and the others had been brought there because that's where the Malfoy family happened to be when they arrived that day. Bellatrix tortured Hermione there because she was overexcited. It was sheer dumb luck the Death Eaters caught Harry Potter and his mudblood that day.

Maria, however, had been intentionally captured and raped. Though Draco assured her that Lucius never participated in those activities himself, Hermione knew he didn't stop the others from doing it. Still, his distaste for it surely meant he would have tried to confine it to certain rooms of the Manor to protect himself, Narcissa, and even Draco from the taint of it. He was a bastard, but he still had *some* standards when it came to his own family, Draco and Narcissa had both been clear about that. Perhaps Lucius sacrificed the Wizards' Parlor for it – this hyper masculine room that was still somewhat

intimate and close to the Ballroom where many of the revels surely took place. Voldemort could give away a prisoner during the revels and those who wanted to be involved or watch could come in here to partake, while the regular party continued on next door.

Christ, Hermione wanted to vomit.

She was relieved that Draco never wanted to use this room again. She could easily imagine herself standing in the middle of that semicircle, totally nude, while Draco was forced to watch her be taken over and over again by other Death Eaters. He must have killed Maria here too, before later killing Jugson and the junior death eater who did that to her.

Hermione knew that for all of Draco's sexual inclinations – some of which she knew would even be called perversions by the more conservative types – he would never have wanted to do this. He liked to sit and look at her, it was true. He liked to order her around and had even tied her up and objectified her. But everything he did to her was consensual, every single thing.

And not just that, but she had observed him watching for her consent whenever somebody *e/se* did anything to her. Even something as innocent as a kiss on the cheek from Theo or Harry was carefully observed, not because he was jealous of them, but because he wanted to make sure Hermione was comfortable. Draco knew that Harry might push due to familiarity and Theo might push due to exuberance. As long as Hermione consented, he was fine with it. If the attention was something Hermione *didn't* want – for example, when McLaggen grabbed her arm at the St. Mungo's gala all those weeks ago – he immediately intervened.

Maybe this was why.

Hermione glanced at the paintings again, disturbed at their theming but also disturbed because they were muggle. It was indicative of the older pureblood beliefs that muggles were animals, not worth any agency over their lives or bodies. The Death Eaters had raped

witches for power plays and politics, but Hermione suspected that muggle women had been raped just for fun.

God.

Hermione found herself breathing hard and hating this place, almost as much as she hated the *Crucio Room*. She consoled herself that after today, she would never come in here again. With one hundred and forty rooms in the Manor, she and Draco could surely stand to lose a room or two and be just fine.

Knowing that this was the last room in the main house she had to search, Hermione opened her magic one last time and called the Manor to reveal its secrets. To her surprise, it connected for the first time since that day in the *Crucio Room* when the chandelier had been repaired.

Did Lucius hide anything in here?

What do you think?

I think he hid activities in here to be sure – things he may not have wanted Narcissa or even Draco to know about. Did he hide objects too?

What right do you have to know?

Draco wants me to be your Mistress.

Are you certain about that?

Yes. You can cooperate now, and I'll be most pleased.

But my Master has no Mistress because the last one he considered was found to be untrustworthy. And now you are turning out to be the same.

I am trustworthy! I've told him everything!

Have you really?

Hermione paused and thought about it. No, she hadn't told Draco everything. She hadn't told him about the time-turner. She hadn't told him that she went to Gringotts earlier that week, and the goblins treated her worse than ever. She hadn't even told him her true feelings: that she really wanted him to court her but that she was afraid others would hate her for it and the magic would end if she let him do it. For all of his promises about wooing her forever, she wasn't sure if she really believed it.

I'm trying to.

He only wants four things from you.

He always says he wants three things.

No, he wants four.

Then he is keeping things from me too.

That may be, but the secrets he now keeps from you come from a place of love. Yours come from a place of fear.

Hermione thought that was a bit rich. Then again, the Manor was his so she supposed it would be biased.

Still, a place of love? Was that true? Did Draco love her? Some part of her thought he must, and she knew she was falling in love with him too. That didn't mean it was an easy thing to admit. Her qualms came from her own insecurities. She always wanted, *needed* to be good enough for whatever she was called to do. Even after their most recent heart-to-heart she struggled to understand how she, of all witches, could be good enough for the likes of Draco Malfoy.

She forced herself to think about it rationally. She knew he was right that he didn't need more money or property. No, he needed support. He needed loyalty. And he needed somebody with a spine. She was

all of those things, or mostly at any rate. Perhaps she was being a bit disloyal by not being entirely honest with him, but she told herself that most of it didn't involve him directly. The things that did involve him were her own feelings, and she was still sorting those out.

She knew that on paper she should feel confident in who she was and what she could give him, but this wasn't paper. This was her heart. It was also her logical mind. They were working opposite one another on this.

I'm not afraid of Draco.

Aren't you? Aren't you afraid of letting go and giving him everything you have?

Is that what I must do to satisfy you? To satisfy him?

It is what you must do to satisfy yourself. And Draco will only be satisfied when you are.

How did the Manor know these things? Because of course the Manor was right about this. Hermione would never be able to turn off her mind that constantly spewed doubts and second guesses until she just admitted she was in love with him, despite their very obvious social mismatch. She could only turn off her head by ignoring it and going with her heart. And Draco, being Draco, would be dissatisfied with anything that made *her* dissatisfied. She knew this to be true more than anything else the Manor had told her that afternoon.

I'll try. I really will. I'm close. I just need a little more time.

Then tell me once more why I should reveal the secrets of this room to you now?

Hermione thought about this carefully, and then she had a brainwave. Something finally clicked into place for her. She wondered if Draco had already figured it out. His comment about the Manor repairing the chandelier for her came back to her in a flash.

You should reveal them because you already know I'm your Mistress. Draco commands you, and I command his heart. I always have, and you know it. You extracted his feelings for Jeanine and whatever subconscious knowledge he had that she was really me when he took control. That's why the Crucio Room is so terrible. You knew your next Mistress might be me if Draco and I ever found each other again. That room was the scene of MY nightmares, not Draco's. His worst memories took place in here. The other rooms where people were tortured and died — the Dining Room, the Cellar, maybe even the Ballroom — are normal and still in use. But you picked the Sitting Room to represent Crucio, not because it was the only place people were tortured, but because it was the place where I was tortured. You acknowledged me as your Mistress months ago, before I had ever stepped foot on the grounds.

The Manor seemed to pause as it considered her words, and Hermione thought it was a bit impressed by her logic. Then it finally spoke to her again.

You are right of course. You were always an intelligent one. But potential is only that — it's a possibility, a maybe, not an actuality. If you are truly my Mistress then you must give my Master everything he wants from you.

And what is that?

You know it already.

He tells me he wants me to eat. He wants me to sleep. He wants me to take breaks.

Hermione felt another surge of guilt as she remembered she was seriously neglecting two out of those three things right now, thanks to the time-turner.

And what else?

I'm not sure.

You are sure. You just won't admit it.

Hermione paused. She fingered the lion on her bracelet and gathered her courage.

He wants my loyalty, my support, my commitment, my love. He just wants me.

Right in one, my adorable little swot.

Hermione was a bit startled. The voice now sounded like Draco, instead of the Manor. But it was an older Draco this time, *her* Draco. The teenage Draco who had hurt her was locked in the *Crucio Room* where some of her worst memories were housed. The manifestation of Lucius - who scared her so much while she was fighting the war - was locked in there too. But in here, it was an adult Draco. Even though he had grown up, he still hated this room more than any other in the Manor. The cruel, teenage version of himself didn't have to exist in here to make it evil.

Hermione was relieved that she was encountering the Draco she knew and trusted. He could be reasoned with.

Draco, can you please tell the Manor to show me the secrets in this room?

Why spend any time in here sweetheart? It's not a place for you.

No, but I'll never have to come in here again if I can find the things I need.

They could hurt you. Father would have allowed you to be hurt.

You wouldn't have let them do it.

I would have, at least for a while. Not now, but back then? I was a fucking coward.

You would have killed me before it was your turn though. You would have found a way.

I don't want you to be hurt in here, Hermione. It's my very worst nightmare.

Hermione sighed. She knew it of course. The real Draco hadn't been thrilled that she was planning to search this room. He told her to leave well enough alone. Nobody was ever going into this room again, and the first sweep from the Ministry had revealed nothing. She had hemmed and hawed and then simply waited until he would be out for it. She hadn't even told him she was doing it today because she knew he wouldn't like it.

She knew that whatever thing was in here could hurt her, but surely it was like the barrier in the tree. She was sure she could find a way to break it without injuring herself. Now that she knew something was here she could do a manual search and probably find it on her own if she really had to, but she wanted to get out of this place. Draco was right about that much at least: it wasn't a place for her. She seized on this and had a brainwave. She knew how to make Draco and the Manor cooperate.

I will be careful. I want you to make the Manor reveal this to me so I can finish it quickly and never have to come in here again. I don't like this room, Draco. It scares me. You know I have a job to do so please help me.

The curse in this room might ask terrible things of you.

Hermione swallowed. She suspected as much.

I'm a professional curse-breaker. I can find a way around it.

And if not?

Then I will probably consent to it, but I can't say for sure until I know what it is. You aren't making me do anything at all, Draco. You would

never do that. Tell me where it is so I can make an informed choice about how to proceed and escape this place.

Hermione felt the magic moving over here, as though testing the veracity of her statement, but she was telling the truth. She didn't want to come in here ever again. And as soon as she framed it this way — making it clear that she needed help so she could complete her task and leave — she sensed Draco starting to cooperate. Now she felt Draco commanding the Manor to show her the truth.

The Manor listened to its Master, and Hermione felt that same familiar thrum she had felt only a handful of times before. This time it was leading her straight to *The Rape of the Sabine Women*.

Of course it was. She should have just looked behind the damned paintings first and skipped the mad conversation with the Manor and Draco.

She didn't feel the cursed ward until she was half an inch from it. She realized with a jolt that the curse had been embedded into the painting itself. She might have to destroy a famous and priceless work of muggle art – though one with distinctly distasteful subject matter – in order to remove the barrier so she could get behind it.

Hermione sighed as she thought about this, casting several detection spells over it. Some part of her wanted to take Draco's suggestion and just seal the room and leave well enough alone. Was she really prepared to risk a Rubens painting to retrieve dark artifacts from a room nobody used anymore?

Hermione chewed her lip and thought about it. She knew what this curse was, she had seen it once before. She could get through it if she was willing to destroy the painting. But poor choice of subject matter or not, Hermione couldn't bring herself to do it. She just *couldn't*. It was considered a masterpiece of muggle art, and university students studied it in classrooms all over the world. So she started to think through a solution she had only used a handful of times before: activating the curse intentionally.

It would be awful. It would hurt. It would make her feel violated. The painting was a damned warning, not just the thing that housed the curse. But if she used the smallest body part possible, maybe she could activate it, grit her teeth through it until she retrieved the hidden items, and then remove the cursed part of her body. It might scar, but she would live, and the painting would stay intact.

God, Draco was going to kill her when he found out what she was about to do.

Hermione fought back a wave of nausea and tried to breathe as she thought about the best way to do this.

Hair? No. That's too close to your head if something goes wrong. Fingernails then. Nondominant hand. They're practically disposable. Besides, if something goes very wrong and you have to pull a Peter Pettigrew, you'll still be able to cast spells. Breathe, Hermione. It's going to be fine.

She used her thumb to pull back the skin right around her left pinky nail. Her nails were longer than usual, and she was grateful for it. That would make this easier and hopefully less painful than if she had to touch it with her skin directly.

She reached up and touched the painting with the tiniest bit of pinky nail she could manage, and immediately she felt the curse activate and break.

Hands all over her. Gripping her, pawing at her, violating her. They were ripping her breasts, impaling her vaginal cavity. They were making her feel like she was being raped in exactly the same spot where Maria Davies died. They were even trying to penetrate that place Draco wanted to take so badly that Hermione was still considering.

Fucking no, that's his if it's anybody's, she mentally snarled to the invisible force.

To her surprise, the feeling of hands hovered just on the outside of that part of her, perhaps sensing that if it breached her *there* it would cause her to retaliate. Or maybe it was Draco's own magic, helping her fight the parts of the curse she hadn't implicitly consented to.

Could she consent to rape? Hermione had read about this a little bit in the Malfoy library but had never thought about it very much until a couple minutes ago. She really couldn't be sure, and she was in no state to contemplate it right now. But for some reason a line was being drawn, and she thought Draco's magic was helping her do it.

The painting warned her this would happen. It was awful, violent, and Hermione wanted to throw up or give up or fight or run.

She forced the bile down.

It's just a curse, it's all in your head. It's just a curse, it's all in your head. It's just a curse, it's all in your head.

She had studied this one and knew it was all neurological. It wasn't real. There weren't *actually* rough hands and swollen members trying to enter her most intimate parts. But damn it felt real, or how Hermione always *thought* it might feel, and it was making her start to panic, truly panic. She felt her grip on the situation slipping away, and she was no longer in control of it.

Instinctively she reached out to the Manor's magic and thought, *Chimera!*

To her utter shock she felt magic that wasn't hers start to fight the curse for her. The penetration stopped, but the hands were still there, as if on top of her, making her skin crawl. She knew the Manor was trying to help her — no, *Draco* was trying to help her. His magic was deadening the effects of the curse, though he couldn't eliminate it entirely. Still, the blind panic of her heart receded to a fast thud, and it was enough that her brain could turn back on and she could act.

With the curse broken, she could touch the painting, and she quickly found a small latch that she engaged. The painting easily swung forward on a hinge to reveal a small cavity behind it. A quick count showed two vials that were likely poisons, one tiny vial of something that looked like blood, and two other objects: a pocket watch and an ornate handheld mirror.

Hermione forced herself to continue to ignore the feeling of too-large clammy hands all over her, and she lifted her wand and levitated everything out of the cavity and conjured a cloth over the objects. Then she slammed the painting shut and turned to her nail.

It was turning black, as the curse worked its way toward the nail bed. This was a slow moving curse, and Hermione was relieved by that. She would only have to remove the nail then, not her actual finger. Even with Draco's help she felt so awful that she no longer dreaded this part because surely it wouldn't be as bad as what the curse was trying to do to her.

She cast a numbing charm, knowing it wasn't perfect. It would feel like taking muggle pain relief pills, but more targeted. It would lessen what was about to come, but it wouldn't truly numb her finger, not like muggle drugs that could remove all feeling from discrete parts of the body. She would have needed a potion to accomplish that. Still, it was better than nothing and the best she could do under the circumstances. She used her wand to sever into her nail, cutting it below the point where the curse was creeping, right above the edge of her cuticle. Then she gritted her teeth and ripped and *shit!*

That hurt. Numbing charm or not, that *really* hurt, but now it was off and turning black as it shriveled on the floor. And the moment her cursed nail was removed, the invisible hands also left her body. Hermione slumped in on herself, shaking a little with relief. Now she just had to deal with a throbbing, bleeding pinky finger. Maybe she would get lucky and the nail would grow back.

Hermione's stomach turned at the sensation. This hurt a *lot*.

She needed that pain potion she occasionally dispensed at St. Mungo's. She had some in her lab, but she couldn't sneak back there with Florrie because she had time-turned today, and her past self was working there. Floo would take too long, and she would bleed all over the Ministry. Normal healing spells rarely worked to close wounds caused by dark curses. Again, she needed a potion.

Gods on earth, what could she do about this? She really should have taken a few minutes to think through this part before she touched that damned painting. She had been so keen to get out of this room she had let her Gryffindor tendencies take over and just jumped into it without really considering the aftermath.

She thought hard, and the solution came to her in a flash: she could steal it.

"Rosie!"

The elf appeared with a *CRACK!* And gasped when she saw Hermione's bloody hand.

"I'll be fine Rosie," she said through gritted teeth, but I really need some potions from St. Mungo's. Can you apparate me directly to the healers' supply room there?"

Rosie looked doubtful, but nodded and grabbed her by the robes, and a moment later Hermione's stomach lurched again as she landed in the large supply room. It was mercifully empty, and she found some of the blood coagulant potion that failed for Tobias Raine, along with that pain potion that would help her recover from this, and a few moments later Rosie apparated her back to the Wizards' Parlor.

"Rosie, can you levitate these things to a safe place in the Manor? Put them in a spare bedroom or something that you can block off from visitors. I'll take them to the Playground soon for decommissioning, but I can't deal with them tonight. Nobody should touch them until I take care of them."

Rosie nodded and started to levitate the items under the cloth Hermione had conjured, while Hermione uncorked the potion to encourage coagulation with her teeth and drank that first. She was just about to drink the pain potion too when she was stopped by Draco's horrified voice as he saw the blood on her hand.

"Hermione? What happened? Are you OK? Oh Salazar, we have to get you to St. Mungo's, I—"

"I'll be fine Draco, I just need a potion and a rest."

"But what *happened*?"

Hermione took a deep breath. He was going to kill her.

The End of Ella Vanity

Chapter 32: The End of Ella Vanity

AN: I know you've been waiting for this ♥♥

Draco

Draco was going to kill her.

He was in love with her, but he still wanted to kill her. He couldn't *believe* she had been this reckless, activating a damned curse intentionally to save some sodding muggle painting.

Draco didn't know who the fuck Peter Paul Rubens was, nor did he care. Draco hadn't even bothered to check this room after the Manor transitioned because he hated it so much. He was shocked to see that the muggle paintings he had always loathed were still in there, but of course he knew why the Manor had chosen to leave them in place. His grandfather Abraxas had hung them during the first war when climbing Death Eater ranks and Lucius never bothered to remove them. Draco was sure that Lucius didn't partake in those particular activities personally, but some of his friends and colleagues did, and the Malfoy Wizards' Parlor was famously accommodating.

Draco finally understood the subject matter and real purpose of the room soon after he was Marked himself, and it made him sick. He avoided the room and the paintings in it as much as possible during the war – only entering when pressure from other Death Eaters required it. He never went in it again after the Dark Lord fell.

It was only now that Hermione had been cursed by one of the paintings that he learned that some of them were famous, maybe even priceless. But Draco still didn't care.

"I'm going to take that fucking painting off the wall and burn it. I'll burn all the others too," he said angrily.

Hermione, naturally, was horrified.

"You can't! I know it's an unfortunate subject matter, but it's a significant piece of art in the muggle world!"

"How is *rape* significant, Hermione?"

"It's a Rubens, Draco! It's a masterpiece!"

"This is like that time you argued with Potter about leaving baby Voldemort in limbo, isn't it? I still say Potter was right to do it, baby or not. That painting is vile, and it hurt you. You should have just destroyed it if you wanted to retrieve the objects behind it that badly!"

"I could never do that! It's too important! And it's just a fingernail!"

"You hurt yourself Hermione! You're fucking bleeding because of some goddamned painting that literally *nobody* cares about!"

"The muggles care!"

"Of course the muggles don't care, they don't even have it! Why didn't you call for help? Why didn't you wait for me? Why didn't you fucking *think*?"

Draco only stopped berating her when he saw the tears in her eyes and realized how ashen she looked. Suddenly he remembered she had never taken whatever potion was in her hand.

"What is that you're holding?"

"Pain potion," she said through gritted teeth, sniffing a little.

“You haven’t taken it?” he said, utterly appalled.

“No! I thought I should explain it to you before I was under the bleeding influence!”

“Salazar, Merlin, and Morgana,” he muttered, and he yanked the potion out from her hand and nearly force fed it to her.

A moment later, a sense of peace settled over her, and he suddenly realized he had erred.

Badly.

“Draco! You saved me!”

She was looking at him with such adoration that he almost groaned. He remembered the effects of this potion well. It worked wonderfully for pain relief, but he had been entirely too honest while he was on it. He was very tempted to ask her all sorts of questions about her feelings, but Draco knew she would never forgive him for it. He just sighed. He was still angry, but he couldn't very well rage at her in the face of her doe-eyed wonder.

“Come on sweetheart. Let’s get you to bed.”

“Oh I *love* it when you take me to bed, Draco. Yours is so much more comfortable than mine. And it’s the most romantic thing, waking up next to you.”

Draco tried to stop the rush of pleasure at her words, but he couldn’t help himself. Instead, he said nothing as he led her up to his room and called Florrie for supplies to help clean the blood off of her so he could examine the damage for himself.

Draco winced and felt sick as he looked at her mangled pinky finger. She had ripped the nail straight off to remove the curse.

“Does it still hurt?” he asked her grimly.

“Oh no,” she sighed. “And besides, it was better than the curse anyway. Thank you for saving me from it.”

“Sweetheart, I didn’t save you.”

“You did! It was going to take me up the arse like you want to, but I told it no because that’s for you. I think your magic stopped it.”

Draco felt his world spin. He forced himself to set aside her fascinating words about her arse being for him. Instead, he focused on the other thing she said.

“Excuse me?” he said quietly. “It was going to do *what* to you?”

And then she told him in a light-hearted, easy breezy voice all about how the curse on the painting had fucking *raped* her, but that somehow Draco’s magic had stopped it from doing everything it wanted to do. Well if that was the case, why hadn’t his magic stopped it from happening at all? Draco felt positively murderous, and there was nothing he could do about it. The only person he could yell at was injured and high. The person actually *responsible* - his fucking father - was dead.

“It was just in my head, silly. And besides, I consented to some of it to save the painting. I knew what would happen!”

“You can’t consent to rape, Hermione,” he gritted out. “That’s literally the definition of the word!”

“Consensual nonconsent,” she retorted. “I read about it in the Library!”

Draco squeezed the bridge of his nose, praying for patience. He truly could not believe he was having this conversation with her while she was in this condition.

“Sweetheart, if you can’t safe word out of it, then you can’t consent. Consensual nonconsent is the enactment of a fantasy, not the real

thing.”

“But I did! I used my safe word and you helped me again!”

Draco just gaped, having no idea how he was supposed to respond to this.

“Did all of it stop?”

“Well no. The worst bits did. Your magic was fighting it for me, but it couldn’t break the curse entirely. That’s why I had to take off my nail, you see.”

Suddenly her expression changed, and she gave him a sorrowful look. “I didn’t like it, Draco.”

Draco’s gut twisted, his anger at her melting as it was replaced with guilt for the fact that his family had managed to hurt her *again*.

“Oh Hermione,” he sighed, as he pulled her toward him, and she buried herself into his chest. “I’m so sorry sweetheart.”

“It was just in my head though,” she said softly. “None of it was real.”

“I’m sure it felt like it was real,” he said. “My sudden urge to murder my father for casting a curse like that is certainly real.”

“It might have been your grandfather. It was old.”

“Him too then,” said Draco.

She just nodded before stilling and then abruptly switched subjects. “You smell like my amortentia, you know.”

Draco was jolted out of the fantasies he had just been having about bringing his father back from the dead so he could kill him all over again.

“Pardon?”

“Amortentia. I brewed it in the lab yesterday afternoon. I’ve moved on to potions to try to reverse the Tobias Raine curse. I’m moving through a bunch to see if any have ingredients that help slow bleeding. Amortentia helps with some dark magic because of the euphoria and contentment it causes. It didn’t work for this, but it does smell like you now.”

Draco’s heart was pounding. “You smell like my amortentia too. Hermione Granger after a Prefects’ bath.”

She pulled away, and her eyes were huge. Then she got a delighted smile on her face. “Oh I was hoping my perfume was something like that! Draco, you love me!”

Again, the sloppy expression on her face pushed his anger away, and he smiled a bit reluctantly as he pulled her in. He *did* love her, but he wasn’t going to tell her for the first time when she was like this.

Then something else she had just said registered.

“You brewed it yesterday afternoon?”

“Mmmhmm,” she nodded.

“How? You were with me yesterday afternoon finishing the Master’s suite.”

To Draco’s surprise she got quiet, and he pulled her back to study her face. She was still giving him that wide-eyed earnest expression, but she also appeared nervous. Then she seemed to come to a decision.

“I’m not telling you. It will make you cross, and you’ll shout at me again. You’ve yelled at me enough for one day.”

Then she gave a truly adorable harumph and settled back against his chest.

Draco traced lazy circles against her skin as he considered this. She was so open like this he could probably tease the truth out of her, but that wouldn't be well-done of him. Instead, he would need to figure it out while she was sober.

He asked something else to deflect a little.

"Have you been working too much, sweetheart?"

She gave a dramatic sigh. "Oh yes Draco, and I know I've been breaking all of your rules, but I've been so busy! It's temporary, I promise."

He made an indistinct noise to settle her again, but his brain was turning her words over and over. To Draco's knowledge she really *hadn't* been working much more than usual. Her mind was distant a bit more often, but she didn't seem to be truly overworked. He always watched her carefully, making sure she took plenty of breaks with him. She skipped no meals that he was aware of — he or Florrie saw her for breakfast and dinner most days now and lunch at least half of the time. She was still going to Theo's, still making time for some truly fantastic sex, still letting him draw baths for her.

As for sleep, they were starting to share a bed more and more often. True, it wasn't every single night but it was frequent enough that Draco felt he had a rather firm grip on her sleep habits and tendencies. Even the nights he didn't sleep with her they communicated with the Lover's Box before bed. She did have the occasional nightmare, but other than that she seemed to be sleeping well. In fact, recently she would climb into bed, and she was usually out like a light within a few minutes. She slept like the dead until he had to rouse her for work.

No, Draco wasn't sure how she was failing to take breaks or failing to sleep enough. Meals he was least certain about because she could skip the odd lunch now and then without him knowing about it, but it wouldn't be very often. She hadn't been losing weight.

But she said she was breaking his rules, and she had apparently brewed a very complex, four-hour-long potion the previous afternoon while she was at the Manor with him.

A truly curious idea that made Draco both very angry and very turned on crossed his mind, but he thought it was impossible. Harry had once told him they were all destroyed.

Unless the Ministry still has one, and it's classified. The Playground is the final resting place for all sorts of classified objects.

Draco set it aside for a moment. He had no proof of anything, and Hermione was high as a kite. He couldn't take her words seriously when she was like this. Even though Draco had spewed truths under this potion, the stories Hermione told him about Harry meant that not everybody reacted to it the same way he did. Hermione had certainly dismissed everything Draco said to her while he was under it because apparently exaggerations, misplaced feelings, and even boldfaced lies were commonplace.

No, Draco couldn't rely on anything yet. But he would watch her. He would watch her more carefully than ever.

Hermione

Pansy declared Hermione's timing surrounding her missing pinky nail to be truly horrendous.

"It might show up in photos!"

Hermione had done some research after the fact and thought the nail would grow back eventually. She might always have a bit of a burned spot on the skin underneath, but that wasn't too bad. Eventually the nail would cover it. Pansy had been in favor of using a regrowth potion or spell to speed the process along, but in Hermione's professional opinion it was best to let nature take its course and wait for it to grow back on its own.

“It will secure itself better than way.”

Pansy, therefore, showed up to Hermione’s flat for the next charity gala, false nails and application glue in hand. She proceeded to secure them to all of her fingers, using the tiniest sliver of nail that was left and a light sticking charm on her pinky.

Hermione, who had never in her life worn false nails, looked at her fingers with consternation.

“These feel terrible!” she moaned, as she tried – and failed – to snap her fabric clutch closed. “I have no coordination with these things on!”

“Oh *honestly* they have barely any length to them at all! Rita’s are twice as long, and she can even write with the damn things!”

Hermione knew Pansy was correct, but that didn’t make her feel any better. The only saving grace was that Pansy kept the color subtle.

“You don’t care about my mudblood scar,” muttered Hermione as she yanked on the dress Pansy had made for her that night. “I don’t know why you care about this.”

“Salazar’s tits Granger, be more gentle with the fabric!” said Pansy in alarm. “And no, I don’t care about the scar on your arm – it’s something that is well known about you. But missing that much nail is going to make people’s stomachs turn.”

Hermione sighed and conceded defeat. Besides, it was temporary so it wasn’t something the world would have to get used to.

This was the third gala of the ‘Big Four,’ as Hermione called them in her mind: St. Mungo’s was always first, then Hogwarts, and tonight was for the Hazelwood Wizarding Orphanage, which had seen an enormous influx of children during the years of the war. The last big gala of the year was always for the Ministry itself during that slow week between Boxing Day and New Year’s Eve. There were smaller

events and fundraisers in between, but those four were the ones that had press and attracted large crowds.

The Hazelwood fundraiser was Hermione's least favorite of the Big Four because it was the most painful. Harry was an orphan. Teddy was an orphan. Hermione might as well have been an orphan. There were far too many orphans in the wizarding world these days. She always felt strange about dressing up in a gown and attending a party for something so sad, but she would never tell Hazelwood no. It played an immensely important role, and by most accounts it did a good job. Harry had taken up Hazelwood as his special cause after the war, once he learned about their work. He was quoted as saying he wished he had spent his childhood there instead of where he lived, and it caught on and became a beloved charity with broad support.

Hermione knew that the previous year they raised enough money to install a new playground and swimming pool for the kids, and this year they were hoping to replace the roof and repaint the building. Hermione was preparing herself for a long event with finger food and cocktails. At least this year she would be attending with Draco and *this* time it wasn't really a group date because there were no tables to buy. Everybody just mingled, and usually they hosted a silent auction.

Pansy finished the last touches on Hermione's dress before floo'ing away to finish getting ready herself. All of their friends would be there tonight, and they were coming in pairs.

"Don't forget to find me! The press will want photos!"

Hermione smiled and sent Pansy on her way, privately thinking that the photos she already had from the first shoot ought to be good enough. Draco had certainly seemed to love them, and she had even caught him winking to one in the immediate aftermath of that horrible curse.

Draco still had not completely forgiven her for it. He had been testy and brooding, keeping a closer eye on her than ever but holding her at arms' length while he did it. He had a tendency to descend into fits of silence, and it had taken three full days to convince him to touch her again after she spilled the excruciating details. He had refused entirely until she broke the rules and pulled out one of her vibrators from his nightstand to threaten him with it.

"I'm getting off whether you like it or not. You're being ridiculous!"

It was true Hermione was trying put on a show of bravery. The experience had been terrible, but she made herself lock it away in the hyper analytical section of her mind that knew it was just neurons and nobody had physically touched her like that. It wasn't perfect, but it was all she could do, and Draco's first touch after the fact had been so caring and gentle that it allowed her to push the very worst parts of it away. Eventually she might be able to convince herself that it wasn't so bad, and while she waited to get to that point she consoled herself with the knowledge that Draco's touch wasn't triggering for her.

Perhaps the most positive thing about Draco's mood was that it seemed to distract him from the *other* secret she had almost divulged – the time-turner. She really wanted to question him about his amortentia again, but she didn't dare because she was afraid it would remind him of her confession about her own. Draco, however, didn't seem to be aware that Hermione's schedule was very packed, and he had been focused on making her feel comfortable with touch again after the thing that happened to her.

She did tell him, however, that she had finally found a hard limit for herself: no consensual nonconsent. Even though Draco insisted she really *hadn't* consented to the curse, Hermione believed it was close enough that she knew it wasn't something she wanted to try. Even doing it with Draco wasn't appealing.

Draco agreed to this limit so readily that she thought it might have become a hard limit for him too over the past few days. The bondage

and objectification was one thing, but Draco had seen rape happen in real life. He had opportunities to participate in it and harbored no fantasies about doing it to Hermione. His fantasies with her all seemed to revolve around intentional submission because she wanted him, not because he was forcing her to do it.

Hermione fussed with her dress just a bit more as she waited for Draco to arrive. Tonight was a deep gold silk, surprisingly simple in its cut with a scoop neck, spaghetti straps, and A-line skirt. It was less flashy than other things Pansy had dressed her in and less revealing too. The fabric, however, practically kissed her skin, and the draping was truly divine. Sure enough, the moment Draco arrived through the floo, his eyes dropped over her form from top to bottom, and he shuddered a little bit.

“Do we really have to go?” he asked.

She just smiled a little and nodded.

He sighed. “Very well, then. These are yours.”

“Again?” asked Hermione, as she took the proffered box. She opened it to find something that looked suspiciously like...

“Canary diamonds. Australian of course.”

“Why are you saying that like it’s obvious?”

He gave her a superior look. “Because it is. We used to own some land there and stumbled across a small diamond deposit on it a couple hundred years ago. Sheer dumb luck. We mined it until Grandfather sold it to the muggles. So yes, they’re Australian just like most of the other diamonds in our vault. These pieces are some of Mother’s favorites.”

Hermione gave him an appalled look. “I’m not taking the estate jewelry that your mother loves!”

“Then you’ll just have to marry me so you can return all the family gems to the vault when I’m not looking,” he retorted.

Then he pushed the earrings in her hand and clasped a matching bracelet around her wrist. The pieces were well-cut, but heavy, and Hermione had to cast that same featherlight charm Pansy taught her for the first gala.

Hermione’s heart stuttered at this. “Are you proposing?” she asked boldly.

“Why, do you want me to be?”

The look he gave her was so eager, so intent, that Hermione panicked a little and hesitated a moment too long. His expression relaxed back into something that was a bit teasing as he tapped her on the nose.

“Wear them. Mother never does.”

“But you just said –”

“They’re some of her favorites, yes. But she won’t wear yellow because it washes her out. These are too beautiful to just sit in the vault, sweetheart. Besides, I’m still a bit angry with you about that blasted painting. You owe me this.”

Hermione felt a bit better to know that Narcissa wasn’t missing out on them tonight, though she rolled her eyes at the notion that she *owed* Draco.

“Is this my punishment then?”

Draco smirked. “No. Your punishment comes later, perhaps tonight or tomorrow. But in the meantime, I want you to wear these. They’re yours. You know what you have to do if you want to return them to me.”

Hermione suddenly narrowed her eyes at him. “Is that your plan then? You’re going to shower me with things like this until I feel so guilty about it that I agree to marry you so it all becomes Malfoy property again?”

To her consternation he just raised one eyebrow. “You said it, not me.”

Hermione pursed her lips and studied him. “Did you use Australian diamonds on the things you've given to me?”

Now he twinkled at her. “Of course. I have plenty of loose stones stored for new pieces. I’ll buy other gemstones, but not diamonds — there’s really no point. According to Mother, my grandfather had some goblins practically clean the mine out of colorless stones and the best of the fancy colored stones before he sold it to the muggles. He only left enough behind to make sure the sale went through.”

“Bloody hell,” she muttered.

He just smirked. “Australian diamonds are a family tradition. You know I follow traditions until I decide I don’t like them. Consider it part of my duty as head of the Malfoy family.”

Hermione harumphed, and he just laughed. “Come on, we’re going to be late.”

Hermione was still absorbing the news that Draco had her charms made using stones he already had. She knew he favored diamonds, and she was very pleased he didn't buy them for her. Every time she thought about it before tonight she felt guilty at the expense. On the other hand, it made her charms that much more personal. She couldn’t believe the Malfoys had owned a mine at one time.

Then again, should I really be surprised?

She knew they had extensive land holdings and not just in England. Was it really so shocking they found natural resources on some of

their land and exploited those resources? It did seem like a very Malfoy thing to do after all.

Merlin, I'm probably going to marry into a family of opportunists - very lucky opportunists.

Draco said no more about it, and Hermione allowed him to hurry her along while she was lost in her own thoughts. He kept his hand firmly on the small of her back as he led her through a magical tent on the lawn of Hazelwood, toward the press who turned eagerly to them for a photo.

“Mr. Malfoy! Is it true you’re dating?”

“Miss Granger! Are you really living at Malfoy Manor?”

Hermione and Draco didn’t answer the dozen or so questions thrown out at them, but Draco just pulled her close. “Pictures speak louder than words,” he whispered into her ear as he planted a deep kiss right on her lips.

They pulled away, and Draco surveyed the press. “That should tell you what you need to know.”

They gaped a bit as he tugged her hand and pulled her further into the crowd, nodding at people he knew.

It was really a crush, and Hermione was grateful he hadn’t left her side. She used him as a bit of a shield to slowly make her way toward the bar and food.

“I haven’t eaten,” she said.

Draco looked torn between annoyance that she hadn’t and approval that she was fixing the issue, and he only let go of her hand to pile a plate high with heavy finger foods as Hermione moved to a high-top table nearby.

Pansy and Blaise meandered over, as did Luna and Theo.

“Darling!” cried Theo, pulling her in for a kiss.

“You’re gorgeous, *leonessa*,” said Blaise approvingly.

“All Pansy of course,” she said, nodding to her friend, who surveyed her with a critical eye and nodded approvingly at the accessories.

Draco was just turning back around with food when the blonde form of Ella Vanity came marching toward them.

“Shit,” muttered Hermione.

“Bitch slap her,” suggested Pansy.

“I’ll help,” chimed Theo.

Hermione opened her mouth to respond, but then shut it as Ella came right up to Hermione and physically shoved her back a few steps. Hermione blinked in surprise and didn’t fall, but by the time she had straightened up again, Draco had a truly ugly look on his face and was pointing his wand straight at her.

“Draco,” she said softly. “Put it down. You know you can’t.”

Draco completely ignored her, and she shot a frantic look at Theo and Blaise, who were muttering quietly in his ear. Slowly Draco lowered his wand, but he didn’t tear his eyes off of her, and Hermione knew he was moments away from hexing Ella so hard he might be sent back to Azkaban.

“What was that for?” asked Hermione archly, deciding to take the high road to diffuse some of the tension.

“You!” hissed Ella. “You mudblood bitch!”

Hermione sent a warning look at Draco, whose grip on his wand was tightening again.

“I’m still not sure what you want,” said Hermione in a bored voice.

“I want you to *back off*,” demanded Ella. “Stop trying to ruin my reputation! Leave Draco alone! Go back to your hole with your *filthy muggles* like you belong! You aren’t one of us! You will *never* deserve him! You’re just playing dress up in that manor of his and whoring yourself out while you do it!”

Draco looked like he was about to attack her, and the others looked very on the edge as well. Hermione almost groaned when she saw Narcissa marching toward them with several of her older friends in tow, and by the look on her face she was certain Narcissa had heard at least part of it.

But something about Ella’s words struck Hermione in a way that nobody else’s words had. In a few sentences she articulated all the stress, all the doubts, all the fears that Hermione herself harbored when it came to Draco. But instead of making her want to run away, the words made Hermione want to fight back. Only now did she really understand that Draco and even the Manor had already chosen her. It didn’t matter if it felt unequal. It didn’t matter if people like Ella Vanity thought she was unworthy. All that mattered was that they chose her, and now they were just waiting for her to choose them back. That was the missing piece.

Hermione knew something of her thoughts about this must have crossed her face, because suddenly Draco looked much less angry, and his eyes started to gleam as he stared at her. Narcissa also paused, as though waiting to hear what Hermione would say. And Ella... well, Ella started to *cower*.

“I do believe,” said Hermione calmly, “that when you waited until Draco was very drunk and emotionally vulnerable right after Lucius’s funeral to strip naked and drop to your knees, *you* were the one behaving like a whore. And then you compounded it when you pretended to be pregnant in some desperate attempt to get him to see you again. It was truly pathetic, all of it. And it didn’t even work. He doesn’t want you, Ella. He’s *never* wanted you. He wants me and everything I can give him.”

Ella was still cowering, but turning red with fury and humiliation as Hermione laid out her sins publicly.

“There is *nothing* you can give him!”

Hermione started to laugh and caught Draco’s eye. He smiled a bit and nodded toward her as though to say, *do go on*.

“I’ve given him confidence, solutions, protection, loyalty, support. I have sacrificed for him, lied for him, bled for him, and he has done the same things for me. Did you know the Manor is starting to answer to me now? Did you know that it took me and *my* magic into account when Draco took over the Manor from Lucius?”

“But.. but...” she stuttered, and then Hermione decided it was just time to do it. It was time to embrace Draco and his traditions. It was time to go in for the kill.

“Draco is courting me,” she said simply, and she saw his eyes widen ever so slightly, and then an intense, eager look settled onto his face. “In fact, he’s given me his Lover’s Box. I’m surprised you haven’t heard about it. It’s rather old news. Surely you wouldn’t have made such a scene if you were better informed.”

Hermione saw Narcissa gape for a split second, before her face smoothed into an expression of passive interest.

“No...” whispered Ella. “No, he can’t have. I would have known...”

“Oh, of course he did,” said Narcissa airily. “Ages ago.”

“I’ve known about it for months,” chimed in Pansy.

“Yes, I’m surprised nobody told you,” said Luna, which made Ella go very pale. “I thought everybody knew about *that*.”

Even Narcissa’s friends, whom Hermione had only met in passing a handful of times, were all nodding to each other as though they had heard about this well before tonight.

“I’ve had it since my birthday in September,” added Hermione.
“Draco didn’t feel the need to be flashy about it, nor did I. The rules are a bit different for the Malfoys, you know, and I’m already quite famous enough without extra gossip sent my way. Still, I thought you would have heard about it Ella. Or if not, you would have taken the hint when he made it very clear that he didn’t want you. I do apologize if this news is... a *lot* for you.”

Amusement gleamed in Draco’s eyes at these words, and Ella started to shake.

“I suggest you find some other wizard to hunt Ella. You aren’t getting this one.”

Ella gave an almighty sniff and turned to flee, as Draco moved directly in front of Hermione, cutting her off from view from the others.

“Eat quickly. Take the photos you need to take for Pansy. Then we’re getting out of here sweetheart.”

“Oh?” she whispered back.

“You think I’m going to spend time at a sodding charity gala after a speech like that? No, I’m going to romance that dress right off of you. Come on, let’s wrap it up. I want to be out of here within an hour.”

He pulled back, and Hermione smiled a little as her friends and Narcissa converged on her, gossiping about what just happened. Narcissa, in particular, looked ecstatic.

“Oh I was so hoping you two would suit!” she said. “It’s a fantastic match, truly.”

Hermione smiled indulgently. Narcissa could be a bit much, but Hermione had become rather fond of her over the previous months.

While Hermione ate, Draco broke away for a few moments. She caught him talking to Ben and Patrick for a few minutes and then to her surprise, she saw Florrie out of the corner of her eye. By the time he was striding back toward her, he had a determined look on his face. "Thirty minutes," he said. "Not a moment longer."

Even Pansy didn't object when she saw Draco's expression, and she pulled Hermione and Luna with her to do all the free advertising the press would give to her through strategic photos ops. By the time they were done, Hermione heard whispers following her wherever she went.

"They are all shitting themselves," muttered Pansy between blinding white teeth as the witches smiled for the cameras.

"It's a bit ridiculous," said Hermione, with a similar smile plastered on her face.

"It's Draco. He's a *huge* deal. And you are too. This is going to turn pureblood courtships on their head. It might even make my mother consider alternatives. She's backed off on Adrian a bit, but she still insists on something very formal. It's a lot for Blaise, and he wants to do it his own way like Draco did."

Hermione gave a genuine smile at that, and at long last Draco was tugging on her hand. "That's enough, we're heading out."

Pansy didn't seem to mind and just waved them off. "The news about you two is going to be front page stuff tomorrow! My dress will be featured!"

Hermione chuckled to herself as she let Draco lead her back to an apparition point.

"No floo?" she asked in confusion.

He just shook his head.

"This is faster," he said.

They reached the apparition point, and he gripped her hand, turned on the spot, and suddenly Hermione found herself in some woods, the night air giving her a chill. She shuddered a bit.

"This way," said Draco.

"Where are we?"

"You'll know in a second," he replied, and a moment later Hermione felt herself crossing the outer boundaries of some wards, and then a few moments after that the observatory came into view.

"I said we'd do it under the stars one night, didn't I?" he asked, as he pulled her to him and wrapped her up in his cloak. She snuggled into its warmth, teeth still chattering a bit from the thin silk dress as she looked over his shoulder to find the observatory.

"Come on, it's warm inside," he said, and he pushed open the door, where Hermione was hit by a blast of warmth.

It was just like he promised, but even better: wildflowers were scattered about; a large blanket and pillows covered a part of the stone floor that Hermione could already tell had a cushioning charm on it; candles floated in the air giving off just enough light so they could see each other; there were even some snacks and champagne chilling on a small ledge. And in the middle of the room was the giant telescope that was the focal point of the observatory.

Hermione was nearly breathless.

"We're doing this," he said, cradling her face in his hands. "You don't get to take it back now. No second thoughts, alright?"

"Alright," she breathed.

His face broke into a broad smile. "I can't tell you how long I've been waiting for this."

“You’ve been very patient with me,” she acknowledged.

“You’re worth it.”

“Draco?”

“Hmmm?”

“Romance my dress off please.”

She caught the flash of heat and a slight smirk as he lowered his lips to hers and his hands skated toward her shoulders to slip one strap off.

“Coming right up, sweetheart.”

Seeing Stars

Chapter 33: Seeing Stars

AN: Draco gets everything he wants - or nearly.

Draco

She was here, she was his, and she had done it in the most Gryffindor way possible by announcing to fucking Ella Vanity that Draco had given her his Lover's Box. She did it with a level of disdain that Draco was certain had impressed even Lucius if he had been watching from Hell.

Gods but Draco was in love with her.

She was a walking paradox: sexual yet innocent, brave yet cautious, thoughtful yet impulsive.

It was that last thing that made Draco point out to her that it was done, and she couldn't take it back now. He was a bit worried that she would want a redo once Ella was out of sight and her temper cooled. He needn't have worried though. Hermione took ages to think, but once a decision was made, she committed to it. It was her nature, so now they were doing this. Draco was courting her openly, and he finally allowed himself to fantasize about how he was going to propose while he teased the strap off of her shoulder.

The elves had really outdone themselves tonight. Ever since he told Hermione the truth about the Lover's Box and threw this idea out to gauge her interest he had been planning it. He had drilled the plan into Florrie: what goes where and when. All he had to do was tell Florrie that he was officially courting Hermione, and she would

execute the plan for him. Now Draco just had to make sure he didn't fuck it up by making it too dirty. This should be slow and romantic.

"Are you wearing knickers?" he whispered.

Alright, that's not romantic.

"Tiny ones," she responded.

"Then ruin them for me right now."

Fuck that's not romantic at all.

Draco couldn't help it, though. He knew how to do romantic sex, he really did. But he had thoroughly underestimated just how much he would want to celebrate this by fucking her into the floor. That dress was sheer temptation spun in gold silk, and she was wearing a small fortune's worth of canary diamonds that told the entire world she was his to spoil. He had always assumed that if she agreed to let him court her in public, she would tell him in private first. He didn't think she would announce it at a party while looking good enough to eat and giving him a raging public erection at the same time.

Draco forced himself to slow down and drink from her lips while he eased the straps off of her shoulders and allowed the dress to slither off of her body with a soft hiss of fabric. He allowed his hands to skate over her skin until he reached the outline of the knickers — thin lace, a tiny string, barely anything to think of.

Draco wanted to frame them and hang them on his wall when this was over.

He lightly touched her nipples and felt them pebble under his hands, and as usual she gave a sigh and leaned into him to encourage it. They were both still standing, and Draco knew he should spread her out on the blanket and worship her with a thousand tiny kisses as he had planned, but he was seized by another idea, so vivid he had to do it.

Instead of placing her on the altar of his love like he had imagined so many times, he kissed her greedily as he backed her toward the telescope, and he felt goosebumps erupt as the cold metal made contact with her skin.

Satisfied that she had something to prop her up, Draco kissed down her neck, marking her around her collarbone just as he liked, then down further to pull a nipple into his mouth for a lazy suck.

She was arching into him, but he wasn't done yet, and he moved to his knees as he kissed down her stomach, flicking his tongue in her navel before he reached the barely-there knickers. She might not be spread out on the cushioned ground like a divine sacrifice, but he was still kneeling in front of her. That would have to be good enough to prove his devotion because he could no longer imagine the night going any other way.

Then he set his hands on her waist and grabbed her knickers with his teeth and pulled them down.

"Oh my God..." groaned Hermione, as she watched him do it with wide eyes.

Draco waited until they were around her knees before releasing them and saying, "What have I told you about talking to God when you're like this?"

She said nothing, but just leaned back and let her eyes flutter closed as Draco pulled the knickers the rest of the way down before he ran his hands up her legs and nudged them apart. She stepped out of them, and Draco swiped a finger across the gusset to confirm that they were, in fact, positively soaked before he pocketed them. Then he gripped her knees to widen her stance even further.

"My perfect girl," he murmured, kissing back up her leg and until he reached her center. "That cunt is so beautifully wet for me. Let me taste you, yes?"

She gave a slightly incoherent moan as Draco gripped her arse and buried his face into her. She started to shake, her hands weaving through his hair, but she wouldn't come like this unless he put his fingers in her too. Draco knew she wouldn't, and he loved her for it. He loved being able to take her as hard as he could with his mouth and never have to worry about sending her over the edge too early. He could control her orgasm perfectly this way. Though she couldn't come with what he was giving to her, it still made her weak for him. He stayed on her for a long while, relishing the taste, until he felt her legs start to give out.

He released her and rose to hold her up, quivering for him and looking up at him with her huge fuck-me eyes that drove Draco mad.

"Please unfasten my pants and take out my cock princess."

Hermione responded eagerly, unbuckling and unfastening and then pulling out his cock. He was weeping for her.

"Do you see? Do you see how much I want you? How much I want this?"

"I do too," she whispered. "Please Draco, I need..."

He raised a finger to her lips.

"I know what you need, but I'm still a smidge cross with you about that painting Hermione. You're going to have to be patient until I've... sorted all my feelings about that."

She pouted a little. "You know *why* I did it!"

"Yes, and I still think you should have just ruined it instead of subjecting yourself to that horrible curse. It absolutely violated you, mentally if not physically, and then you had to injure yourself to make it stop. Every time I think about it I want to *Avada* something, do you understand? I want that painting gone, and I'm going to have it removed as soon as the Manor decides to cooperate."

“Don’t destroy it!” she pleaded. “I agree it should be taken out of that room but give it back to the muggles! They already think they have it in the National Gallery anyway. Swap their fake one for yours.”

Draco studied her. She was giving him that look that made him crumble — that look that meant he couldn’t tell her no for too long, and she knew it.

Minx.

But Draco could deny her nothing when she asked so prettily and turned the full power of her enormous, innocent eyes on him like this. She would always get whatever she wanted from him when she did this, even if it wouldn’t be exactly *when* she wanted it.

“Fine, I’ll send it back to the muggles. But next time just wreck the fucking painting.”

She made a discontented noise at this, but Draco grabbed her hand and led her around the telescope to a chair in front of the viewer.

“Now, as I said I’m still a bit cross. But you *did* announce that I’m courting you tonight, so the punishment I had in mind for endangering yourself with that fucking painting will be amended accordingly.”

She gave him a slightly wary look as he sat down on the chair. He drew his wand and waved it to conjure a small table with some parchment, ink, and a quill.

“Come sit on my cock,” he said.

Hermione bit her lip but moved toward him, and he spun her to face away from him. They both groaned a little as she sank down onto it.

“Good,” he whispered as he waved his wand again and the telescope adjusted itself to the perfect height for her.

“Now then. Draw a star chart for me. I want to remember what the night sky looked like when you said yes to my House.”

She inhaled as Draco wrapped a hand around her waist and pressed his ring into the dip of her hip. He could feel her passage already start to clench for him.

Perfect.

“Draco,” she breathed.

“Draw me a perfect star chart while you warm my cock, and I’ll consider forgiving you.”

“I have to move,” she begged.

“No,” he said a bit sharply. “Not until I have my star chart.”

Her breathing was shallow, but she swallowed hard and nodded quickly as she bent her head to look into the eyepiece and started to map the constellations for him.

He watched over her shoulder while he trailed lazy kisses along her neck and rested one hand less than an inch from her clit. He could feel the involuntary tremors as she tried to hold still, and Draco too was having to do breathing exercises to hang on for her.

This was positively delicious, and he quickly decided that cock warming was woefully underrated.

He used his hands to tease her mercilessly, circling her nipples and clit but not giving her the touch or pressure she craved. It was a punishment for her, yes, but an enjoyable and intimate one.

“You’ve reversed Adhil and Almach,” he pointed out as he watched the progression of her chart.

She made a discontented noise. “I have not.”

“Of course you have. I know that constellation very well.”

She gave another sound of protest and then studied her chart for a moment before sighing in defeat. “I suppose you do. It’s Andromeda.”

“That’s right. Here, let me swap them for you.”

He reached for his wand and tapped the parchment, and the names reversed.

“Thank you,” she grumbled begrudgingly.

“Thank you *what?*” he asked, suddenly gripping one breast to make her gasp and licking the shell of her ear.

“Thank you *sir,*” she breathed.

“Good girl. Now you’d better carry on my little swot. I could have you like this all night, but you are positively dripping. You’re so needy, I can tell....” He allowed his finger to flick over her clit, and she gasped. “You want me to fuck your perfect cunt just like this, but I’m not doing it until you finish my star chart.”

“But *why* must you insist on this chart?” she groaned, though Draco couldn’t help but notice she was quickly labeling another star while she was doing it.

The bracelet she was wearing sparkled brilliantly in the candlelight, and it moved him in an unexpected way. It was another reminder that he wanted everything that was his to be hers.

An odd feeling passed over Draco, and the sudden urge to take her as quickly as possible finally burned itself out and left behind something softer and more serious. He had been nervous to articulate his feelings for her, but for some reason his anxiety was dwindling. He thought it must be because he needed her to understand what she meant to him. He needed her to take care of

herself. And yet, she was *still* arguing with him about it, just a little bit, by objecting to this light punishment he was doling out for her.

“Why do I want the chart? Because you saved me from my legacy and from myself. Because in one night you’ve shattered a millennia of expectations about me. Because you made me realize that pure blood is nothing more than a fucking construct, and you’re more pure than any woman I have ever met. Because you’re wearing gems dug from the earth that helped build the House of Malfoy, and you’re looking up at the heavens that have always inspired the House of Black. Because you’ve made the sire of both fall in love with you.”

Hermione turned to look at him with such longing that Draco couldn’t help but kiss her. Here was the romance. It had finally found its way between them. This was what he had been hoping to tell her tonight so she would eventually take those next steps with him.

“You’re precious to me. Every bit of you is precious. And that’s why I would destroy a hundred paintings to save you from being inconvenienced. I would destroy a thousand to keep you from being hurt. And I’m going to correct *anybody* who does something that dishonors you, violates you, or seriously hurts you, and that includes yourself sweetheart.”

“Draco...” she started, but he put his finger to her lips.

“I just want to remember what the stars looked like tonight. You’re letting me do this with you publicly, and that’s a huge deal for me. I’m going to keep this star chart forever. And while I wait for you to finish it, I’m just reminding you that even though your job is dangerous, even though you can’t always avoid accidents, I expect you to avoid seriously injuring yourself if there is *any* other way to proceed. There isn’t an object or artifact on this earth that’s more important to me than you.”

Finally, slowly, she nodded, and then her eyes closed as Draco gave her a slow kiss. When he released her she looked glassy-eyed and

shuddered a bit as Draco gave her a small nudge back toward the telescope.

She was trembling, but she was nearly done with the chart, and Draco took the opportunity to touch her more intentionally, gripping her breasts and swirling lazy circles around her clit.

“You’re driving me mad,” she breathed, and he gave a wicked chuckle.

But she was behaving herself now. She was no longer objecting, and she was moving as little as possible, with just the occasional tiny jerk to tell Draco how difficult this was for her.

She finished the last star name with a flourish and pushed the paper away as she sank back into his chest.

“There. I’ve finished your chart.”

“Thank you sweetheart. I’ll treasure it.”

“Have you forgiven me yet?”

“Nearly. A few more minutes ought to do it.”

She was so wonderfully supple under him like this, her breasts heavy and her core damp.

“I was wondering if I could convince you...” she started.

Draco paused his ministrations. This sounded like the opening to a negotiation, which was a bit out of character for her. He was intrigued.

“How might you do that?”

She turned toward his ear and whispered, “I have something you still want.”

Your heart, your love, your lifelong commitment.

“True,” he acknowledged.

“And I thought I might give it to you.”

Draco’s heart was thudding.

Please, Hermione. Please give me your heart too.

“Oh?” he asked, trying to be casual.

“Yes. This...”

And to his surprise she grasped his hands and moved them away from her for a moment so she could lean forward and clutch the eyepiece of the telescope to hold her up. Then she took one of his hands and guided it behind her toward her bum.

“My arse,” she clarified.

Oh fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Draco’s mind shorted out. All desire for romance and sweetness left him in an instant as every neuron in his brain was suddenly laser focused on that perfect arse he had not allowed himself to think about during daylight hours for the past several days. Her unexpected confession under the influence of the pain potion had only been examined in his dreams or during his darkest moments of weakness. After raising it with her that one time she never brought it up again, not even after he sent her a book about it through the Lover’s Box. He was fine with it, he really was. He would never cross any lines with her, and he wouldn’t pressure her for something like that. A tiny part of him had been hoping she was still thinking about it, but he couldn’t be sure. Eventually he tucked the hope away in the back of his mind and didn’t allow himself to think about it. She would come to him about it when she was ready, or she wouldn’t. That was that.

Now here she was, having finally made her decision. Hermione really was the type to take her time when she was considering something brand new.

“You’re sure?” he breathed, forcing his gaze away from her arse and toward her face to make sure he could see the truth in her eyes.

She swallowed and nodded. “I’m rather nervous, but... yes. I’m curious about it. And I trust you. And... you made me fall in love with you too. I told that curse that it would only be yours, and I meant it.”

Oh Gods she was giving him her heart too. She was giving him every single thing he wanted, every fucking thing. Instinctively he gripped her hips as he let himself bask in her words.

“Thank you. And don’t worry, we’ll go slow. You remember your safe word?”

She nodded. “Chimera.”

“Don’t hesitate to use it. I love you. And I am not even the slightest bit cross with you anymore.”

Then Draco thrust up, and she moaned as the pressure she had been craving finally hit her in that special spot. It took only moments before she was shaking for him again.

“Once like this,” he gasped. “Give me one like this, and then I’m going to explore that perfect arse...”

Draco was desperately eager to dive right in, but he knew it would be easier for her this first time if she had come first. It would pull her out of her head. It would help her relax and make her crave another round. Besides, Draco was sure it wouldn’t take long at all.

Sure enough, she broke for him within five thrusts, and those delightful little tremors were trying to pull his own release out of him too, but he persevered.

He grabbed his wand and quickly cast a charm to cleanse her, and she gasped.

“We’ll go slow,” he whispered. “So slow sweetheart. And we’ll just do some prep work tonight. I’m not going the whole way until I’m sure you’re ready.”

She nodded frantically, and Draco kept his cock inside of her. “Hang on,” he said, and she gripped the telescope like a lifeline as Draco quickly summoned some lube from a basket Florrie had left for him and dipped his fingers into it. He had never needed it before tonight, but ever since mentioning this to her the first time he always had it nearby just in case. Finger ready now, he peered down and ran it down the cleft of her arse. He brushed over the pucker, and she shuddered.

“Fuck, Granger, you’re going to make me come,” he groaned.

He bit his lip and tried to contain himself as he breached her. She gasped, and Draco felt his self-control weakening as he moved it slowly inside of her.

“Good?” he asked, and she nodded.

“Then I’m going all the way up to my ring.”

She moaned as he pressed in slowly and held it there while he began to move.

“Fuck...” he groaned. This was perfect, utterly perfect as he filled both sides. He could feel himself moving between that thin barrier that separated her channels, and he was getting perilously close.

“*Draco*,” she groaned, and she slumped forward, trembling.

“You’re so dirty for me angel, letting me play with you like a toy. I love this. I fucking love you, Granger. I love you and your swotty little arse. I want you to see the fucking stars...”

He started to move faster, and he was barely hanging on by a thread.

“Come for me, and then I’ll fill you Granger. I’m going to fill you right the fuck up... *fuck...*”

She gave a great moan and shuddered for him, and Draco knew she had gotten there, and he was done. He was so fucking done, he couldn’t help himself as he pumped into her and started to blow, trying to be as gentle as possible given where his finger still was.

Finally spent, he slipped out and grabbed his wand to clean them both before he pulled her back into his lap. She was shaking a little and so was he.

“Alright?” he whispered.

“Yes, that was...”

“Fucking incredible.”

She nodded. “I like it a lot, but it’s intense.”

“I know. We’ll build up to it.”

She turned and kissed him for several long moments until he broke away to nudge her off his lap.

“Come over here, I want to give you something.”

He led her toward the blanket they still hadn’t used, before summoning the other thing from the basket Florrie had prepared for him. She had retrieved it from under his bed. It zipped toward him, and he caught it lightly before handing it to her.

“Another box?” she asked in amusement, as she pulled it toward her. Then she gave him an odd look. “It’s warm.”

He smiled a little. “That’s because it’s special. Look at it.”

Draco watched her study it. It was quite a bit smaller than the Lover's Box and far more delicate. The Lover's Box featured extensive carvings, but it had always looked a bit heavy to Draco due to its size and the Malfoy crest embossed so prominently on top. This new box featured a light wood all around the edge, with a richer, striated wood in the center of the top. It was inlaid with gold symbols that he could tell she didn't recognize.

"It's made out of vinewood and hawthorn," said Draco.

Hermione looked at him in surprise. "My wand is vinewood."

He nodded. "I know. And mine is hawthorn."

Hermione got a knowing look on her face, and Draco was sure he knew why. Harry used Draco's wand after that day she was tortured at the Manor. He defeated Voldemort with it. Harry returned it to Draco once he was out of Azkaban.

"There's also dragon heartstring and unicorn hair under the wood inlay on top," he added.

Hermione inhaled. It was their wand cores, and he could tell she realized this based on her expression.

"Is that why it's warm?"

He nodded. "You have an affinity for vinewood and dragon heartstring. That's why you can feel it. Boxes like this are usually made out of magical materials because they channel and hold magic better than non magical species."

"Is the Lover's Box made out of magical wood then?"

Draco nodded. "It's elmwood and unicorn hair. I can feel it a little bit, but not as much as this."

She nodded a little. "I suppose that explains why it works so well despite its age. I can't sense the magic in it in the same way as this

smaller box though.”

Draco smiled. “Malfoys favor magical wood species, and we like to embed our cores into wooden objects too so we can feel the magic. There haven’t been many Malfoys with unicorn hair or hawthorn affinities over the years so I’ve never been able to feel much around the Manor. So for this box... well I couldn’t resist. And besides, there’s a bit of a backstory to it.”

“Tell me,” she said.

He took a deep breath. “I had this made seven years ago, when I still thought I could find Jeanine. Remember, I was going to kidnap you and keep you as my prisoner. I knew you would hate me so I had this made for you as a sort of apology —something to give you to make you forgive me for it.”

He could tell this really surprised her, and she looked at him cautiously. “It was the first thing like this I ever had made so I used my wand elements. I thought you were a muggle, but I was going to show you magic. I wanted to prove myself to you in some way. I don’t know, I was a teenager.”

She nodded slowly.

“Of course I never did find Jeanine because she didn’t exist. I put it in my vault and finally pulled it out again when I realized it was you all along. I took it back to the goblins and had the vinewood and dragon heartstring added on the lid so that you could feel everything too. And they did the gold inlay for me as well. I thought about giving it to you that night I really fucked up, after the Hogwarts fundraiser. It was always supposed to be a way to apologize to you and win your affections. But I realized that wouldn’t work on you, not really. I decided to wait until your feelings were there and you agreed to let me claim you publicly. It felt like coming full circle.”

Hermione smiled softly at this.

“And the symbols?” she asked.

“They’re runes,” he said.

She gave him a confused look. “No they aren’t.”

He smirked. “Sure they are.”

“But I don’t recognize them!”

“That’s because they’re elvish runes. Specifically, house elves.”

Hermione looked at him in surprise. He knew his eyes were gleaming. This had been one of the things he couldn’t resist adding once he knew it was for Hermione. She reached out a finger and traced them. Draco thought they were much prettier than the odd, spiky wizarding runes they had studied in school. These were elegant, curved, feminine. They reminded him of the vines on the gates of the Manor.

“What does it say?” she asked.

He just gave her a smile and felt a bit wistful as he looked at it. The inscription had been something he poured over before he had it added.

“As to that, I think you should figure it out for yourself.”

She gave him a sharp look. “I’m sure Rosie or Florrie could tell me.”

Draco nodded. “They could. I’ll admit Florrie checked my translation, but I figured it out first. If I can do it, then so can you.”

Hermione nodded slowly.

“Go ahead and open it,” he said.

Hermione finally lifted the lid to find another runic inscription inlaid with gold on the inside the lid with velvet lining the interior. A look of

understanding crossed her face.

"It's a jewelry box!" she said with delight.

"If I didn't already have this waiting in the wings I would have given you one before now," said Draco wryly. "I don't approve of your nightstand. It's not nearly secure enough for some of the things you store in it."

Hermione gave him a small smile. "I suppose that's fair. Although in my defense I never had much that was valuable until very recently."

Draco nodded a bit. "Well you do now. At some point I hope you'll be able to pop into the Malfoy vault at Gringotts to pick up things whenever you wish, but it can be inconvenient. You should have something that lets you keep the things you wear often nearby."

An odd flash of something Draco couldn't quite identify crossed her face as he said this, but then it was gone as she eased into a beautiful smile.

"Well thank you. It's one of the loveliest things anybody has ever given to me, truly. The craftsmanship is stunning."

Draco felt a rush of pleasure that he had gotten it right.

"Good," he said. "Now lift the tray."

Hermione shot him a questioning look and did so, to find a charm for her bracelet in the shape of the Malfoy Lover's Box. He had a tiny canary diamond set into the latch as though it was glowing. It was a perfect coincidence that he was able to give it to her tonight.

She smiled as she pulled it out. "I would normally say it's too much, but I'll admit this *does* seem appropriate."

He grinned. "It is. Though now you've also given me the job of figuring out how to represent your gorgeous arse in charm form. We crossed that milestone tonight too, sweetheart."

Her jaw dropped in outrage. “Oh you are *terrible!*”

“You love me though, remember?”

She huffed. “Oh I suppose, but *honestly* Draco if you have the goblins make some sort of... I don’t know... *rear end* charm I will take you to the Playground and curse you until you are unrecognizable.”

He grinned. “Challenge accepted.”

She huffed, but he could tell she was trying not to smile.

“Alright. Now this jewelry box will never run out of space. It has a variation on an undetectable extension charm built into the bottom of it. If you fill it up, another tray will appear. And if you fill that one up, still another, and so forth. It will stay very organized.”

Hermione shot him a look. “Undetectable extension charms are illegal.”

“First, I am almost certain that *you* have cast an illegal undetectable extension charm before. Second, this one was perfectly legal because the goblins cast it and not me.”

“Pardon?”

“There’s an exemption for goblins and house elves. You have to look through several cross references in the law to find it, but Pollox Malfoy made sure that both creatures could still do it when that law was passed. He liked having undetectable extension charms built into his briefcases, satchels, and robe pockets, and he wasn’t interested in getting a waiver from the Ministry every time he wanted to do it.”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Hermione, but she seemed amused despite herself. “How many stories like that are in your family?”

“Dozens,” he said with a smirk. “I told you that interfering at the Ministry is a family tradition.”

Hermione just shook her head.

“Last thing then is to ward it,” he added. “Blood wards again.”

Hermione eyed him. He knew blood wards were borderline dark, but he was very adept at them.

“You favor blood wards,” she said, and Draco heard a note of accusation in her voice.

He gave her an intense look. “They’re secure. I’m sure you know some obscure wards too, but if they aren’t blood wards they can be broken with enough study or effort. You know that.”

Hermione bit her lip.

“Fine, a blood ward then.”

Draco waved his wand and conjured a pair of needles. He handed one to her. “Prick your finger, sweetheart, we have to do it at the same time.”

“You’re adding blood too then?” Hermione asked as she pricked her finger and he did too.

He studied her for a moment, but then decided he could tell her why. She knew where this was headed if he got his way.

“I’m going to cast a ward that’s permanent without an expiration date. Given that, I think it’s a good idea for a Malfoy to be able to get into it.”

She shot him a shy look, but then dipped her head and nodded in agreement. Draco gave a sigh of relief. Blood wards could be tied to a specific person or tied to family lines. If he used one for family lines and she ever became a Malfoy, then she wouldn’t be able to get into

it unless he added Malfoy blood at the same time. He wanted one tied to family lines instead of just her so that future generations could use it too once they were gone. It was beautiful enough to become a Malfoy family heirloom one day.

Besides, if I ward it with family blood ties then she won't be able to get into it if she marries somebody else.

Draco wondered if he should feel bad about this, but he didn't. All the things that he had given her were hers to keep regardless of what happened between them. But this thing – this one thing – meant more to him than anything else because of the story it told. If she ever took a name that wasn't Granger or Malfoy, the jewelry box would effectively break, just like his heart.

He started to chant under his breath, and the box began to glow. He muttered a string of Latin and made sure to include "Granger" and "Malfoy" as the only family lines who were permitted to cross the wards. Then he grabbed her hand and squeezed a drop of her blood on the top of the box at the same time he did it with his own hand. The blood faded into the latch, and it was done. It was hers now and would be accessible while she was a Granger. It would stay that way if she ever became a Malfoy, and Draco would be able to get into it too. If she turned Weasley, however, she would be locked out.

Good. She's mine.

She leaned into him and gave him another kiss when it was done.

"Do you want to stay here or head back?" he asked.

She glanced around. "I wouldn't say no to a snack and some champagne. But let's sleep in your room tonight."

Draco was perfectly happy with this suggestion, and they ate their fill of cheese, fruit, and bread before he pulled her to her feet and balled up her dress so she couldn't put it back on.

“I’m still naked,” she pointed out.

“Yes, and it’s fantastic.”

“Draco, I can’t sneak through the Manor like this.”

“It’s late, sweetheart. Nobody but me is going to see you.”

“The portraits might see me and tell your mother.”

“In case you’ve forgotten, all the portraiture has been replaced with mad house elves and unicorns. My dead ancestors are gone. They won’t say a word.”

She just gave him such a fierce look that he sighed with some regret and offered her his cloak.

“Thank you,” she said primly.

He led them out of the observatory and apparated them to the far side of the quidditch pitch where they crossed the interior wards to the Manor and slipped in.

“You know,” she said, as they passed painting after painting filled with dozing magical creatures, “I wonder if the strong unicorn theme is because of your wand. You said that not many Malfoys have wielded unicorn hair cores.”

He shot her a skeptical look. “I doubt it. I think the Manor just went mad.”

“Oh I don’t know about that,” she said softly. “I’m starting to think it knew exactly what it was doing.”

He smiled a little at this as he opened the door to his room and led her in. In no time at all he had dressed her for bed and tucked her in. Then he added her knickers to his collection.

“Unbelievable,” she muttered, and he just grinned.

He sat down on the bed next to her and stroked her cheek a little. “I just remembered some papers Ben supposedly sent over before the party. He’s working on due diligence for a major land deal in Northern England. He wants me to look at it over the next couple of weeks. It completely slipped my mind. I’m going to check to make sure everything arrived, but I’ll be back in a few minutes. Don’t wait up.”

She yawned and nodded, snuggling in a bit more.

“I love you, Draco,” she said in a sleepy voice.

Draco’s heart squeezed a little. “I love you too, sweetheart.”

She closed her eyes, and he rose, quietly letting himself out of the room and heading down the stairs. He hadn’t been lying about the papers from Ben, but that wasn’t the thing he wanted to check. He just had to see it again – that ring she had decommissioned months ago that he locked away in his desk drawer in the Study.

He hadn’t looked at the ring since he put it away because he didn’t know how long it would take to win her heart. He didn’t want to stare at it for months or years, waiting for her to come around. He had simply tucked it away in a box, safe, in the very back of his desk drawer where only he and Florrie could get to it.

But tonight, he couldn’t help himself. They had made a huge leap forward, and now he was trying to decide how quickly he could marry her. He’d been courting her for over two months, and she let others in on that little secret at the party. It would be a very short courtship if he proposed any time soon – anything under a year was against the rules – but he was making it theirs. He was a Malfoy. Maybe this was a rule he could break too, once he was sure what her answer would be.

He was turning over the things he needed to do to make it work, as he considered settlements for her and promises and other gestures. He would need to meet with Alyssa soon to talk it out with her. He

would need to present the contract to Hermione before he actually proposed. She should be expecting it. Those books she read discussed engagement contracts at length.

He was a bit preoccupied by these thoughts as he slipped into the Study and headed toward his desk. He just wanted to look at it one time and relish the milestones from tonight – the public courtship, the confessions of love, the breaching of her arse.

Fuck that was hot.

Draco shook himself out of it. He wanted to see the ring, not her arse. Well, he wanted to see that too, but her delectable arse was currently snuggled into his bed, and it would be at least several more hours before he would be welcome to explore it again.

He stood behind the desk and silently opened the drawer that only the Master and his bound elf could access. There, in the very back left corner, was the small black velvet box he had placed here when these dreams were so nebulous they seemed almost impossible.

Smiling broadly, he reached forward to pull the box out. He lifted the lid, and then the smile abruptly dropped from his face, as his brow furrowed in confusion.

The ring had vanished.

The Great Financial Crisis of 2004

Chapter 34: The Great Financial Crisis of 2004

AN: Hermione still has a couple secrets.

Hermione

Hermione gave herself one full day to bask in the joy of being in love and out in the open with Draco before she got back to work. The Sunday after the Hazelwood fundraiser had featured a long article in the society pages of *The Daily Prophet*, detailing the nature of their relationship. To Hermione's shock, Theo had been right: the Lover's Box was a sort of social kryptonite that absolved Hermione of all blemishes while Draco was considered to be the most devoted of boyfriends. It was truly odd, and Hermione never would have believed it was *that* powerful if she hadn't read the article with her own two eyes. There wasn't a single hint that Hermione was after Draco's money or that he was after her reputation. Her blood status was celebrated, and Draco was called progressive. It was as though their entire history had been washed away with pretty words and compliments because Draco was earning her affection the "proper" way and Hermione was gracious enough to observe his traditions.

Hermione thought it was asinine, but then again, she wasn't about to complain. She couldn't remember *ever* being on the receiving end of such a glowing article.

Even better was the floo call from Ginny, who came bursting into Hermione's flat unannounced, while Hermione was taking a rare break from actual work to spend time puzzling out the inscription from her new jewelry box. She was making progress with it, though Draco hadn't made it easy on her. She had a runic dictionary that

translated the symbols to a more modern form of elvish. From there she had to use another dictionary to translate it from modern elvish to English. Hermione thought it would take her several days at the rate she was going, but she was starting to have a suspicion about what it said.

“HE DID IT!” squealed Ginny, wriggling her finger in Hermione’s face.

Hermione caught the flash of diamonds, and she let out an uncharacteristic squeal too, which was so shrill it made Draco come running from the bedroom where he had been taking a nap.

“Wha...?” he said.

Hermione and Ginny snorted with laughter to see him so disheveled. Hermione shooed him back to bed, while she got the full scoop from Ginny.

“Well he’s been acting weird for *ages*, but after he heard about you and Draco last night, he decided to pop the question when we got back to Grimmauld Place! I think he was hoping you two would take up the society pages so we can lie low for a few days.”

“That will work until you’re seen out in public,” said Hermione in amusement.

“True,” said Ginny. “But I don’t care. I’m just so relieved he finally did it!”

Hermione was thrilled for Ginny, and for once she didn’t even feel that familiar twinge of jealousy whenever somebody she knew got engaged. Draco’s behavior the night before – and again that morning – made Hermione think that she could have that too, whenever she was ready. She wasn’t quite there yet, but for once Hermione wasn’t left behind. It made her excitement for two of her best friends truly genuine.

“Have you told Pansy yet?”

Ginny grinned. "Yes, and she's going to design my dress! She'll be doing the bridesmaids too. I want all three of you in it, obviously, but you're the maid of honor."

Hermione smiled at this and readily agreed. "If Pans is doing it, you know it's going to be *perfect*."

"She'll do yours too! You know she's doing other things to break in, but she really wants to focus on evening wear and wedding dresses if she can make a name for herself."

"I have to imagine doing your wedding will help her with that," said Hermione with a smile.

"Yes, and when it's your turn that's going to seal it. The Malfoy wedding is like a whole thing." Ginny waved her arms around vaguely as she said this, and Hermione blushed.

"It's still rather early," she said.

"Psh," said Ginny, waving her off. "He gets this dopey expression on his face every time he looks at you when you aren't paying attention. I'd wager you could tell that man you want to do it tomorrow, and he'd be able to pull a ring out of his pocket."

"Stop it," said Hermione, rolling her eyes, but she was secretly very pleased. The warm feelings from the last day still hadn't worn off.

Yes, Hermione had a truly glorious Sunday, until dinner rolled around and Draco asked, "So when are we going to search Gringotts? We only have about six weeks left."

Hermione tried not to wince.

"Oh I'm sure somebody will do it eventually, but there's still more at the Manor, Draco. We've finished the main house, but there are all the outbuildings. I've made a list of them, and there are at least a

half dozen! And that doesn't include the larger grounds, nor any other properties you think we should search."

He cocked his head to study her for a minute.

"Well," he said slowly, "You're right about some of the outbuildings. However, we've already done the observatory, and I seriously doubt the Dower House contains anything. Mother has renovated the entire property, and any curses would have been tripped by now if anything was there. I'll grant you the Heir's House is fairly large, but we can probably do it in a couple days since it's vacant. Other than that we have the Greenhouse, the Aviary, the Stables, and the Mausoleum. The Quidditch Locker is brand new so that doesn't need to be searched, and I'm not sure *how* to search the rest of the grounds because it's about five hundred acres of fields and woods. If he buried something out there, we'll never find it."

Hermione bit her lip.

"What about other properties then?"

Draco shrugged. "Almost all the Malfoy properties in England are commercial or residential real estate that we lease. Most have been rented out, but even those that have been vacant are likely safe so they could be rented when a tenant was found. Our other *personal* properties are all out of the country, and I wasn't required to disclose them. The British Ministry has no jurisdiction over foreign properties."

"Alright, well I still say we search the outbuildings."

"We can do that, but is there some reason you don't want to go to Gringotts? If we can't find the Master's Hiding Place, then Gringotts is the most obvious place."

Hermione scrambled for a good excuse. "Oh, I'm just not sure they'll let me into your vault. I mean, I've never been to Harry's or anything like that..."

Draco relaxed and laughed. "It's fine," he said. "You just check in with me. I gave a brief tour to the first group from the Ministry, and it was easy. They just didn't bother to actually *look* while they were there."

Draco rolled his eyes, and Hermione gave him a tight smile as she tried to think of something to say to change the subject.

"Well speaking of other properties, I did think of one. Do you still have the Safehouse?"

This had the desired effect of distracting Draco from Gringotts. He seemed surprised she was asking and got an odd look on his face.

"Father never knew I owned it," he said quietly. "I didn't have to disclose it because it wasn't part of his estate. It's always been mine, and he couldn't get in."

"Oh," said Hermione, coloring a bit. "Of course."

"But to answer your question, yes I still have it."

Hermione blinked. "Why?"

Draco shifted uncomfortably. "I just couldn't let it go. It was like your jewelry box. I originally bought it for you, and Mother and I weren't going to flee until we were sure Potter had lost. It's still under a fidelius, and I never even told her the address."

Hermione's eyes were wide. "So you're still the only person who can get in?"

He shrugged. "Yes. Just me and Florrie of course, since she's bound to me personally. I suppose I could dismantle all the wards and sell it. Maybe I should. I just couldn't bring myself to do it before I knew who you were, and I haven't taken the time since."

"When was the last time you went there?"

Draco paused and bit his lip a little. "Right around your birthday. When I added the muggle repelling wards."

Hermione blinked. "There weren't any on it before?"

He shook his head. "No, of course not. I bought it for Jeanine."

"But you *still* warded it?"

"I told you I know wards. I spent hours in the Library with it and added every single one I could find that would still permit a muggle to use the property. You can hide muggles with a fidelius."

"I..." Hermione's face suddenly dropped.

You can hide muggles with a fidelius.

She had never even thought about it. She had come up with her plan to remove her parents' memories and send them out of the country and didn't second guess it. She didn't think most wizarding wards would protect muggles because they would make the property impossible to inhabit, but she had never done a deep dive like Draco had.

"Sweetheart, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said quietly. "Just... my parents."

Draco sighed and stood to pull her into a hug. "I'm sorry. I really am. I wish so many things had been different. I wish the war didn't happen. I wish we had been friends in school. I wish we had been on the same side, and we could have figured it out together."

She sniffed and nodded a little. "I'm fine, it's just... I never thought about it. I had no time really, so I came up with my plan and did it. But I just dismissed the safehouse idea out of hand because I assumed it wouldn't work for them. It was irresponsible of me."

“It wasn’t,” he insisted. “The only reason I had the time was because I was a Death Eater, and I hadn’t found you yet. I bought the house very quickly, but it took me the entire summer to do the research and ward it, and I figured I would keep at it until I either found you or I read every book on wards in the Library, whichever came first. I never did find you, so you know how that ended up.”

Hermione nodded, feeling marginally better. She wouldn’t have been able to take that kind of time, nor did she have the resources that he had for it.

“Hermione,” he said quietly. She pulled back to look at him. “Would you... want to visit sometime?”

She gave him a small smile and nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I think I’d like to see it. I know it was supposed to be my prison, but knowing you...”

She felt him smile into her hair. “You can see how seventeen-year-old me planned to win your favor again and seduce you.”

“Oh Merlin,” said Hermione, giving a small laugh at this.

“Tell you what, let’s plan on that Gringotts visit this week if you can spare the time – I have a couple days free at the end of the week, and it’s going to take at least several days to get through it – and then at some point I’ll surprise you with a visit to the Safehouse. Well, it’s more of a cottage than a house, but you know what I mean.”

Hermione’s heart sank again, but she forced herself to hitch on a smile and nod.

Gringotts. Great. Just great.

Hermione spent the next week with one planned auror raid, which resulted in more than a few injuries thanks to a couple of well-placed

bombardas. The rest of her hours were spent time-turning on the Playground so she could work on the artifacts she collected from behind the painting in the Wizards' Parlor while still working on her experiments with the Tobias Raine curse.

Upon further examination, she had been right that there were two poisons. Both the mirror and pocket watch were cursed. However, the small vial of blood was a bit perplexing. She didn't know if it was animal or human, and she was running some tests on it in her limited free time, more out of idle curiosity than any true need to find out what it was.

Hermione planned to decommission the mirror and pocket watch the following week. This time she was going to have an entire audience because she had sent owls to Draco, Harry, and Kingsley, and evidently Draco had been in a meeting with Blaise, Ben, Patrick, and Alyssa when her owl arrived. They all wanted to come watch, and of course Theo heard about it from Blaise and insisted he be invited as well. By that point Hermione felt bad about leaving out her other friends, so she invited them too.

Merlin, she was going to have nearly a dozen people watching her. It was a bit discomfiting for somebody as private as Hermione, but given that it was her job and Draco's objects, she supposed she could make an exception to her normal rules about visitors. The whole situation was a bit unorthodox.

She continued to work on the inscriptions on her jewelry box in the evenings, and by the end of the week she had worked out the words on the outside.

O, thus she stood,

Even with such life of majesty, warm life,

As now it coldly stands, when first I woo'd her!

I am ashamed: does not the stone rebuke me

For being more stone than it?

It was one of Leontes's most famous lines from *A Winter's Tale*, years after he learned the truth about his wife Hermione: that she was innocent of the thing he accused her of and that he had broken her heart and caused her death by treating her so poorly, or so he thought. From the moment he thought she died he pined for her, and during that scene he was looking at a statue of her. Soon after those lines were spoken the statue came to life and Hermione returned to him after sixteen years.

She realized that instead of a statue, Draco was talking about Jeanine through this inscription, the woman who didn't really exist. Draco woo'd Hermione for a single night and then spent seven years away from her, always pining just a little bit. Like the Hermione in the play, the real Hermione also vanished after she met Draco that night, and it was Draco's own fault. Had he treated Hermione better, had he been less prejudiced, had he and his peers not tried to cast her out of the magical world, he might have had her for all these years he was away from her.

It was beautiful and a little sad, and it made Hermione's heart squeeze as she traced the lines.

Hermione knew she would work on the inscription under the lid next, but it was much longer. Draco also diverted her by sending her two charms through the Lover's Box, both of which Hermione now recognized as elvish runes. It took her a couple hours to finally narrow them down.

Trust

Love

He sent her another note with them.

The star chart wasn't the only thing you gave me that night.

Hermione knew he was right: she told him she loved him and then let him play with her arse. They were both really significant milestones to go along with her agreement to let him court her.

She supposed that if he had to represent anal play in charm form, this was probably the most romantic way to do it. He was right it required a lot of trust.

After taking the time to translate her two new charms, Hermione set elvish runes aside for now and began to worry about the thing she had been dreading for months: Gringotts.

She really should have told Hestia that Gringotts didn't permit her entry. If she had, Hestia could have arranged for one of Gringotts' own curse-breakers to accompany Draco to his vaults early on in the search, and he would have been none the wiser. If Hermione had any sort of inclination toward divination, perhaps she would have foreseen that she and Draco would become close – very close – and there would come a point when she could no longer exert professional distance when it came to searching his Gringotts vault because he would find it suspicious. Had she known this, she would have confessed it all to Hestia at the very beginning. Hestia and Hermione were friendly, and the older woman was a mentor. It would have been embarrassing, yes, but far less so than telling her boyfriend about it.

In fact, the prospect of telling Draco the truth about Gringotts was so mortifying that she still hadn't done it. She had been deflecting all week with tales of the raid and the Playground. She was banking on Draco's own reputation – no pun intended, of course – to get her through the doors. She told herself over and over again that the goblins wouldn't make a scene since she would be there with the

great Draco Malfoy, beneficiary of multiple high security vaults. They might sneer or glare a little, but surely they wouldn't say anything or try to bar her from entering. Still, she had trouble convincing herself of this, so she continued to deflect until the day was upon her.

It was a Thursday, and Hermione allowed herself the luxury of going to the Playground all day long to delay the inevitable. But eventually she really *had* to leave for dinner, and she had no choice: she had to time-turn herself back to the morning in order to meet Draco for the first visit. He told her he had cleared his schedule for two full business days, and they could work through the weekend too if they needed it. If they still weren't done, then how did the week of the tenth look for her? Draco would hold open a couple more days that week just in case.

Hermione was dreading it.

"Hello sweetheart," said Draco, as he met her at the bottom of the steps and pulled her in for a kiss. "Did you sleep well?"

Did I sleep...? Oh, it's morning again.

Christ, Hermione was going to be shattered by the end of the day. She had turned back a solid ten hours for this because she dragged her heels at the Playground for so long.

"Fine," she said tightly as he led her up the steps. When they reached the top, the guard goblin stopped them, and Hermione's stomach plummeted.

"You," he grunted. "Come along."

"Hermione, what –?" started Draco, but she just shook her head.

"It's nothing, I'll see you in the lobby in a minute."

Draco looked totally bewildered as Hermione followed the goblin to the room where her normal searches took place. As usual, a couple

of rough look goblins met them, and immediately began the search.

“What are you doing here?” asked one gruffly. “You were here two weeks ago.”

“I’m accompanying Draco Malfoy,” she said.

The goblin just snorted. “Figures. Not like we don’t have other things to do except babysit his plaything while he swans around in his piles of gold.”

A feeling of dread started to unfurl. “Draco is expecting me to accompany him to his vault.”

“That won’t be happening,” said the goblin curtly. “Now turn around, spread your legs, hands against the wall. You know the drill, little sneak thief.”

He started to frisk her, and Hermione felt tears prick and a lump rise in her throat, and this time the slightest edge of panic. She hadn’t been here since the painting did that awful thing to her, and it felt too similar, too close, too...

“What in the actual *fuck* do you think you’re doing?” came the very soft, very dangerous voice of her boyfriend.

Hermione tensed and squeezed her eyes shut. This couldn’t be happening. This *really* couldn’t be happening.

“Security,” grunted the goblin. “Standard protocol.”

“Get your hands off of her, or I will break every goddamn bone in those filthy fingers of yours.”

“I told you, it’s –” but he was cut off by Draco gripping him by the throat and shoving him against the wall.

“You do not touch her, do you understand me?”

The goblin tried to scowl, but Draco was much larger than him, and Hermione turned to see he had his wand pointed at the goblins throat. The goblin's companion was backing away slowly.

"Sweetheart, are you OK?" he asked, without taking his eyes off the guard who had been searching her.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then come on, we have some business to take care of."

"She can't go down there!" piped up the goblin whom Draco had not directly threatened. "She's not allowed!"

Hermione just closed her eyes in mortification, but didn't try to deny it. It was true. She wasn't allowed in the vaults, and evidently they weren't making an exception for her today.

Draco, however, grabbed her hand and said, "Who says that's where we're going? Come on, Hermione. We have an urgent meeting we need to attend."

She furrowed her brow in confusion, but let him pull her away, relieved to be out of the guards' grasp, but terrified they would be sending reinforcements after them.

"Draco, you shouldn't –" she started, but he cut her off.

"How long have they been doing that to you?"

He was pulling her through a set of mahogany doors and down a long corridor she had never visited before. He had a positively terrifying look on his face, and Hermione balked. He came to a halt in the middle of the mauve-carpeted hallway.

"Tell me, Hermione. How long?"

She tried to force the tears away, but she couldn't. A couple escaped, and Draco looked more dangerous than ever as he tracked

their progress down her cheeks.

“Since the end of the war.”

He said nothing to this, but his nostrils flared a little, and he resumed his pace, dragging her along behind him. Hermione saw a series of offices, and several goblins looked up in alarm as they watched Draco pulling Hermione toward the office at the very end. To her shock, he didn’t even knock when they got there, he just flung the door open.

“We have a meeting with Director Gornack,” he said to a small goblin who appeared to be working as a receptionist in a sort of antechamber.

“Mr. Malfoy, you don’t have –” he started.

“Get him *now* Duroot, or I will not be responsible for my actions!”

Hermione probably shouldn’t have been surprised by the fact that Draco knew the director of Gringotts and his assistant by name.

Still, she wasn’t expecting this.

The goblin named Duroot scampered through a handsome door with gilt handles and returned a moment later.

“He will see you sir.”

“Of course he’ll fucking see me,” snarled Draco with so much disdain that for a split second Hermione was reminded of Lucius.

“Come on sweetheart, we have a few matters of business we need to clear up.”

He pulled her through the door and Hermione found herself in a very handsome office with a small, elderly goblin sitting behind a large desk. Hermione wasn’t sure if the windows behind him were real or if

they were charmed to appear to look out onto Diagon Alley. Regardless, the overall effect was quite nice.

“Director Gornack, we have a small problem,” said Draco.

Hermione saw Gornack looking at Draco warily, as though he already knew what Draco was about to say. Still, he just raised his eyebrows.

“I’m not sure I understand, Mr. Malfoy.”

“Bullshit,” snapped Draco. “I showed up with Hermione today to begin the Ministry-sanctioned search of my vaults for dark objects that my father may have left behind. Imagine my surprise when she was pulled away from me before we even entered the building, and then I came into a room a few minutes later to find your guards fucking *frisking* her!”

Draco’s voice was raised by the end of it, and Gornack winced a little.

“Mr. Malfoy, you have to understand – there are protocols, and she stole –”

“No, she helped *Harry Potter* steal a single dark object from my aunt’s vault to win the sodding war, which – in case we’re forgetting – became *my* fucking vault the very next day! I don’t suppose you frisk him whenever he drops by? Or Ronald Weasley, who also helped? I’m sure it’s just Hermione who gets that sort of treatment, isn’t it?”

Hermione was torn between her love for him and utter mortification. He was absolutely right of course, but she hated making a scene.

Gornack reddened slightly, and Hermione saw the flare of triumph in Draco’s eyes when he noticed it.

“Just as I thought. Well let’s be very clear about something. She will not be frisked. She will not be searched. She will not be treated differently than any other patron of this bank going forward. And if you can’t manage that, then you’ll be losing quite a bit of business.”

Gornack went a little pale at this. “Mr. Malfoy, surely you can’t –”

“Oh I can, and I will. The French goblins haven’t left me the fuck alone ever since Father died. They’ve been offering me more generous fee arrangements every single month to get me to leave Gringotts and move everything to them. The only reason I haven’t is inertia and the convenience of direct apparition. But you should know that the last time they reached out to me they even offered a personal floo connection from the Manor directly to a lounge at the bank where they could clear me for customs. It would add five or ten minutes at most each time I need to visit. I would find that time very well spent if you are unable to accommodate Hermione. I will also be having a word with Potter, Weasley, and several other very important clients of yours to see if they would like to join me.”

Gornack was ashen now. “Mr. Malfoy, please...”

“Do not test me, Director. I own an entire fucking *level* down there, and I will move every knut tomorrow if I have to. She is *sub tutela domus meae*. I know you read the society pages of *The Prophet*, so I’m sure this doesn’t come as any great surprise to you. In fact, I had a similar conversation about this with one of your brothers in the artisan guilds a couple months ago. You must have heard about it. I can’t fathom what the fuck you were thinking to allow these protocols to continue, especially once it came out publicly. *Surely* you knew I would find out about it at some point, and I would be most displeased.”

Hermione chewed her lip nervously. She didn’t know exactly what the Latin meant, but she understood the gist. She was surprised to hear that Draco had already spoken to other goblins about this, but obviously he had, and it was making him even angrier now. Perhaps he had dropped her name when purchasing one of the charms, and

the goblins said something rude. She glanced at Draco and saw he was entirely serious about his threat. She was still so embarrassed, but for some reason his beautiful defense of her was also starting to turn her on.

No, Hermione, for God's sake, this is not the time.

Gornack finally nodded. "Very well. We will... lift the special security arrangements for Miss Granger."

"And she will be allowed down to my vault today and any other day we wish to come," Draco continued.

Gornack got a pinched look on his face, but nodded.

Then Draco turned to Hermione. "Sweetheart, do you have your own vault that you'd like to visit too?"

He was giving her a look that told her he already knew the answer to this question, but he was making her say it in front of Gornack to twist the knife just a little bit.

She flushed and shook her head. "No. I... don't have one."

"Fucking unbelievable," he muttered as he turned back to Gornack. "This does explain why my lawyer was having trouble locating an account for certain settlements that may be made for her benefit in the future. We will need to correct that too, of course. Give her the closest vault to mine that's available and put the same security on it that I have. And you will not charge her for it for six and a half years, since that's how long you've been barring her entry."

Hermione was staring at Draco in amazement, but Gornack just pursed his lips and nodded.

"Excellent. In that case, we will wait in the lobby for ten minutes while you alert the bank to the security changes, and then we will be

proceeding with our business. By the time we're done, I expect her vault to be set up and ready to go."

"Very well," said Director Gornack. "I will... make the arrangements post haste. Mr. Malfoy, Miss Granger."

He bowed toward both of them, and Draco gave a curt nod back, as he pulled Hermione out of the office and back down the hall toward the lobby. When they reached it, he led her to a bench and glanced at a handsome clock on the wall, no doubt ensuring that ten minutes – and *only* ten minutes – would pass.

They were quiet for several minutes until Draco finally turned to look at her and took her hands. "Are you alright?" he asked softly.

The embarrassment came flooding back, and Hermione just looked down and nodded. "Thanks," she said in barely a whisper.

"You don't have to thank me. Their treatment of you is utterly appalling. But Hermione, why didn't you tell somebody? Surely Potter or even Weasley would have intervened. The goblins might not like them, but they can't ignore them, especially not Potter."

Hermione shrugged uncomfortably. "It's just embarrassing, and I'm independent. It got worse over time, and I just..."

She trailed off, as he gave her a sympathetic look.

"I assume that's why you didn't tell me either?"

"God, Draco, it's humiliating!" she said, giving him a pleading look to make him understand. "I hoped they would overlook it today since you were with me, but no. I haven't wanted you to know what it was like, not when you have... well, *everything*."

"Hermione, you need to learn that you can ask for help when you need it. There's nothing wrong with that. It doesn't make you any less independent."

“I should have been able to handle it,” she whispered.

He shot her a stern look. “You can’t do everything alone. Just like I can’t do everything alone. Do you know why I wanted the Ministry to send a specialist to my home to find Father’s dark artifacts? It wasn’t just because I’m busy. I asked because I didn’t know much about detection spells until you taught me. I also didn’t know how to break curses, and I still can’t do *that*. My point is, I knew I needed help with it for any number of reasons, not least of which was the safety of those who live in the Manor with me. And you, sweetheart, needed help with the goblins. They’re utter arseholes. You shouldn’t be ashamed by it.”

Hermione deflated a little. “Fine. You’re right, I know it. I’m sorry.”

He gave her another stern look. “You have nothing to apologize for. I just hate that they’ve been doing this to you for so long. How have you been getting money this whole time?”

She shrugged. “Physical checks that I bring in to cash. They do this every time I come in, but it’s only once a month, thank God.”

“I would love to end every last one of them.”

“It’s understandable why they hate me so much.”

“I would understand it more if they treated Harry and Weasley the same way and if I didn’t know for a *fact* that they have been compensated for the damage out of the reparations fund. They’re just arseholes sweetheart, it’s best you accept it.”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but cracked a small smile.

“Good, you’re smiling again, and you know that always pulls me out of my foul moods. Now then, I believe our ten minutes is up, so let’s get to work, shall we?”

Hermione bit her lip, but nodded as she placed her hand in his, and he helped her stand. He pulled her toward one of the counters, and the goblin behind it looked at them nervously.

“Good morning,” he said cordially. “I’m Draco Malfoy. Hermione Granger is here to visit my vault.”

Fuck This Place

Chapter 35: Fuck This Place

AN: Let's all give a collective middle finger to Gringotts, shall we?

Draco

Draco's temper had moved from violent to simmering by the time the goblins led them toward one of the carts to go down to the belly of Gringotts. He felt it was the best he could do under the circumstances. Draco couldn't remember if he had ever been so angry in his life.

They frisked her. They fucking *frisked* her. They touched her in a way that made her uncomfortable, anxious, and scared. Draco saw the fear in her eyes when he walked in, and he was sure she was having a mild flashback to the things that curse had done to her. But at least the curse had been *mental*. It wasn't much comfort at all, but she kept telling him that over and over again, and eventually he started saying it too.

It wasn't real. It was just in her head. Nobody actually touched her.

It was the only way Draco could cope with it until he was sure she would be OK. He had been very careful with how he touched her in the days immediately following it, but Hermione made it clear that his hands didn't scare her. If anything, she seemed to derive comfort from them. And then the things she let him do to her in the observatory and again the following morning helped reassure Draco that she was able to draw a line between actual and mental, at least most of the time.

The goblins though? They had fucking touched her, and she had been scared. It might have even made that line she drew in her head about the curse blur just a little bit. Draco had only seen Hermione truly frightened one other time, and it was when Bellatrix tortured her. That had scared her too, and Draco had his own flashback when he saw her eyes.

He was still so angry about it he had half a mind to just pull his assets out of Gringotts and send them to France regardless. The only thing stopping him was he knew the goblins would retaliate against her, and she would never get her own vault here if he did it. He wanted her to have one, if for no other reason than to shove it in the goblins' faces.

The fact that she had lived without a vault for the past six and a half years – perhaps *always*, since she had been in the war and a child before that – was also appalling. Alyssa told him the goblins were oddly cagey when she submitted a request for Hermione's basic account information. The goblins would never turn over entire account numbers, but they had procedures for one wizard to identify the account of another in order to make one-way deposits. It was standard fare for pureblood engagement contracts, because it facilitated the settlements.

Alyssa, however, hadn't been able to get the goblins to tell her, and it was the first time Draco privately questioned her competency. He asked Blaise to try instead, and Blaise also failed. Draco then started having doubts about Blaise too until he saw the way Hermione was treated. Then he knew the truth: the goblins wouldn't tell his advisors about her account because it didn't exist.

A part of him was still a bit angry with Hermione because she should have asked for help. Potter, Weasley, even Shackbolt would have intervened for her years ago if she had just spoken up. He hoped that this incident proved to her that she could turn to him when she needed him to throw his weight around for her. It didn't matter what it was, Draco would always be happy to do it.

He glanced at her sideways as the cart hurtled through the caves of Gringotts, and he could see her eyes were a bit wide. He wondered what it must be like for her, having not been in a cart for more than six years. Then again, the look on her face suggested it was an entirely novel experience for her.

“You’ve done this before, surely?”

“Once,” she said. “But I wasn’t myself that day.”

The goblin in the front of the cart stiffened at her words, and Draco’s own eyes widened as he realized what she meant. She had only been inside the vaults a single time, and it was to steal that object from Bellatrix.

Fucking hell, her nerve both impressed him and horrified him.

“Before that?”

She shrugged. “My parents just exchanged muggle money at the counter. I’ve never had a reason to come down here other than that one time.”

He gave her a wry look at that. She had plenty of reasons to come down here, not least of which was her own paycheck, but it was the goblins who had kept her away.

“Well the Malfoy level is a bit different,” he said.

“Somehow that doesn’t surprise me.”

Draco smiled a little at this. She sounded more upbeat than she had in the lobby. That was good. Her fear and then her obvious mortification had made him want to put a shield charm around her and then burn the fucking place to the ground.

The cart finally came to a halt, and he saw Hermione looking around a bit curiously as she stepped out and onto a large ledge that almost looked like a balcony overlooking the bit of cave that continued

below them into darkness. The Malfoys were on one of the lowest levels.

The balcony wasn't covered in rough stone like most of Gringotts, but featured a white marble floor with the Malfoy crest inlaid into it in black marble. Hermione stared at it and then quirked her eyebrow at him. "Well it's no wonder you were always so bloody arrogant at Hogwarts."

Draco gave a shout of laughter and led her toward five large doors, which were the various vaults commanded by his family.

"This one," he said pointing to the one on the far left, "Is the Family Vault. It's just gold and other currency. We can go into it if you want, but there is nothing else in there, and I can assure you none of it is cursed."

Hermione nodded. "No need, then," she said. "It *is* possible to curse currency, but somehow that doesn't strike me as something Lucius would have done."

"Quite," agreed Draco. "He was always a greedy bastard."

Hermione suppressed a smile at that.

"Now this one," he said, pointing to the door next to it, "is the Heir's Vault. It's also mostly currency, but it does have objects. Traditionally the heir is left with a few Malfoy heirlooms of his own, though not too many. In my case the contents of Bellatrix's vault were moved here after she died, so most of the objects in this vault were actually hers. Father could get into this vault until I came of age, but once I turned seventeen he could no longer enter it without me. I never brought him into it a single time after my seventeenth birthday due to the war and then his prison sentence. It may be worth a search at some point, but I've never encountered anything dangerous in the seven years I used it without him. Once the six months with the Ministry is up, I plan to empty it into the other vaults, and I'll fill it again if I have

my own heir someday. But for now I've kept everything organized the way it was when Father died."

He glanced at her as he said this, and she turned a bit pink, but nodded. "It's not part of the estate then?"

"No," said Draco. "And if we have time before the six months closes to look through it, I'm game. But it's not part of the estate so everything in there is mine already."

Draco truly wasn't aware of anything dark in the Heir's Vault, but he had never searched through Bellatrix's objects in a methodical way because he didn't really want to know. The law granting the Ministry a time extension for searching Death Eater assets passed after Bellatrix died, so they only had thirty days to search for her. But between the Ministry being in a shambles just after the war, the bank having serious physical damage tied to her old vault, and Draco's stint in Azkaban, their search at the time had been cursory at best. Draco wanted Hermione to understand what he was telling her.

I don't get amnesty for whatever you find in there.

She seemed to understand his silent message, because she just assumed a passive look. "We really don't have time to search vaults that aren't part of the estate. Perhaps when the project is over we can revisit it."

She will make a perfect Malfoy bride.

This, more than anything, finally eased Draco's foul mood from earlier. In fact, the knowledge that she was truly willing to safeguard Malfoy secrets - and she was smart enough to do it without having to be told obliquely - was really turning him on.

Draco licked his lips and turned to the middle door.

"This is the Objects Vault. This is where we should spend our time. It's the vault claimed by the Manor, though there is shared control

with the Master and his spouse. The Master owns everything in it, but the Manor can call and return objects to it when the Master or Manor elves need something from it. It took many conversations with the Manor elves for me to understand how it works, and generally I let them handle it.”

Hermione nodded, and then looked curiously at the other two doors that were left.

“This one,” he said pointing to the one on the far right, “is Mother’s. She has full control over it, and I have no idea what’s in it. She’s never given me a tour. However, the gold my father left her in his will went there. I assume her marriage settlements and the Manor’s settlements went there too. Regardless, it’s also not part of the estate because it’s all hers. Father only gave her gold, so there are no objects to check.”

Hermione gave him a surprised look, but he just shrugged. “The Family Vault and the Objects Vault are accessible by both the Master and his wife. The Heir’s Vault is accessible by his parents until he comes of age, but the wife usually maintains her own vault that’s just hers to control. I know Mother let Father in now and then, but I’ve never been invited.”

Hermione gave an amused smile at this. “Is she renovating the Dower House from this vault then?”

Draco just gave her a wry look. “What do you think?”

She chuckled, as they both looked at the last one, nestled in between the Objects Vault and Narcissa’s personal vault.

“And this...” said Draco, trailing off as he looked at the goblin who had been standing next to them silently thus far.

“It is being prepared for Miss Granger, Sir,” said the goblin in a sniffy voice.

Hermione blinked. "Pardon?"

"Mister Malfoy asked that we give you the closest vault to his that was free. That's this one madam. If you wish to make other arrangements..."

"No," said Draco, cutting him off. "This will do perfectly well. Hermione, that one will be yours once they're done setting it up with the necessary enchantments. Only you will be able to get into it."

She gave him a suspicious look, but he stared innocently back at her. The truth was, that vault was reserved for his *own* wife. It had been his grandmother's when she was alive and then emptied when she died. The Malfoys had always kept two vaults on this level that were traditionally used for Malfoy wives because most of the time there were at least two of them alive at once. Occasionally there were three, and in that case the youngest had to make do with a personal vault elsewhere in Gringotts while waiting for the oldest Malfoy matriarch to pass, but Hermione wouldn't have to wait.

True, it was rather unorthodox to place her here before she said yes, but Draco took the Slytherin tenants to heart: if you saw an opportunity, you should always take it. Besides, it was senseless to open a vault for her elsewhere, only to move her here as quickly as possible.

Because Draco had already decided he would get an engagement contract underway and then marry her as quickly as possible. She just needed to let him know that she was ready.

Well that, and he needed to find her ring.

That Manor had taken the ring from him, he was almost sure of it. Draco hadn't moved it, and Florrie hadn't either. They were the only two who could get into that desk. Draco only hoped the Manor had placed it back in the Objects Vault for him. It had already proven that it could somehow move things back and forth between the Objects Vault and the premises without alerting the Master first, and that was

the reason Draco had been so keen to go to Gringotts with Hermione today. He wanted to search for that sodding ring while she searched for dark objects, and if he couldn't find it then he needed to see what else she liked.

Draco might have been a bit attached to that ring, but he wasn't so attached that he would delay things if she made it clear that she was ready. If he couldn't find it by the time Hermione was done searching the vaults, then he would give it a little time to turn up elsewhere before executing Ring Plan B.

It suddenly occurred to Draco that she was giving him a pretty large hint right now because she was a deep pink as she stared at the vault that was to be hers, but she didn't object. She did, however, give him a very knowing look, and he was sure she wasn't fooled.

"Let's go in the Objects Vault then," he said, in an effort to distract her before she got into her head about it. "This one is... a bit unique. I'll admit I have very few memories of it. I couldn't get into it without Mother or Father until Father died, and there was rarely a need for me to go in there."

He could see Hermione was very intrigued, and Draco stood back and let the goblin stroke the door. Then Draco placed his hand on a small orb right outside of it. He winced a little as the tiniest prick of blood was drawn to check his identity. The Malfoys always *did* favor blood magic. He just hoped Hermione wouldn't mind since he had placed the same security on her vault.

The door melted away, and they stepped through to an antechamber. It looked like the hallway of a nice office building, and it shared the same mauve carpet the goblins used for their executive wing. Draco wrinkled his nose at it and made a mental note to have the carpet replaced with something less... *mauve*. It was the least they could do to soothe his temper.

Hermione looked around in confusion. "There are a dozen more doors, Draco."

He smiled a bit. “Yes, and that’s why I didn’t know what I had. They are subdivided by type of object. The few times I visited with Mother over the years we just went to the room she needed. It was usually jewelry.”

“So what are they, then?” she asked curiously as she approached the first one.

Draco pointed to a plaque on the door. “I’ve been down here briefly a few times since Father died. I had the bank label the rooms for us to make it easier. This one is Furniture. Then we have Rugs and Tapestries, Fine Art, Minor Arts and Decor, Linens, Crystal and Silver — that also includes china and pottery, by the way — Rare Books, Important Documents, Jewelry and Watches, Potions and Rare Ingredients, and last but not least is Magical Objects – that’s for things like our pensieve.”

“Christ,” she muttered, and he just grinned.

“Start wherever you want, princess.”

She shrugged and opened the first door, which was Furniture. She gasped as she stared at it and wandered in, Draco and the goblin escorting them following behind.

“Honestly Draco, it’s like a bloody showroom!”

Draco wasn’t exactly sure what she meant by this, but he knew it was large. It was several quidditch pitches’ worth of square footage devoted to generations of furniture that had been stored by the Malfoys whenever the Manor turned over.

“Well it has to go somewhere,” he said reasonably.

“Please tell me that this furniture rotates through the Manor? Or your other properties? Or something?”

He shrugged. "I told you the Manor gets settlements. A lot of the furniture gets replaced, though the elves told me that some wives pull from here too or reuse what their mothers-in-law selected if they like it. We've been doing it for a thousand years though, and you know furniture trends change. Over time the spare pieces have built up."

"That is absurd," she said. "I wouldn't buy anything new. God knows you have plenty to choose from right here."

Draco felt a slow smile cross his face. "Show me what you like, sweetheart."

She just shot him a look, but she started to meander through the rows of chairs, bedframes, coffee tables, and ottomans. She started to head toward the section with dining room tables, and Draco watched as she brushed the top of a couple of them with her fingers.

Fuck, Draco was getting hard.

"I like this one," she said, pointing to one with much cleaner lines than what was currently being used in the Manor.

"You favor art deco then? Mother always gravitated toward the regency era."

"I know," she said wryly.

"Art deco certainly fits the wildflowers much better," he said, as he approached her and slipped a hand around her waist and pulled her toward him so she could feel his hardness. She leaned into him a little.

"Draco..." she said quietly.

"Hmm?"

"You're impossible."

He chuckled and said, “Stay here, I just had an idea.”

She gave him an odd look, but just shrugged and continued to examine the various pieces of furniture as he turned and walked toward the goblin at the door.

“You do not touch her, talk to her, or even approach her. Do you understand me?” he said under his breath.

The goblin’s eyes widened but just gave a nod, as Draco slipped out and into one of the rooms on the other side of the hall. His trousers were tightening as he looked around and started pulling open various drawers and boxes to find what he wanted. He kept an eye out for her ring as he looked, but he didn’t stumble across it. That was fine, he would do a more methodical search later.

He stacked the few boxes he had picked before he made his way back toward the Furniture Vault. He slipped in to find Hermione still looking at dining room tables, her eyes drifting back toward the first one she told him she liked.

Draco started to move forward, and when he passed the goblin he said, “Get out.”

“Sir?”

“I said get out,” said Draco a bit louder.

Hermione looked up at his voice and stared at him in confusion.

“But, Sir, you’re supposed to have an escort at all –”

Draco fixed him with a hard look. “Let me be clear. I’m about to go over there, play dress up with her, and then we’re going to fuck on the table she just picked out for the Manor. You can stay and watch, or you can get the hell out of here.”

The goblin choked, but Draco ignored him, as he moved toward Hermione. She had a deep flush on her cheeks that Draco saw was

creeping all the way down the neckline of her dress, and her eyes were dark.

“Please tell me you’ve already ruined those knickers,” he said as he approached her.

She said nothing, but just gave a slow nod.

“Excellent. Then take off your dress, sweetheart.” Draco was eyeing her wrap dress that he was pretty sure was being held together by a tie.

She glanced over at the door. “He’s still here,” she said under her breath.

“Oh? Do you really give a shit what he might see or think after the way they’ve treated you?”

To Draco’s delight, the flare of determination lit her gaze, and she shook her head. “No. I don’t.”

“Then get naked. We’re going to put this table through its paces. See if it’s a good fit for us.”

She gave him a truly delightful little smirk as she untied her dress. She started to open it, and a moment later Draco heard the sound of feet and another strangled cry behind him.

Draco grinned back at her as her dress hit the floor, and the sound of a door slamming shut echoed through the vault.

Hermione

Draco Malfoy was a sneaky bastard, and Hermione should have objected the moment she realized exactly how he had arranged her new vault. After all, Hermione was independent. She was capable. She could take care of herself.

She should be very annoyed with him, she *knew* this.

But somehow Draco had managed to disconnect her logical mind with her emotions. Because instead of being angry as she stared at that vault that was now hers, she blushed and creamed her knickers, thereby ruining them in a manner Draco would approve of.

Why was it so hot? Her logical mind tried to give her an answer: it was possessive, it was caring, it was a power play. He elevated her to the same status as his mother in a single move. It told the goblins to fuck right off, and it told *her* that the only future he saw for them was marriage. Because there was no way, *no possible way* that he would have arranged for her to have one of the five Malfoy vaults for her exclusive use if he had any questions or doubts. Hermione might not understand the intricacies of pureblood courting rituals, but she did understand *that*.

Hermione had to admit that the notion she would keep her own vault that Draco couldn't control was oddly satisfying. If she did end up marrying him, she would be living in a home he controlled, supported by a fortune he controlled, and even her orgasms were something he now controlled. She enjoyed freeing herself of control to a certain degree — she had spent her entire life wound so tight it was bliss to let go sometimes — but she had struggled to wrap her mind around just how much control she would relinquish if she let Draco have his way.

A vault that he couldn't get into returned some control to her. It evened the playing field just a little bit and gave her some agency, some independence, even if she was really living off of his largess. She was surprised by how much she liked the idea.

When he started to ask her about furniture preferences she felt another round of heat bloom down low. And when she heard the truly shocking thing he said to that goblin she started to become drenched.

She glanced down at his trousers as she opened her dress and saw an enormous bulge. She tried to play it cool.

“You’re rather eager,” she said, unhooking her bra and stepping out of her underwear.

His eyes were roving over her as he reached out his hand to take her knickers. She saw him run a finger across them before putting them in his pocket.

“Watching you pick out antique furniture really turns me on,” he said.

Hermione couldn’t help the giggle that escaped at this, and he gave her a wolfish grin.

“Do you think they’re watching us?” she asked. “Some sort of security camera?”

He smirked. “I subscribe to the Spell Security and Surveillance Package Level 4. I don’t recall everything it includes, but I would assume there are eyes on us. It was a rather extensive list.”

Hermione bit her lip. She should be mortified and desperate to put her dress back on, but...

Draco cocked his head a little to study her. “Does that excite you?” he asked.

She hesitated a minute, and then nodded. “Yes.”

“Good. We’ve fucked for security cameras before.”

Then his eyes darkened, and he started to undress too. When he released his cock it was as erect as she had ever seen it.

“Now you heard what I told that little bastard back there?”

Hermione nodded.

“Then let’s proceed.”

He opened the boxes and pulled out a necklace that was so large it was gaudy, a couple of very thick bracelets Hermione would never wear in real life, and then he presented her with something that could only be described as a crown that he plopped on top of her head with some fondness. Hermione would have said it was made out of rhinestones, but she had a feeling they weren't fake. She felt her curls getting tangled in the metal prongs.

“What’s all this then?” she said incredulously. “This is ridiculous...”

“I told you I’d drape you in diamonds, didn’t I? And Hermione...”

He stepped back and took in the whole effect. He was looking at her like she was one of the most beautiful things he had ever seen.

“I want *you* to fuck *me*,” he finished. “Just like this. *Please* sweetheart...”

This was new. He had never said please in that sort of desperate voice before. It was like he couldn’t help himself, like he needed her.

To her surprise he moved back to the table she had picked and laid down on it, propped up only by his elbows as he continued to stare at her.

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

His eyes had been fixed on her breasts but now they flicked up to her face. “I want you to take whatever you need. I own all of this, and you own me. Show those fuckers who are watching us exactly where you belong. It can be sweet, it can be dirty, I don’t care.”

Hermione bit her lip, excitement flooding her. She loved to turn over control during sex, but right now? Right now she needed to take it. He was right. He was absolutely right. She wanted to assert herself here in this place where she had been humiliated for years.

She climbed onto the table and straddled him as she pushed him back on it a bit roughly.

“Fuck...” he muttered, his eyes wide.

Hermione leaned forward and ran her tongue down his *sectumsempra* scar, and when she got to his hips she kissed around for a moment before giving his cock a lick and then taking him into her mouth.

Draco's eyes fluttered back in his head, and he was starting to breathe hard. He didn't ask her to do this to him very often, and the tiny jerks told her why: he liked it too much.

She tasted the precum start and then popped off. He groaned a bit and made a needy sound as she moved away.

Ha, the master of the tease was getting just a small taste of it. But she had a free license to take, and she wanted to take him. She wasn't interested in denying her own pleasure when he turned control back to her.

“You said draping me in diamonds was sweet, but I think you miscategorized it. Doing it in Gringotts is *very* dirty.”

She sat up and centered herself over him and then sank down as he groaned.

“Fuck princess... be dirty then... *Gods...*”

She started to move, treating his cock like her vibrators of old as she impaled herself over and over in just the right spot. She opened her eyes to stare down at him, and again he was watching her in amazement.

She wasn't sure what possessed her to say, “Is this all mine, Malfoy?”

His pupils blew as he gripped her around the waist, digging his nails into her skin just a little bit.

“It’s all yours. Anything you want... fucking take it.”

“Then make me come,” she said, and he didn’t even hesitate as he thrust up into her.

Oh but this was glorious. Hermione threw her head back and gripped her nails into his chest as she rode him. She felt the slap of the necklace against her skin and that odd crown becoming further tangled up in her hair, the panting of his chest as he pummeled her, and the clutch of her own center all around him as it begged for its release.

“Harder, I’m close,” she gasped, and Draco didn’t disappoint as he picked up the pace.

She was chasing it, and a moment later she caught it. She broke with a moan, and she stared down to find him drinking her in, utterly transfixed by whatever picture she was making for him.

He slowed for a moment, drawing it out for her, until she said. “Sit still for a second, I want to try something.”

He immediately complied, and she lifted herself off and turned around.

“Oh fuck are you going to...” he started, and then she sank down again, in reverse.

She looked behind her and saw him staring down at her arse with enormous eyes, and then she leaned forward. He actually whimpered, and Hermione smirked.

“You want it like this then?” she asked.

He just nodded frantically and brought his hands to her hips as she began to bounce.

She was still watching him over her shoulder, and his jaw dropped as he just stared, not even blinking, and Hermione had never felt more beautiful than she did in that moment.

“Take my arse,” she said suddenly. “With your hand.”

He wrenched his gaze up to her face and looked almost pained by the suggestion. “Gods sweetheart I want to, but we don’t have lube and –”

He stopped talking as she pulled off of him, grabbed his hand and stuck his fingers inside of her.

“There’s your lube. I’m wet enough.”

She released his hand and sank back down on him again, and he seemed almost frozen in disbelief by what she had just done.

“Arse. Now,” she snapped, and he shook himself out of it and a moment later she felt the tingle of his spell and then that delicious stretch that was a little painful but so satisfying as he breached her.

“How’d you do the spell?” she breathed. She had truly forgotten about it when she was demanding he take her like this.

“Wandless,” he groaned. “It’s very recent. I only know two wandless spells...”

Something about this delighted her.

“You practiced because you wanted my arse like this? You were doing that instead of working this week?”

“Fuck, sweetheart, yes... goddamnit, this ranks as one of the hottest fucking things I’ve ever done,” he said fervently, and Hermione just smirked. It was for her too, and she loved every single thing about it.

“Give me another finger then... stretch me.”

“Oh Gods...” he groaned, but she felt herself stretch further, as he did what she said.

“I want to come one more time before you do,” she said breathlessly.

He looked back at him, and he clenched his jaw, but nodded. “You will. Do it Granger.”

She did. She didn’t worry about him, she only worried about herself, and something about it was so freeing, so exhilarating that for once she could just *take*. She wondered if he knew just how much she needed this and if that was why he turned control over to her today. She had never once felt like she had agency in this place. As a child she went to the counter with her parents, and the goblins sniffed with thinly-disguised disdain as they changed her muggle money for galleons. As a teen she arrived on a mission and robbed it before fleeing for her life. And as an adult, she had been shunned, humiliated, and degraded in a way that hurt her confidence and made her financial stress infinitely worse.

But here she was, shagging Draco Malfoy on an antique table, draped in diamonds just like he promised, and she was in control for the first time ever. Hermione didn’t think she had ever felt this free, this powerful. She belonged here with him, even though these things were his. He said she owned him, and she finally believed it and understood exactly what that meant. His control over the Manor or the fortune or even most of her orgasms paled in comparison to her control over his heart. He knew it, and for the first time ever Hermione really knew it too.

She fell in love with him all over again.

“I’m close...” she gasped, and Draco gave one last push with his cock and his fingers, and then Hermione shuddered, and her vision wrenched. She felt him following her just moments later, the heat from his spend inside of her making her groan.

She sighed and slumped forward, well-sated, and it wasn't long before she felt Draco gently nudge her off and clean them both up. He sat up and pulled her in for a hug from behind as their legs dangled off the edge of the table.

"That was both wonderful and terrible," he muttered.

Hermione was nonplussed. "Pardon?"

"It was wonderful because it was legitimately incredible sex. It was terrible because now I have to tell Theo he's right and being topped is really fucking hot. He's been telling me this for years, and I've never tried it."

"Never say so."

He shrugged. "It's true. I'm very dominant, and I'll always be that way. And you, sweetheart, are an incredible submissive. I can't believe how lucky I am every time you do it. But fuck if I don't want to switch with you now and then too. I'm super into it. You rode me like a dream."

Hermione felt a small giggle erupt.

"What?" he said, smiling at her laughter.

"Oh it's just that the last time I was down here in the vaults I rode a dragon too. Maybe riding dragons in Gringotts is one of my things."

He grinned broadly at this. "You are welcome to ride me every time we visit. I would hate to break your streak."

She smiled at this. "Well I also really like it when you take control. But today... thank you. I really needed it."

He dropped a small kiss onto her bare shoulder. "You deserve to be here, Hermione. Your place is here with me. The way I see it, you're mine, and I'm yours. That means anybody who fucks with one of us fucks with both of us. The goblins probably won't do it again, but if

they do please tell me. Or if anybody else tries to fuck with you, tell me. And I'll return the favor."

Hermione nestled into him. "I don't know that anybody will mess with you."

"Ella tried to," he said instantly. "She tried that night of the Hogwarts gala, and you cast that spell that revealed her lie. And then later on you ran her off for me. That doesn't even touch on the whole Azkaban thing where the entire Wizengamot was ready to fuck with me and Mother but they couldn't because you manipulated my questioning before the trial. You didn't even like me back then. My point is this is definitely not one-way, so please don't be ashamed to tell me if somebody tries to screw with you. I won't tolerate it, and I hope you won't tolerate anybody behaving that way toward me either."

Something eased inside of her at his words. Again, he was viewing this through a lens of equality, a give and take. He backed her up, and wanted her to do the same for him.

"I promise," she said. "And I love you, Draco."

He gripped her harder and pulled her in for a long, lazy kiss. "I love you too," he said after finally breaking away.

She smiled at him. "Back to work then?"

"You tell me. Would you like to search while naked? Or we could decorate the rest of the Manor instead. I am entirely at your disposal, sweetheart."

She laughed and rose as she started to detangle the crown from her curls. "Get dressed and then put these crazy things back where you found them. They are ridiculous, Draco, I would never wear them in real life. We'll work in this room to start."

He nodded sagely, as he started to put the jewelry back in their respective boxes. "Very well. But next time you ride me, I'm getting them out again. It was really fucking hot. And while you check for curses in here, you might as well mark the furniture you like. Two birds, one stone and all."

She gave him a wry look. "Only if you promise not to do those ridiculous Manor settlements."

His eyes gleamed. "Oh I'll make no promises like that. It's tradition. But I will promise you this: if you don't mark the furniture, then the settlements will be adjusted upwards to accommodate what I must assume will be one hundred and twenty-seven rooms' worth of new furniture."

Her jaw dropped, as he just gave her a satisfied smile and moved off.

Hermione wrinkled her nose, and she slipped her dress back on. Then she turned to study the table where they had just shagged.

"Fucking fine," she muttered to herself as she reached into her small bag for her wand.

She conjured a sticker and marked the table.

The Viewing Room

Chapter 36: The Viewing Room

AN: Draco discovers something extraordinary.

The endnotes contain a small spoiler for this chapter.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Draco

Draco watched with satisfaction as the number of stickers grew in the Furniture Vault that day. It took several hours to work through the whole thing with both of them casting detection spells, and Draco wasn't terribly surprised they didn't find anything. They resurfaced for a late lunch in Diagon Alley before returning back to Gringotts for more, where Draco left Hermione in Rugs and Tapestries for a time as he searched Jewelry for her ring.

He pulled out tray after tray of rings, but never found it. Then again, he wasn't certain that the Manor was aware of the Malfoys' organizational methods. The shared control of the Objects Vault was still somewhat perplexing to him.

By the time they left Gringotts, Hermione looked dead on her feet, and Draco insisted she go to bed early. They returned the next day, where they spent the morning in Fine Art. The Fine Art Vault was rather claustrophobic and was comprised of several long hallways with tall walls filled with paintings. It opened to a larger gallery on the very end with full-sized statues, where Draco finally discovered the fountain that had disappeared from the gardens during the transition.

Hermione, unsurprisingly, was harassed a bit as she walked past portraits of Draco's dead ancestors, but Draco retaliated by silencing them. Then he pulled out the jewelry again and got her to ride him in front of several portraits that included his Great Great Great Aunt Cressida. Only when Draco released the silencing charm did Draco learn that the small crown Hermione was wearing used to be hers. She was *not* pleased.

The most curious thing about the Fine Art Vault was the amount of muggle art they discovered. Hermione walked around that section with her mouth hanging open as she took it all in.

"Draco there are some true masterpieces! There's Rembrandt, Caravaggio, and even Vermeer. Bloody hell, don't tell me you have the real *Girl with a Pearl Earring*? I suppose the one the muggles have is a copy then? This is incredible... and *oh...*"

She had turned to another wall to find paintings that reminded Draco of Luna's work. They were bright, colorful, and somewhat abstract, though the subject matter was still discernible. "Post-impressionism," she breathed. "It's one of my favorite movements. You have Cezanne, Seurat, and of course some Van Gogh and Picasso. Oh my God and Matisse! I *adore* Matisse..."

"Tag them," said Draco. "Once I figure out how to swap out some of the art, we can hang these."

She bit her lip and cast a shy look. "Do you really think so? I am quite fond of all the magical creatures obviously, but there are a few bare places..."

"Yes," he said. "These will look fantastic with the unicorns and that furniture you picked out. Tag everything you like, and once the six months is up, I'll have the elves bring them in to hang."

She beamed and started marking their frames, and Draco sat back and watched contentedly. He just knew she was coming around to the idea of marrying him.

That afternoon began their foray into Minor Arts and Decor, and Hermione's face fell when she stared at the room.

"God this is going to take forever."

It was true. It was nearly a thousand years' worth of paperweights, marble busts, bookends, small picture frames, and all the normal bric-a-brac that might be found in an antique shop. They worked through the afternoon and returned the following day to keep going, even though it was the weekend. It was only as they were closing in on the end that Hermione stumbled upon something: an old music box that lit up when she cast a detection spell at it.

"Found one," she called, and Draco hurried over, keen to make sure she didn't do anything reckless this time.

She cast a few more spells at it and then sighed.

"I know what this is. We won't be able to save the music box, but I can break it on Monday when I do the other two. It's only..." she hesitated.

"What?" he asked.

"It's very dark. I've seen several of these before, and I know exactly what to do, but... remember when I told you I killed half a person?"

Draco's eyes widened, and he nodded, as he looked at the music box cautiously.

"Well this would be another half. And it's a part of your family in a way. It's old enough that I'm almost sure it's not from Lucius, nor any other direct male descendants because I think it would have messed with the Manor's transition if they had made one. But before I turn it in, please tell me if you are OK with me destroying it. I can't believe I'm going to say this, but we could just leave it here, and odds are good it would never be found. If I destroy it, I will be killing the last bit of some two hundred year old distant relative of yours."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I don't really understand..."

She sighed. "It's classified. And I'm sorry, but it's *really* classified. It's not a joke. Harry will recognize it and Kingsley probably will too, but nobody else will."

He sighed. "Well look, if it's that dark then get rid of it. I'm not fussed about some ancient relative. You're positive you know what to do with it?"

She nodded. "It's a bit dangerous, but yes. I've destroyed one before, and I made sure to have the Playground built in a way that would make it safer if I ever had to do it again."

Draco nodded with satisfaction, and they set it aside to finish the room. It was evening by the time they were through, and Draco called it for the weekend.

"That room was probably the worst in terms of the number of items we had to check, though Crystal and Silver is going to be pretty bad too."

Draco was amused to see that Hermione had preemptively tagged a few things she liked in Minor Arts and Decor, and he wondered if she would be doing the same thing Crystal and Silver when they finally got around to it.

Draco insisted Hermione take a break from work on Sunday, though of course her version of a break was researching the inscription on her jewelry box. When Draco insisted she take an *actual* break, she cast an impervius spell on the dictionaries and brought them into the tub with her. Draco retaliated by joining her and thoroughly distracting her. It was only after she had come twice that he let her return to her studies.

Finally, it was Monday morning, and Draco had two meetings before he was heading to the Playground with the others to watch Hermione curse-break.

First, he stopped by the goblin artisans who were making Hermione's charms.

"Mr. Malfoy," said one of the goblins warily. Draco was sure the goblin must have heard rumors about Gringotts based on the expression on his face.

"Good morning," he said. "I'm here for another charm."

The goblin nodded. "Very well. What would you like?"

"A dragon this time. Specifically, I would like for you to research the species of dragon that used to guard Bellatrix Lestrange's vault — you know, the one Hermione Granger escaped on all those years ago — and craft something that looks just like it. She did say it had purple eyes, so we'll do lavender diamonds for that part. You can pull from the loose stones in my vault again."

The goblin gave him an ugly look. "And may I ask..."

"Because she likes to ride dragons in Gringotts, as I'm sure you've heard by now. And this is my invitation to her that she continue to do it whenever the opportunity presents itself."

The goblin looked pained, but just swallowed and said, "Very well, Sir. I'm sure we can find out the information we need to create a charm like that."

"Excellent," said Draco, with an easy smile. "We are learning, aren't we? Now then, please contact me when it's ready for pickup."

He left the scowling goblin behind and just chuckled. He knew that particular commission would probably make its way back to the director of Gringotts himself, and Draco sincerely hoped it would. He wanted to reinforce the message to the bank that they were not to fuck with her any longer, and he also wanted to celebrate what he viewed as a milestone in their relationship.

The semi-public shagging in his vault was hot of course, but it was also the first time he thought she understood just how much power she really had in their relationship. She was absolutely stunning as she accepted it, claimed it, and then ran with it. The look on her face when she walked into her new vault for the first time was also sheer perfection. It didn't matter that the vault was still empty, she simply looked around with a satisfied nod and gave the goblin a superior look as though it was perfectly natural that her vault would be placed there, next to Draco's. She contributed a sample of her blood for their security protocols without flinching, and then dismissed the goblin with a wave of her hand before pulling Draco to her for a deep kiss. Her newfound confidence in that place that had done nothing but humiliate her for years turned him on so much that he shagged her once more, this time against the wall of her new vault.

Yes, Draco wanted to celebrate that moment of empowerment when she finally realized that she owned her very own dragon and could command him however she saw fit. Their relationship wasn't mismatched at all. It was a perfect balance.

That meeting complete, Draco made his way to the next.

"Malfoy," said the redhead as he stood to shake Draco's hand. Draco had just walked into a small coffee shop just down the street from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes.

"Weasley," he said. "And Weasley."

"You're going to have to be more specific," smirked George.

Draco just rolled his eyes.

Ron Weasley had a pained look on his face and said nothing. Draco knew that Hermione still saw him now and then, but she had grown more distant from him than from Harry over the last few years. That distance had increased once she got together with Draco. Ron Weasley wasn't exactly *hostile*, but he was obviously suspicious and

uncomfortable. They made small talk for a few minutes until Draco finally turned it to business.

“Are you going to have a launch party then?” asked Draco, as he took a sip of his coffee.

George smiled broadly. “Somehow I doubt that would go over well in *The Prophet*. Nah. But I will be doing a night of complementary... *fun...* at The Ruby Slipper. It’s going to be part of the holiday party. The management is into it.”

Draco quirked an eyebrow at this. “That’s not a bad idea.”

George inclined his head. “Yes, I won’t be giving away anything reusable of course. But some of the one-time use products will make an appearance. We’ll get them hooked in one night, and then they’ll have to buy it if they want a second round. The club is large enough that it will be a decent customer base to start, and then the reputation for our products will spread from there.”

Draco licked his lips, as Ron cast an uncomfortable look at George.

“I still can’t believe we are doing this,” he muttered.

George just gave him a stony look back. “We’ve discussed this dozens of times. Malfoy is right. It will print money, and there’s nothing wrong with liking things a little different. We are catering to many different tastes.”

“I take it you’ll be at the party then?” asked Draco, looking at George.

He nodded. “Yes, The Ruby Slipper has been... eye-opening.”

Draco grinned. “I may be there too. I’d like to see some of the products in action.”

Predictably, Ron Weasley looked incredibly offended. “But Hermione!”

“She would come too, obviously,” said Draco, rolling his eyes.

“Hermione would *never* –” started Ron, but Draco cut him off.

“The things Hermione will and won’t do are for me to know and not you. That being said, given that you never shagged her, nor even gave her the courtesy of going down on her, I don’t think you’re really one to talk about her limits.”

To Draco’s amusement, George was looking at his little brother with dismay. “You didn’t even go down on her?”

Ron’s ears turned bright red, and he just sunk down in his chair and refused to speak.

Draco looked back at George. “If Hermione’s in, I’ll be there too. I used to frequent the private rooms when I would go, but things may be different now that I’m with her. I’ll let you know. I think your plan is a good one though. Let me know if you need another capital call to stock inventory before you launch.”

George smiled as Draco rose and shook his hand. Draco cast one, scathing look toward Ron before turning and leaving the cafe.

He had to admit he hoped Hermione would want to go to the club’s holiday party. In prior years Draco would make the effort to self-transfigure for it, because it was one of the few group events he really enjoyed, and knowing George Weasley it was going to be particularly fun this year. He wouldn’t pressure her though. She clearly had an interest in it, but they were still figuring out limits. If she was uncomfortable with it, he could always purchase the products himself once they launched.

Draco started to make his way to the Ministry, eager to see Hermione in action this morning. It was lining up to be quite a show, with three separate curses to break. He was heading there a bit early to make sure he got the best seat. He checked his watch. He was thirty minutes early, but he didn’t mind killing time in the viewing

room and watching her work. The entire Playground was visible, after all.

He checked in at the Ministry, headed down to the Department of Mysteries and into the familiar corridor where the Playground was located. Draco didn't want to disturb her, he just wanted to watch her for a few minutes. Watching Hermione Granger puzzle out a problem was one of his favorite things to do. Her face changed as ideas crossed her mind and she eliminated possibilities. Her expression always lit whenever she found something. He could watch her for hours.

He entered the small antechamber and smirked again at the signs on her door. He opened the door to the viewing room and saw it was dark, but he slipped in anyway. It gave him a better view of the Playground when the lights were off. He settled into a chair and looked out onto the Playground and then paused.

There was a Hermione in her office, pouring over a sheaf of paper. She was dressed to break curses, her attention totally absorbed by what she was reading. And then, in the muggle lab a couple doors down, he saw a *second* Hermione dressed in her lime green healer's robes, with her back to him. Draco stared in disbelief and questioned whether he was seeing things until Healer Hermione turned, and Draco got a glimpse of her profile too. It was definitely her. The Hermiones were each in separate rooms and seemed totally unaware of what the other was doing, but there was no question that Draco was seeing two of them.

Draco's memory of the night Hermione had been on that pain potion resurfaced. He had been watching her carefully since then, and he noticed she had been more tired than usual the last couple of weeks. Some mornings it was even hard to wake her up. He couldn't be positive that he was right about this, but the suspicion that had been lurking back in his mind ever since that day came roaring back.

Suddenly Healer Hermione checked her watch and started to turn around to leave the lab. Draco dove under the window ledge so she

wouldn't see him, and he strained his ears until he heard the door to the Playground open and close and then the door to the hallway open and close as well.

Of course. She was going to St. Mungo's, either to check on a patient or volunteer at the clinic. She was leaving with plenty of time to spare before her audience arrived, or so she thought.

As for Draco, he crawled on the floor below the window and slipped out of the viewing gallery and antechamber again, careful to make no noise as he did so. He checked his watch and waited for the minutes to tick by. He would give her fifteen minutes before he reappeared. Surely that would be enough time for Healer Hermione to get out of the Ministry, and he would act like he had no idea what she was doing. He needed to be certain, *absolutely certain*, before he confronted her about it, and he didn't want to put her on her guard.

The fifteen minutes crawled, and just as he was about to turn back into the antechamber and announce his presence, Potter and Shacklebolt strode up.

"Three today, is it?" asked Shacklebolt eagerly.

Despite Draco's consternation about the thing he just saw – which was *definitely* not in line with his rules about sleeping and taking breaks – he chuckled. Shacklebolt looked like a child on Christmas morning, ready to see what Hermione would do to entertain them today.

Some part of Draco wondered why he wasn't jealous of Shacklebolt. He was inordinately handsome – very tall and broad, with dark skin and piercing eyes. He gave off an aura of power, confidence, and calm. He was the perfect politician – likable, sharp, and he seemed to be stuck in time at precisely forty-three years old. He had not aged a single day in the six and a half years he had been Minister of Magic.

Hermione herself had confessed to having a crush on him during the time she was supposedly emotionally attached to Mark. Draco thought that if her crush had been anybody else he would be jealous. But Shacklebolt was happily married and spoiled Hermione rotten in a purely professional way. Draco thought she deserved every bit of it, and he was pleased that somebody in her life, other than him, was willing to give her whatever she wanted.

They made their way to the viewing room, turning on the lights this time and attracting Hermione's attention. She waved from her office, before turning back to her notes, and Draco just grimaced a bit as he sank into the chair he had originally occupied.

Was this past or future Hermione he was watching? As fascinating as her job was, it was still dangerous. Draco sincerely hoped that future Hermione was at St. Mungo's right now because if so, then past Hermione made it out of this round of curse breaking unscathed. Or rather, that's how Draco assumed it worked.

Thinking about the logistics of it was giving him a headache.

He was pulled out of his admittedly disorganized thoughts as the door to the viewing room opened and Draco's entire legal team walked in, along with Pansy, Ginny, Luna, and Blaise. Draco and Harry started making introductions.

"Oh this is fascinating!" said Alyssa as the group settled in, and she peered curiously out onto the Playground.

Harry launched into an explanation of the different rooms for those who were new to the Playground, while Hermione wandered over to say hello.

"Hermione!" said Shacklebolt with delight. "What do you have for us today then?"

"A mirror that will blind you, a pocket watch we're going to blow up, and a very old music box that I will have to put beyond magical

repair.”

“Excellent,” he said enthusiastically. “Do you need special clearance for anything?”

“I need permission to cast fiendfyre.”

Draco gaped, as did most of the others in the room, except for Harry and Shacklebolt.

“Granted,” said Shacklebolt, instantly. “Let’s do that one last, it will be quite the finale!”

“Is that legal?” whispered Patrick to Alyssa and Ben.

“I have no idea,” whispered Alyssa.

Shacklebolt glanced at all of them and said, “It doesn’t matter if it’s legal or not. The only one in here who can bring charges for dark magic is Potter, and he knows that if he decides to prosecute her for it, I’ll just pardon her. Isn’t that right, Potter?” he added in a stern voice.

“Yes, yes she’s immune from prosecution, I know,” said Harry, rolling his eyes. “It’s not worth the paperwork headache.”

Shacklebolt nodded in satisfaction and then turned back to watch.

“I didn’t hear that,” muttered Ben, and Draco smiled a little.

“Alright,” said Hermione. “The mirror first, then. I have to warn all of you that this is very dangerous, and it *can* blind you permanently if you aren’t prepared for it. I have glasses for all of you to wear. It’s a bit like watching a solar eclipse.”

Hermione held out a basket of dark sunglasses and everyone took a pair. She grabbed one for herself before making her way back out on the Playground.

Draco turned his attention to the Playground, and they all watched curiously as she levitated something silver to the middle of the room and suspended it in her spotlight. She waved her wand, and just like the ring, it started to rotate.

“Alright,” she called. “When I break this one, a very bright light will emit. You all need to put your sunglasses on. You won’t be able to see anything until the break, but it will be plenty bright once it happens. Do not remove your glasses until I say so. Everybody, glasses on!”

Draco and the others slipped on the sunglasses, and she was right. They were so dark it was impossible to see anything at all.

“Breaking now!” she called, and Draco heard her mutter an incantation, and then there was an odd rushing sound before a bright light exploded in Draco’s vision. Even through the very dark glasses Draco winced, and spots burst in front of his eyes.

A few seconds later she said, “Glasses off!”

Draco removed them, rubbing the bridge of his nose. He looked around and saw the others blinking rapidly to clear the spots from their vision.

“Merlin,” muttered Pansy.

Hermione walked up to the mirror and examined it closely before nodding to herself.

“All done, and this one is intact. Draco, you can have it back.”

“Actually, you can have it, Pansy dear,” he said. “It looks like you.”

Pansy gave him a gracious smile, and he handed it to her after Hermione brought it into the viewing room.

“Alright, that’s our party favor. The next two will not be intact when we are done.”

She left again and this time levitated the pocket watch to the spotlight and let it start to rotate. She spun her wand around her fingers for a few seconds as she contemplated it. Then she nodded to herself and stepped back.

“This one is going to go fast,” she said. “Get ready.”

She raised her wand and started to mutter an incantation. As Draco watched, the pocket watch turned blue and began to glow. It started to shake and then cracked open, and then with a mighty BOOM! it exploded.

Draco jumped, and he felt the others around him jump too.

As for Hermione, she dropped to the floor and covered her head as pieces of shrapnel flew toward her. Draco didn't even realize he was standing up as he saw her hands bleeding a bit, until Blaise grabbed him by the robes and pulled him back down.

She uncovered her head and stood up.

Shacklebolt pressed the small button near his chair and said, “Hermione, are you alright?”

“Fine,” she called. “Just give me a quick minute.”

She started tapping her wand on her hand, and Draco saw her healing several large cuts. His stomach lurched, and his jaw clenched. He knew accidents were inevitable at times, but he still didn't like it.

“Alright,” she said after a moment. “I need Harry for the last one.”

Harry rose and left to go into the room with Hermione, and Draco suddenly felt very nervous. She almost *never* asked for help, and he knew from personal experience how dangerous fiendfyre could be.

“This last object is quite dark,” she said. “This room is reinforced so fiendfyre won't destroy it, but you're still going to feel a blast of heat

when I cast it. I'll be casting and Harry will be shielding so he and I don't get burned by being in the same room as the fire. I can't hold a shield and control the flames at the same time."

Draco's nerves eased a bit. That was sensible, and Harry was now assuming a stance next to her like they had done this a dozen times before.

Draco realized they probably had.

"It's kind of intimidating seeing them like that isn't it?" muttered Blaise.

"Well they did save the world," said Theo quietly.

"Just missing Ron," said Luna.

"To be fair, Harry and Hermione did quite a bit without him," said Ginny.

Draco said nothing, but just watched as they talked quietly for a moment before Harry nodded and stood back.

"Alright, I'm going to open the music box before casting the fiendfyre, and then Harry's going to shield as soon as it emerges."

"Here we go..." said Shacklebolt excitedly.

Hermione walked forward and placed the music box against one wall before walking back to join Harry on the far end. She aimed her wand at the music box and hit it with a spell. Almost immediately the form of a familiar woman started to rise, and she looked at Hermione with red eyes.

"YOU BEFOULED MY TIARA YOU FILTHY —"

"IGNUS INFERNI!" Hermione bellowed.

As the first whisp of fire left her wand, Potter shouted, "*PROTEGO MAXIMA!*"

And then a great fiery serpent fully bloomed, barreling straight toward the music box.

The heat washed over the viewing room, and the figure of the woman disappeared into the flames. A high-pitched scream emitted from her until a small burst of fire erupted right where the music box had been.

Hermione appeared to be straining, and she was crouched behind Harry's shield as she squinted to see if it was done yet.

"I'M GOING TO PUT IT OUT!" she shouted over the roar of fire.

"*FINITE INFERNI!*" she shouted, and the snake appeared to almost molt as it rose and then fell back, layers of flame peeling off of it and extinguishing itself. It was surprisingly beautiful to watch as it slowly burned down to an ember before disappearing entirely.

Shacklebolt leapt to his feet and gave them a standing ovation, and the others followed, as Harry pulled Hermione in for a hug and kissed her on the forehead.

"What the hell was that thing that came out of the music box?" muttered Blaise.

"That would be my Great Great Great Aunt Cressida," supplied Draco, still in slight disbelief at what he had just seen. "She's been a bit cross with Hermione recently."

"Evil-looking bitch don't you think?" asked Theo conversationally.

"I'll say," chimed Patrick. "And what was that about a tiara?"

"Nothing," said Draco quickly, biting his lip at this.

“Well Hermione’s incredibly scary,” said Ben. “I do hope you know that.”

They were cut off as Hermione and Harry came back into the viewing room, smelling strongly of smoke.

“Fantastic,” said Shacklebolt enthusiastically. “Really fantastic, I just love fiendfyre don’t you? It really lights the place up!”

Draco raised an eyebrow at this as Hermione grinned. “Glad you had fun.”

“Oh yes, you know how much I enjoy the Playground. Now then, I must be going. It was a pleasure meeting you all. Hermione, do let me know when you have something else that good!”

She just smiled at this as he walked out, and Harry, Ginny, Luna, and Theo followed.

Hermione looked at Draco and said, “I’m going to head back to my flat to get this smoke off of me, and then I have to go to St. Mungo’s for a bit. I’ll come by for dinner.”

Draco tried not to react to this as his brain started to loop. She was here now and going to St. Mungo’s next. He had seen her in healer robes. He must be with *past* Hermione now, and she was about to go time-turn herself to repeat the morning.

Merlin this was complicated.

Instead, Draco just nodded and said, “I’m glad you ended Cressida for good.”

Hermione smiled a little. “Well I had quite a bit of motivation once I realized it was her.”

Then she said farewell and turned to leave, while Draco and the others followed.

His brain was spinning now. She was turning time, he was almost sure of it. But where was her time-turner? How long had she been doing it? How could Draco be certain?

Draco wasn't sure what he was going to do just yet, but he knew one thing: he had to learn more.

Hermione

Hermione loved the clinic, and it had been far too long since she was here. Between her work at the Manor and her work on the Playground, she hadn't been by to volunteer in several weeks.

Today, however, was perfect for it. All of her people — truly all of them — would be at the Playground with her. She couldn't split the way she normally would, so instead of using her future self to go to the Manor, she used it to go to St. Mungo's and volunteer at the clinic. She did, however, stop by her muggle lab first, while her past self was in her office. She had been doing that more and more often recently because the Tobias Raine curse was driving her mad.

This morning though, she hadn't been studying Tobias Raine. Maybe it was the fact that she was breaking the curses on the rest of the objects from that small cache she found in the Wizards' Parlor, but Hermione turned back to the vial of blood. As she continued to test it against samples in her lab she started to grow more and more intrigued. It wasn't human, it wasn't house elf, it wasn't werewolf, and thank Merlin it wasn't unicorn. She hadn't found a match yet, and as she continued to work, something about it niggled in her mind. What on earth was so rare and valuable – and arguably dark – that a Malfoy had saved it and hidden it behind that wretched painting?

The mystery of it had captured Hermione's attention more than she wished. As it was, she had more than enough puzzles to solve at the moment and not enough time to do it. She was forced to set her tests aside when the time grew close for her past self to curse-break, so Hermione slipped out and made her way to the clinic. Truly, this

was a way of relaxing for her. The maladies that walked through the clinic's door were rarely severe – at least half of her patients just needed a dose of pepper-up before being sent on their way – and it was the part of healing she really liked: the patient interaction, the instant gratification of being able to solve problems quickly and easily, and the commitment to helping all walks of life.

Since Draco's not-so-anonymous donation arrived, the clinic had experienced a major facelift. The cracked leather on the chairs in the waiting room had been replaced; an extra examination room had been built; a small play area for children had been installed; and some new medical equipment had been ordered. There was fresh paint and new tile and the whole thing felt cared for again. It no longer had that air of neglect that made patients who had fallen on hard times feel like they were a second thought.

She spent that morning glorying in the mundane, but very satisfying, help she could give to her patients. It was December now, and flu season was on the rise. She was handing out pepper-up like candy. She had also healed two broken bones, prescribed a potion for a stomach ailment, and treated several patients with severe acne. Thankfully, none of it was permanent like Marietta Edgecomb's.

A quick lunch later, she was back to it, until suddenly Padma Patil's patronus landed in front of her. Hermione's stomach clenched.

"Emergency room, now!"

"Shit," muttered Hermione, hoping beyond hope it wasn't going to be Tobias Raine all over again.

She fled to the emergency room, and when she got there she skidded to a halt, eyes huge as she took in the carnage.

There were six. Not one, but six. And just like Tobias Raine every one of them bore the hallmarks of an untransformed werewolf. Padma and then others were frantically casting spells, but once again they were having no effect.

“Hermione, help!” urged Padma.

“I can’t,” she said softly.

“Hermione!”

“Padma, there’s nothing we can do, they’ll –”

“I thought you were working on a cure!”

Guilt, awful guilt cut at Hermione.

“I am, but it’s not done, I don’t –”

“You have to *try!*”

Hermione moved forward and started casting spells she knew wouldn’t work. She had all but decided at this point it would probably take a potion, but of course she hadn’t figured out what went in it yet. The number of mice who had perished in her failed attempts was truly staggering.

She tried to keep it together as the first patient passed and then the second and so on. This time only one of the patients had the curse cross an artery to spew blood, but it was on the other side of the room from Hermione. By the end of it, she was still fairly clean because this time she hadn’t gotten that close. She knew it would never work.

When the last patient passed, Hermione flicked her wand for her patronus to summon Harry. She wouldn’t be able to do it for much longer.

“What do you know about them?” asked Hermione as she struggled not to shut down from the experience of seeing six people die at once.

“They were each sent into the lobby with a portkey strapped to them. I assume the portkeys were illegal.”

Hermione was starting to shake. This was murder. Mass murder. Public murder. This time the perpetrators wanted the world to know what happened to the victims instead of stashing them in a bag like Tobias Raine. They were sent to St. Mungo's as a taunt.

This was so much worse than Hermione had been imagining.

She just stood there, feeling herself starting to dissociate, but she couldn't leave without speaking to Harry first.

He arrived fairly quickly, though by the time he did Hermione was numb. She realized that this time she wasn't the only healer being affected like this. It was utterly shocking to all of them.

Harry walked into the room, and Hermione just looked at him and gestured toward the bodies. "Six. Identical to Raine. Padma can tell you more."

Then Hermione swept past Harry, grabbed the potion for shock from the store room, and floo'd back to the Manor, trying desperately not to remember Padma's words.

"I thought you were working on a cure!"

"I am," said Hermione softly. "But I'm failing."

She barely knew where she was when she stepped out onto the rug in the Study. She had to find him. She had to do the thing she said she would do, because she was shutting down and only had moments before she wouldn't be able to speak at all.

She flung open the door, hurried down the hall, and opened the door to the Smoking Room without knocking. Draco was there with Blaise, Ben, and Patrick. All four of the men looked up at her curiously, but when Draco saw her face he said, "Let's break for the day. We can reconvene tomorrow."

The others threw him surprised looks, but they just rose and begin to leave as Hermione walked toward Draco slowly. She made herself say it.

“Draco, I had six bad days at work.”

AN: Of course I had to insert a horcrux somewhere, didn't I? Draco's just lucky it didn't screw up the entail.

Time's Up

Chapter 37: Time's Up

AN: Draco has a dilemma, and Hermione has a breakthrough.

Draco

Draco was sitting in the viewing room under the invisibility cloak Florrie had purchased for him from Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes the previous day, watching two Hermiones work on the Playground. He bit his lip as he contemplated everything his witch was doing. He knew why she was doing it of course. She felt responsible for the deaths of six people because she hadn't worked out a potion or counter spell to the obscure curse that killed Tobias Raine and now the others. Draco didn't like to see her put that kind of pressure on herself, but he hadn't tried to stop her yet because he sensed she was the only one who would be able to figure it out.

When she arrived at the Manor in the immediate aftermath, Draco had gone through the same steps with her as the first time. He showered with her, ate with her, bathed with her, and then held her. But this time each step took longer. The thing she had seen was just as violent as Tobias Raine, but it was far more people, and Hermione felt guiltier than ever for not having a solution ready. When she finally got to the point where she started to cry, it lasted until the early hours of the morning before she finally fell asleep from utter exhaustion.

If it had been any other thing causing her to work this hard, Draco probably would have confronted her already. He had snuck onto the Playground a couple more times and was more certain than ever that she was turning time. He finally had the brainwave to purchase the invisibility cloak so he could watch her uninterrupted for at least a

full day to confirm his theories before saying anything to her about it. Now that he was certain about what she was doing, however, he was hesitating.

He had to admit it was fascinating to watch. With the cloak he was able to determine that she usually kept her past self at the Playground and then time-turned in a closet across the hall from the Playground. Her future self was probably the one he had been seeing for however many weeks she had been doing this; but today her future self had been spending most of her time in a different part of the Playground than her past self.

She didn't communicate with herself except to say, "I solemnly swear that I'm up to no good." It was always her future self who said it. He had no idea why she had picked that phrase, but he had heard her say it twice. Both times her past self nodded, and he realized it was a code of sorts to reassure her past self that it was just a time-turned Hermione she was encountering and not somebody else under polyjuice.

Other than that one code phrase, her past and future selves went out of their way to ignore each other. Her past self in particular stayed buried in her office or the library while the future self was the one doing the experiments and leaving the Playground now and then.

Now that he was sure what she was doing, his feelings about time-turning were distinctly mixed. She was working too hard – far too hard – and this was exactly the sort of thing she wasn't supposed to do. Furthermore, she was keeping it a secret, and Draco thought they were past their mutual secrets after Gringotts. Her financial secrets he could understand – after all, their relationship was still very new, and he was aware that she was embarrassed by the way the goblins treated her. But *this* secret felt different. She was living a second life, buried in her work, and exhausting herself while she did it.

On the other hand, the reason she was working so hard was because she wanted to break the curse that killed seven people. She

was probably the only person who could solve it, and even if she wasn't she was still much further along than anybody else. And Draco knew they needed to solve it because it was suddenly a lot bigger than whatever was going on with Alan Estes and the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

Draco glanced down at the newspaper article he had taken to carrying around, as he debated about whether or not to confront Hermione about her time-turner.

Werewolf Terror!

by Fedora Blank

The Minister of Magic has confirmed that a band of werewolves has organized and are demanding rights and protections under threat of an uprising.

"Unfortunately they attacked six individuals outside of the full moon using a novel curse that caused the victims to be killed within several minutes. It is thought the victims are unrelated to each other or to the werewolves who attacked them, and they were chosen at random to inspire fear in the general wizarding population.

We ask the public to remain calm. Our entire auror team is on the case, as is the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. We also have the brightest minds in the Ministry working on a countercurse for the new form of attack the werewolves inflicted on their victims. We expect the perpetrators to be caught soon and a spell or potion developed to counteract the effects of the curse.

Please stay safe and maintain constant vigilance as this situation is developing."

When this reporter asked for the terms the werewolves are demanding, Minister Shacklebolt referred me to Mr. Alan Estes,

current head of the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures.

“What they want is unprecedented. They are demanding a representative in my department, a seat on the Wizengamot, free access to Wolfsbane, and the right to form colonies with a separately functioning government, similar to the goblins. I am unaware of the identity of their current leader, but he or she has been communicating with me by owl. We are working to negotiate an appropriate response so that they do not attack more innocent bystanders. We in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures have always strived to work peaceably with werewolf populations, as there is no question that if they were ever to organize, they could be formidable. We are seeing that today.”

Draco silently slid the article back in his pocket and grimaced. Yes, their little investigation had been completely turned on its head by the attack. Draco knew Harry was still looking into Estes, but the new attack threw it into a different light. Now Harry and Theo were wondering if Estes had been in communication with the werewolves all along and was trying to stave it off before they acted. Draco had no idea; all he knew was that the situation had rapidly escalated, and now Hermione was squarely in it.

He didn't want to stop her brilliance. He just wanted her to slow down. He wanted her to take breaks. But that wasn't her nature, and this time Draco could sympathize with it. Who else would be able to reverse that curse? If she could do it, she would remove the most urgent threat to the public. It would buy the Ministry time to track down the people involved.

And there was still the Malfoy estate with the looming deadline of January 2. It was only a few weeks away now, and there was still a lot to search. She had set their search aside for the week while she doubled down on her curse reversal work – and Draco saw she was *literally* doubling down by turning time on the Playground – but they would be going back to Gringotts soon. She told him that she was

committed to finishing her sweep before the deadline closed so that she and Draco could honestly say they had done their best to search everything of relevance. Her conscience wouldn't let her leave a job unfinished if she could help it.

And so he dithered. He questioned whether he should put his foot down or let her keep working, because as much as he hated to admit it, Draco knew she was right that she *didn't* have time to do everything.

She can't burn herself out though.

Draco wasn't exactly sure when he would intervene, but he knew he wouldn't allow burnout. He fingered the newspaper article in his pocket and sighed as he rose. He would give her a little more time to keep on as she was. But the moment he noticed her pushing herself any further than this, he would step in. He would have to.

She was his to take care of, even if it meant the werewolves won.

Hermione

Hermione was exhausted, and Draco was starting to notice. He had always watched her closely, but he had never watched her *this* closely. She was doing what she could to keep the exhaustion at bay, but she was certain he noticed that she switched from tea to coffee in the mornings and had added a special eye-cream on Pansy's recommendation to reduce dark circles.

Even time-turning for extra sleep wasn't enough any more. She needed to take some days off, but she couldn't. She *couldn't*.

She had set aside all of her work that wasn't the Malfoy estate – which had a quickly approaching deadline – or the curse reversal. But that also meant she was accruing a backlog of other small items to curse-break, and Hermione had never been one to enjoy a full inbox. At least the planned auror raids had been suspended while

the werewolf situation was unfolding. Hermione didn't think she could take on yet another project right now.

Today she was back in the Malfoy vaults, staring down Silver and Crystal. It was daunting.

"How many china patterns does your family have?" she asked, wrinkling her nose.

"Maybe a dozen," he said.

"But there are so *many* ..."

"Well we we have enough place settings to fill the table in the Dining Room. It seats twelve. And of course we have a couple hundred generic party plates for balls and such. Malfoys don't use paper products."

"God," she muttered, mentally cursing the fact that every place setting of china had five components and their six silver patterns did too. She did some mental math for the china: five pieces per setting; twelve settings per pattern; twelve patterns; and then a couple hundred generic extras for large parties...

"Malfoy, there have to be nearly a thousand pieces of china in here!"

"Malfoy?" he asked in amusement.

"I reserve the right to use your last name when I'm annoyed with you."

It took an entire day, though Hermione did find a pattern she rather liked, and Draco smiled happily when she tagged it.

"I like that one too, sweetheart. It's Limoges, if I'm not very much mistaken."

Hermione recalled that some muggle women did this when they got married, though she didn't think it was that common with wizards.

Hermione wondered what Narcissa would say if she knew Hermione was decorating the Manor already, without a ring on her finger.

The next day she consented to go back to the vaults, though of course she spent an entire day on the Playground before she did it. This time Draco took her into Jewelry, and Hermione held her breath as she saw it for the first time.

It was a smaller room than the others she had been into thus far, but still unbelievable to her that it was its own space. She thought it was arranged very much like a tiny jewelry store with display cases along the perimeter and shallow drawers below them. In the middle was something that looked like a small island with a glass top on it and even more drawers.

She lifted the glass on the cases and pulled out drawer after drawer, casting detection charms on everything she found. Hermione was dumbfounded by the sheer quantity of it.

"I told you we used to own a diamond mine for a time," he said, waving her off when she pointed this out to him. "We always kept the best specimens for ourselves. The Manor elves told me we even used to have our own goblin artisan on staff. And of course over the years the wives were gifted new things or brought in pieces from their own families. Most of it ended up here whenever they died. We've collected these things for a millennia, Hermione."

Hermione could believe it.

"I no longer feel guilty for taking your jewelry," she announced. "You have more than enough."

"You don't want to return it to me then?" he asked, pouting a bit.

She smiled sweetly. "I think not. You did say it was mine, didn't you?"

He growled a little, but caught her and spun her to press her into the island before giving her a deep kiss. "Take all of it," he whispered.

“Every bit of it.”

“Then I’ll feel guilty again and have to return it when you’re not looking,” she pointed out.

He looked her squarely in the eye. “Precisely.”

Hermione couldn’t help but notice that he was watching her very intently as she got to the section with rings. Her cheeks turned a bit pink, but she continued to cast detection spells as she averted her eyes from the sparkle in front of her. She forced a passive look on her face and decided she had to distract him.

“I’m not sure about the werewolves, Draco,” she said.

He watched her curiously, clearly drawn in.

“What do you mean?”

She sighed. “Just that I agree with them to a large extent. I *do* think they should have a seat on the Wizengamot and a representative in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. I also think they should have free Wolfsbane. I’m not sure about a completely separately functioning government that doesn’t answer to the Ministry of Magic, but protected safe lands wouldn’t necessarily go amiss. I just hate how they are going about it.”

He cocked his head to study her. “You don’t think they’re dark then?”

She shook her head. “Not most of them, no. Grayback certainly was, but Remus Lupin was not. They’re witches and wizards, aren’t they? They just have a furry little problem.”

He snorted at her description of it, and she shot him a look. “That’s what Harry’s dad used to say about Remus, you know. He had a furry little problem. I tend to agree. And with Wolfsbane the problem is manageable. It’s expensive though, especially on the scale it would need to be brewed.”

He narrowed his eyes just a little.

“Anyway,” she continued, “I certainly don’t agree with the methods. But...”

“But?” he prompted.

“But I agree with most of their demands. I just wish they weren’t killing people to be heard. And I wish they didn’t feel like they had to.”

They fell silent for a bit as Hermione continued to work.

“You could help me, you know,” she grumbled after a long while.

She couldn’t help but notice that Draco wasn’t doing any work at all in this room. Usually he helped her with the detection spells to speed them up, but here he was just lounging and watching her.

“I’m making notes,” he said.

“I don’t see a quill,” she retorted.

He tapped his head. “Up here.”

She rolled her eyes. “Notes about what then?”

He gave her a slightly challenging look. “I’m sure you know, sweetheart, even if you are pretending to ignore the pretty things right in front of you. I’ve learned your tells.”

Hermione turned crimson and ducked her head, unwilling to let him see how pleased it made her.

It’s fast. It’s really all too fast.

The problem was, Hermione’s heart didn’t seem to think it was too fast. And her heart was happily picking out china patterns and casting an admiring eye on quite a few of the rings she ran across.

The more time she spent with him, the more he started to act as though they were married already. Hermione was struggling to imagine another future herself, and the part of her brain that warned her it was too much, too fast was being thoroughly overruled.

“By the way,” he said in a casual voice that suddenly made her suspicious.

She glanced up at him and narrowed her eyes. “What?”

He grinned. “No need to get jumpy. I was just going to tell you that my club is having a holiday party on Saturday. I was wondering if you wanted to go?”

Hermione came to a complete stop as she turned to look at him. “A... holiday party? At your sex club?”

He dipped his head. “Does it surprise you that people who like to have sex also like to celebrate the holidays?”

Hermione rolled her eyes at this a bit, but she couldn’t help but bite her lip as she thought about it.

“Is it a normal party? Or is there...?”

“Debauchery? Nudity? Public displays of... fun? Yes,” he said.

“Oh,” she said softly, her eyes widening a bit. “Well do you want to go?”

He shrugged. “Up to you. I told you I would hang on to my membership if you’re into that sort of thing. Given what we’ve done down here,” and now Draco made a sweeping gesture around him, “I thought you might be interested.”

Hermione blushed deeply and unconsciously touched the brand new dragon on her charm bracelet. She still couldn’t believe Draco had the nerve to commission *that* from the goblins.

“Well...” she said slowly. “There are two things I’m not sure about.”

“Alright,” he said reasonably. “What are they?”

“Well first, I don’t know if I have time for parties and such this year, what with –”

“Stop,” he said, raising a hand.

Instinctively she clamped her mouth shut.

“You have time,” he said. “I know you’re working very hard, sweetheart, but you have to take breaks now and then. You just have to. Don’t let that be a reason you say no.”

Hermione sighed. The truth was, she felt inordinately guilty about how much she was using her time-turner, and she knew Draco had a point.

“Fine, I won’t let that be a reason.”

He nodded. “Good. Then what’s your other concern?”

She bit her lip. “Well... it’s just... down here, I know you.”

He quirked an eyebrow. “I don’t follow.”

“I mean I *know* you, Draco. I know you probably threatened the goblins not to spread rumors about us, and you probably even collected the footage from whatever camera was watching us. We’ve had an audience down here, but it’s one that’s invisible and terrified of you because you have so much leverage over them.”

He inclined his head. “True.”

She nodded a little. “This would be different, wouldn’t it? It would be other witches and wizards. We’re both famous. You’re courting me, and sex during a courtship isn’t strictly allowed. Sex like that is *definitely* not allowed. It would get around.”

He shrugged. "You may be right. I can tell them no, I just wanted to check first."

"I —"

He paused and raised an eyebrow. Hermione wondered if she had the courage to do this.

"I'm not saying no," she said.

Hermione thought she saw some excitement stir in his eyes, but he narrowed them at her.

"Oh?" he said evenly.

"Well you told me before you would transfigure yourself, right?"

"Yes," he said slowly. "I've always done that for the public parties."

"Right," she nodded. "Well Draco and Hermione might not be able to go, but..."

"But?" he prompted.

"But Mark and Jeanine might."

He went completely still as he stared at her.

"You're sure?" he said carefully.

Are you sure you want to turn into the woman you believed to have my heart?

Was Hermione sure? Not exactly. But had she been curious about this club of his ever since he confessed to it on that first night of Secrets and Truths? Yes, she had been very curious. Would she like to watch other people? She wasn't sure about that either, but she was open to trying it. The pictures in Draco's books had certainly excited her, and seeing it in real life might too. Did it turn her on to

know other people could see her? She knew it did because she had done it in front of the goblins to some degree already. And Mark and Jeanine were safe.

"I think we could try it for awhile," she said. "You told me there are private rooms too?"

He nodded. "Yes, I can reserve one. We can set it up however you like."

Hermione bit her lip and couldn't help but glance down. Draco's pants were suspiciously tight.

He really wants to do this, but he doesn't want to pressure me.

"Right," she said suddenly. "Do that then. We'll go as Mark and Jeanine for the party. Maybe we watch, maybe we participate a little – I'm not sure yet. But reserve a private room too, and then we can do whatever we want if the public stuff is too much."

A slow smile started to spread across his face.

"Alright," he said.

"And the scar on my arm," she added. "I'll need to cover it. It's too famous, and transfiguring it isn't going to work since it's a cursed scar."

He nodded. "You can wear gloves. It won't be out of place."

"Good," she said.

"Is there anything specific you want in the room?"

She raised an eyebrow. "You don't normally let me pick."

He shrugged. "I want you to be comfortable. This is going to be brand new for you."

She exhaled. "I'm not sure. How about... just surprise me, alright? And if it's too much when we get to it, I'll tell you. Let's just play it by ear and see how it goes."

He nodded. "Fair enough, we can do that."

Hermione nodded and then turned back to what she was doing, but it wasn't long before she felt him come up behind her and slip his hand into her pants.

"You're going to love it, sweetheart, I'm sure of it. And I'll be with you the whole time."

"Draco..." she sighed, but it turned into a moan as he slipped a finger inside of her.

"Open that last drawer you were working in..." he murmured, starting to kiss her neck and rub slow circles against her.

Hermione reached a shaky hand to the drawer and opened it.

"Take out that tray of rings," he said, slipping one finger inside of her and then another as he started to pump.

Hermione did, her breathing getting shallow.

"Good girl. Now pick out ten for me."

"Ten?" she asked in confusion.

"Ten," he confirmed. "Pick out ten, and then I'll let you come."

Hermione was panting, her legs were starting to shake, but she quickly selected her ten favorites from the tray. To her surprise he grabbed all of them and shoved them into his pocket.

"Thank you," he said as he suddenly hooked his fingers forward, and Hermione let out a groan.

“Draco...”

“Come on sweetheart, come for me now...”

It built quickly, and soon Hermione felt herself cresting, and before she knew it Draco was placing his fingers in her mouth to lick.

“Clean me off then suck me dry,” he said.

Hermione turned around to find him staring at her with such dark eyes that she didn’t even say a word as she dropped to her knees and opened her mouth.

“Fuck you’re perfect,” he sighed, as he released himself and pressed his hips toward her, bracing himself against the glass of the nearest jewelry display.

“You can use your hands this time. Show me how good you are.”

It was a challenge, she knew, but she was very good at this. She started with flat-tongued licks and light flicks before hollowing out her cheeks and taking him in, her hand sliding down the lower shaft and pumping firmly.

She looked up through her lashes to find him watching intently, his breathing ragged, as the musky taste filled her throat.

She made quick work of him, she thought. He liked oral sex quite a bit, and he didn’t have the same control when he was in her mouth as when he was inside of other places. He laced his fingers through her hair, and started to guide her, as she opened her throat and let him use her to pump.

“Fuck... fucking that sweet little swotty mouth Granger...” he said.

Hermione keened at this, she couldn’t help it. She loved the things he said to her, the praise he gave her, even when he was using her a little — *especially* when he was using her a little.

And then he was shuddering, and she braced herself to taste him.

He started to spurt, and she forced herself to swallow. The taste didn't bother her, but she thought the texture was a bit odd. Still, she managed it, and he looked at her like she was a queen, like she was fulfilling every dream he ever had. If that was all it took, she could swallow him every day if she had to.

He pulled her up from her knees and kissed her deeply before pulling back. "I'll give you an appropriate dress for the club. Pick out some earrings you like – chandeliers are good. Nothing too flashy though, or they might suspect who we are."

She nodded and went to a different drawer and pulled out some gold chandelier earrings that had caught her eye earlier.

Draco nodded. "Keep those too, if you like them."

She rolled her eyes a little. "And those ten rings you have in your pocket?"

He just smirked. "Insurance. Now then, on to the next room?"

Hermione gave him a wry look, but he just winked at her. "Fine, but you spoil me terribly. I hope you know that," she commented as they left Jewelry and she started to open the door to Potions and Rare Ingredients.

"Impossible," he said. "You are incorruptible, despite my best efforts. That means I can shower you, but I can't spoil you."

She rolled her eyes at this, but then was diverted by the room she was in.

"Oh Draco..." she breathed, looking around the small room.

It looked a bit like an apothecary, without the barrels of bulk ingredients. One wall contained vials of potions in all different sizes. The other three walls were lined with shelves containing ingredients.

He just watched with a small smile on his face as she started to make her way around the room, looking at every single one.

“Some of these are incredibly rare!” she said, eyeing the billywig stings and fwooper feathers.

Hermione had most of these in her own lab, but it was shocking to see them in private stores.

She turned to survey the potions and then looked at Draco with her eyebrows raised. “Some of these aren’t legal for you to own,” she said.

“Oh?” he asked lightly.

She just pointed to the veritaserum. “The list of people who can legally own veritaserum is very small, and you aren’t on it.”

“But you are,” he said with an easy grin. “So the way I see it, we can either move it to your vault, or we can leave it here and assume it won’t be searched again until this vault’s ownership has been... modified.”

He smirked at her blush, but she forced herself to roll her eyes. “Fine, have it your way.”

“You’re going to make me hard again,” he said with satisfaction, as she bypassed the veritaserum, polyjuice, and several other potions that weren’t technically *illegal*, but were definitely on the restricted list. She knew he was right about them though: they weren’t poisons so *she* could own them because her name was on that list. The odds of this vault being searched before things between them advanced seemed rather low. There was no reason to send them to her vault while they waited.

She continued to move around the room and paused again when she got to something that reminded her of a large tackle box that muggles might use for fishing. Curious, she opened the box to find

several dozen small vials of what looked to be blood. She pulled one out and squinted at the label.

“Granian blood?” she asked incredulously. It was so rare that even she didn’t have any.

Draco shrugged, and she pulled out another.

“Merpeople? Erumpet? Good lord, Draco, these are all blood samples from magical creatures that are very rare! And some of them are almost certainly illegal...”

He raised her eyebrows as she hesitated.

“Yes?” he prompted.

“It’s just... God, I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but...”

She glanced at him and bit her lip. He was watching her intently.

Finally she sighed. “Look, can I take these back to the lab with me? They might help me with that curse.”

A slow smile crossed his face. “Very well. If you really think it will help.”

She nodded. “Yes. In fact, I’d like to take them back now and call this room clear. All of the potions and ingredients that are restricted can be owned by me... well, this blood is illegal unless the magical creature consented to donate it, but we’ll never know if they did or not. I’ll assume they did.”

He smiled broadly. “Fine, but only because you’re letting me keep the others. Come along then, I’ll let you go back to the Playground. But come by the Manor for dinner, yes?”

Hermione nodded eagerly as she clutched the tackle box and they exited the Objects Vault. As usual the goblins glared at her a little bit,

but nobody said a word to her anymore, and she made her way to the small floo in the bank's lobby.

"I'll see you for dinner," she said.

Draco nodded and gave her a quick kiss before she threw some powder into the fireplace and found herself spinning away. Several minutes later she was nearly running toward the Playground, her mind racing with all the tests she needed to run.

For some reason – Hermione couldn't exactly say why – the tests she wanted to run weren't on the potion she was developing for the werewolf curse. No, Hermione found herself eager to test the vial of blood she found in the Wizards' Parlor.

She had been tinkering with it on and off to give her brain a break from her failed experiments, and she couldn't really say *why* she was so fixated on figuring out what it was. Maybe it was because it was hidden by a Malfoy who wasn't her boyfriend and that meant it was probably dark. Maybe it was because she hadn't matched it to any common blood types. Maybe it was because there was something else... something she just hadn't put together yet. All she knew was that she now had a case full of rare blood stock, and if the blood in the tiny vial didn't match one of *these* then she would never figure it out.

And if the blood did match, what then? Hermione wasn't sure, but she couldn't turn her brain off until she knew. Her pile of objects to decommission was slowly growing, but so were the mysteries she had to solve. Hermione just couldn't get this one out of her head. She sensed it held answers for her, even though she didn't know what they were yet.

She set the tackle box on the bench in her muggle lab and began the slow process of mounting slides to look at the blood samples under her microscope and testing other samples with chemical compounds to determine their makeup.

Vial after vial failed for her, and she was starting to get discouraged until finally she only had three vials left. She picked up the next one and paused as she read the label, her heart thudding.

Centaur

Of course. Of *course* it was centaur. She knew before she ever put the blood under the microscope that it would be a match, and sure enough she was right.

There had been a centaur tracking spell. There had been centaur herds killed. And now, remarkably, she had just found centaur blood hidden in the Malfoy vaults and behind that blasted painting. Like Harry said when Tobias Raine was murdered, twice is a coincidence but three times is a pattern.

True, the blood was old, but it had to mean something. It just *had* to. Hadn't the Manor led her right to it, once she finally asked nicely enough? Hermione had assumed the secret it was keeping was the location of the cursed objects, but what if that wasn't it? What if the secret that she needed to learn was that the centaurs were involved?

Tobias Raine had already died when the Manor revealed this to her. The Manor knew – because Draco knew – that she felt responsible for his death and needed to find a solution.

Answers, connections, and possibilities were now coming at her from a hundred different angles, and she suddenly latched onto the thing that she had forgotten. It had been so long ago it had slipped her mind.

Firenze

His portrait told her on her very first day in the Library that he had once done a favor for a Malfoy, and he was thanked with a portrait. Hermione stared down at the blood in her hand and wondered if this had been it? Had Firenze given the Malfoys some of his blood? Hermione knew enough about centaurs to know that this was wholly

against their code of ethics. They did not barter their bodies to humans *ever*.

But then again, Firenze had never been like the others. He was mystic and wrapped up in divination, to be sure - but he also engaged with humans when the others would not. He set himself against the stars time and again during the war. Not even banishment had stopped him.

Hermione knew she needed to talk to the portrait, but she wanted to run some more tests first. She hadn't had a break-through this large in weeks, and even though she was running on fumes and had already turned back eight hours that day, she needed a bit more time before joining Draco for dinner. She could talk to Firenze once she was done.

She bit her lip. She had never turned time *twice* in one day, other than the odd hour or two for classes. She had already repeated a full day and was considering repeating another half. She thought four more hours should do it. She knew she would be utterly shattered, but wasn't this worth her exhaustion? If she could run the rest of her tests before dinner then she would be better prepared with her questions for Firenze.

Decision made, she glanced at her watch and thought her past self was already gone to turn back time for Gringotts. Sure enough, she headed to her office where she kept her time turner and saw that it was empty. She reached into her desk drawer where her future self always made sure to return the time-turner. She kept it here because she couldn't risk being caught with it by Draco during one of his spontaneous sexual moments. She opened the drawer, pulled out the tiny hourglass and stared at it.

"Just four more hours," she said to herself as she clutched it to her and started to turn to leave her office.

But as she reached the door she jumped as she found herself blocked by Draco, who was taking an invisibility cloak off. He was

looking a bit severe as he held out his hand.

“Time’s up sweetheart,” he said. “Give it to me.”

Funishment

Chapter 38: Funishment

AN: No more secrets.

Draco

Up until that moment, Draco wasn't exactly sure when Hermione would cross the line with the time-turner, but he knew she had finally done it. She slipped away to the Playground that morning before meeting him at Gringotts under the guise of "checking on her lab." Draco, naturally, had followed her under his cloak and saw her future self putting the time-turner back into her desk while her past self buried her nose in a book. Only then did she leave for Gringotts. He knew that he was about to spend the whole day with Future Hermione while Past Hermione was on the Playground.

When she went back to the Playground after Gringotts, Draco had a feeling she was going to do something rash, and he followed again and waited to see if he was right. He saw her tinkering in the lab for a long while until she finally seemed to figure something out. Based on her reaction it seemed like something big. He hoped that would be the end of it for the day, but then he saw her make her way to her office, and something about her expression made him follow her. When he heard her say she was going to turn for another four hours, he knew enough was enough.

"Time's up sweetheart," he said. "Give it to me."

She looked stunned, even a bit scared, as she clutched the time-turner to her like a lifeline.

"No," she said.

"Hermione..." he said, in a warning voice.

"You have no right. You shouldn't even know about it. How could you follow me? Why would you do this? What..." she trailed off and fell silent at the dark look on his face.

"You want to know why I did this? Why I followed you? Because that day you put on your little show in here breaking curses for everyone I showed up early and saw two of you. Imagine my surprise. At first I thought it must be polyjuice, but nobody else could run a muggle lab like you sweetheart. I had a suspicion about what you were doing. And I was right."

"You've known..." she said faintly.

"I've *suspected* for a week," said Draco shortly. "I confirmed it for sure a couple days ago, and I'm not pleased about it. Not at all."

"You shouldn't have followed me, Draco. That's just..."

"And *you* shouldn't be living a second life without telling me!"

She flinched a bit, and he forced his temper back down. He didn't want to fight with her, he really didn't. But enough was enough.

"Nobody can know, Draco. That's the whole point of time-turning. You aren't supposed to be seen."

Draco felt a lurch of annoyance at this.

"That's bullshit, and you know it. You didn't tell me because you thought I would stop you. And you were right. I *am* stopping you, starting right now."

Her jaw dropped. "You can't!"

A muscle in his jaw twitched. "Watch me."

“No, you can’t! It’s a classified object! I have clearance for it, and you don’t! It’s illegal for you to have it!”

He started to walk toward her, and she backed away a bit, still clutching the time turner.

“Going to turn me in, sweetheart? You won’t turn me in for murder, but you’ll turn me in if it’s something that inconveniences you?”

She flinched again, and Draco felt a rush of guilt for phrasing it that way, but he didn’t take it back.

“That’s not what I meant,” she whispered, and he saw tears start.

He refused to let himself be swayed by them. He was right about this, he knew it.

“Give it to me, Hermione. You aren’t using it again today. You are exhausting yourself, and I won’t have it.”

She sniffed, and a tear fell down her cheek. Draco felt himself wavering, and he bit his tongue to prevent himself from taking it all back and just giving her what she wanted.

“I can handle it,” she said in a shaky voice. “I’ve done it before. Medical school...”

Draco’s eyebrows flew up. “You used it for medical school?”

Now she gave him a surprisingly scathing look.

“Of *course* I used it for medical school! I was holding a full-time job at the Ministry at the same time! Kingsley arranged it because I told him I couldn’t do both at once. I was sure nobody would suspect that I was using a time-turner for it. Wizards always think muggles are so primitive and their educations are so behind wizarding ones that nobody would ever think that maybe muggle medical school was harder than healer training! All my friends – even Harry – just thought I was attending part-time and staying busy!”

Draco was slightly chagrined to realize he hadn't thought much about it, but his own prejudices made him assume exactly that when he found out she recently graduated from medical school. He just thought muggle medical school wasn't that rigorous compared to healer training, and she could work at the Ministry and take classes at night while she did it. She would have had a very full schedule, but nothing that would require extra hours in the day.

"So you did this..."

"For two bloody years!" she said, starting to shout a little. "*And* I did it for an entire year when I was at Hogwarts! And while I was at Hogwarts I didn't even turn back time for sleep except for that one night because I *had* no other place to sleep! During medical school and over the last few weeks I've at least been able to get some extra sleep because I had a second place I could use for it!"

She gestured toward her sofa at this, and Draco suddenly understood: she had slept there during medical school when she had to catch up, and this time she could sleep with Draco.

Draco paused as he considered this. "Are you able to turn back and sleep full nights?"

She hesitated, and his gaze sharpened on her face. Finally she sighed.

"No, not completely. As far as my body is concerned, time still moves linearly. When I turn back hours I'm just adding time to my day, that's all. The same is true for sleep. I can sometimes go for twelve hours but I can't sleep any longer than that, no matter how long I'm awake beforehand. My body won't let me do it."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "So today you've been awake for..."

She grimaced a bit as she said, "About nineteen hours so far."

Draco checked his watch. It was only five-thirty in the evening, and he knew she wouldn't go to bed for another four or five hours at the earliest, even if she didn't add more hours to her day.

"Hermione, that's completely unacceptable. This is going to be a twenty-four hour day for you as it is."

She bit her lip. "Draco, I'm so close. I had a massive breakthrough just now, and you *know* how important this is! I have to figure it out, I have to –"

He put a finger against her lip. "I know. That's why I haven't said anything before now. But *please* don't turn back again today, sweetheart. It's already too much."

"But –"

"No," he said firmly. "Whatever it is, it can wait until tomorrow."

He knew he had finally won when she slumped a little, and Draco let out a small sigh of relief.

"Draco, I'm not going to stop completely," she said.

He studied her as he thought about it. He knew she was right that this was important. But she couldn't push herself this much.

"How did you do it in medical school? Were you just always this exhausted?"

She bit her lip as she thought about and then shook her head. "No. I was exempted from enough coursework thanks to healer training that I didn't have classes all day long. Most of the time I only had to turn back for half days. I could usually keep up with my reading in between projects at work. I would turn a full day now and then, but it wasn't all the time. I took classes year-round, but there were also breaks between sessions for a week or two, so I could always catch up on sleep then."

He nodded slowly, as he thought about this. "Fine. Then tonight I'm going to ask you to sleep for as long as you can before going to work tomorrow. No alarms, no waking up early. Tomorrow night we are leaving Theo's no later than ten to get you into bed at a reasonable hour. And then this weekend please take time off to rest. The only thing we have scheduled is the holiday party at my club. If you do that, then starting on Monday I won't object if you start turning for half days until the estate is done or you figure out the curse reversal, whichever comes first. Once that's done please give up the time-turner and go back to a normal schedule."

"Draco..." she said in an exasperated voice.

"Hermione..." he said sternly. "I mean it."

"You can't interrupt my job, Draco."

He gave her a wry look. "Sweetheart, asking you to cut yourself off after a day and a half of work versus two full days of work isn't interfering with your job. It's keeping you healthy because you won't put normal limits on yourself. There is literally no other person at the Ministry who works as much as you do because it's physically impossible."

She chewed on her lip for a bit as she thought about this, but then finally gave a short nod.

"Thank you," he said, pulling her in for a kiss. She gave him one reluctantly and then glared a bit as he pulled away.

"I'm still cross with you," she grumbled. "You shouldn't have spied on me."

Draco felt a small smile tug at his mouth. "I'm not apologizing for it if it means you'll slow down and take care of yourself. I told you I care about you more than anything else, and that includes the estate or reversing this curse. Besides, I'm still very cross with you for doing it in the first place, not to mention keeping it from me."

She looked at him a bit warily. She said nothing, as he just raised an eyebrow.

“Please give me the time-turner. I’ll give it back to you at lunch on Monday.”

Her nostrils flared a bit, but she said nothing as she slowly held it out for him, and he plucked it out of her hand and shoved it into his pocket where the ten rings she had picked out earlier were still clanking around.

“Thank you. Now come to the Manor for dinner. And I suggest you mentally prepare yourself for tonight while we eat.”

“Mentally prepare for what?” she said cautiously, as she started to follow him out of her office and toward the door to the Playground.

“Your punishment. You did break the rules, sweetheart.”

Hermione

Hermione was angry with Draco, but she was also angry with herself. How could she have allowed herself to get caught? How could she have been so careless?

How could I have done this to myself?

A small part of her – a *very* small part – knew Draco was right. She had started with the occasional half-day turn, and it quickly morphed to half-day turns every single day. Then she started going longer and longer until she was doing full days every day, including weekends. It was far worse than medical school at this point, and she was shattered. She knew she should stop, but she couldn’t make herself do it. Her guilt and sense of responsibility wouldn’t let her.

She was silent as she followed him to the Manor as she thought about it.

Draco had suspicions about her time-turning for a week, and he hadn't stopped her before now. She wondered if he was aware she was doing full days that whole time or if he only knew she was doing it now and then and wasn't aware of just how bad it had gotten. Maybe it was her impulse to do it a second time today that made him intervene. Or maybe it was because she finally had a breakthrough. Either way, he felt the need to reveal himself and stop her because he knew she wouldn't do it herself.

He was right to do it, whispered a small voice.

He shouldn't have spied, said the part of her that was very stubborn.

Instinctively she knew that both were right, but she remembered his words.

"And you shouldn't be living a second life without telling me!"

Was that really how he viewed it? It implied that he didn't trust her to tell him about it herself.

I wouldn't have, she was forced to acknowledge.

She wasn't sneaking around with another wizard, but she was sneaking around with her job. And she hadn't talked to him about it first. He had always told her that if she needed to modify any of his rules she should talk to him about it first, and she hadn't. She didn't think it was any of his business.

Maybe I made it his business when I agreed to follow his bloody rules in the first place.

She sighed as they floo'd to the Manor. She thought they were both in the wrong, but perhaps she was a bit more wrong than he was this time. After all, once she explained it to him he still agreed to let her work more than usual – he was just cutting her off after a certain point each day before her body gave out. She couldn't deny that her

behavior with the time-turner had turned a bit addictive ever since she started using it again. It wasn't healthy.

Still, she was in a mood through dinner, and it was oddly stilted. She sensed Draco was angrier with her than he had let on, and Hermione was still brooding about the invisibility cloak.

"I wish you hadn't spied on me," she said suddenly. "I don't like it."

He narrowed his eyes and thought about this. "Do you wish I had confronted you a week ago when I first suspected it and cut you off then?"

"I —"

Hermione paused. Now she wasn't sure.

"I don't know," she finally admitted. "But you know I'm a private person. We've discussed how much I dislike it when you do things behind my back to invade my privacy. Using a cloak to spy on me crossed a really big line."

His jaw clenched a little. "And not telling me about the time-turner crossed a big line for me. How long have you been doing it?"

Hermione looked down at her plate and played with her fork a little bit. "Since the photo shoot," she finally admitted.

He said nothing, but when she looked up at him, his eyes were flashing again.

They fell silent. Hermione wasn't ready to apologize yet, and she could tell he wasn't either. They ate in silence until finally she couldn't stand it anymore, and she just pushed her plate away. She stood, and automatically he did too.

She started to walk out, and he said, "Where are you going?"

"Away," she said, without looking back at him.

She felt his gaze boring into the back of her head, but to her surprise he didn't try to stop her, and she slipped out of the Dining Room and back to the Study, where she quickly floo'd to her flat. She closed her fireplace. She knew Draco could always apparate to her if he wanted to, but she hoped he wouldn't. She needed space to sort her feelings. She needed to feel her anger.

She needed to cry.

Despite her tempestuous relationship with Ron over the years, Hermione did not enjoy conflict. Her fights with Ron had become legendary, and it was one of the reasons she knew deep down they would never work long-term. Ron was the only person she had ever fought with semi-regularly. She hardly ever fought with Harry or any of her other friends, and she didn't want to fight with Draco either.

She knew she was in the wrong – possibly even more so than he was – but she meant it when she said the spying crossed a line for her. She knew Draco was the interfering sort. She had forgiven him for the things he did early on in their relationship, but this thing with the invisibility cloak felt even more invasive because she would have no way of knowing if he was doing it. She was as familiar as anybody with the magic of invisibility cloaks, and perhaps that was why she didn't want one used against her.

In fact, Draco could be in her room right now, and she wouldn't know. She tensed as she tried to feel his magic and sensed nothing. But this was the very issue: she couldn't be sure.

She knew she shouldn't have abused the time-turner the way she did. Of course she knew that. She had to admit she could see why Draco would view it as a violation of trust because he was under the impression that she was doing the things she promised him she would do: eat, sleep, take breaks. Hell, she had even been feeling guilty about it.

But she still didn't want to see him again until he made it clear he wouldn't use the cloak. Trust was a two-way street.

Hermione was curled up in bed, tears silently tracking down her cheeks. She hated this, absolutely hated this, but it was a hard line for her. She couldn't let it go until he acknowledged that it was wrong of him, and he wouldn't do it again.

She looked at the clock on her nightstand and sighed. It was only eight. She was tired from the very long day, but she knew if she went to bed now she might wake up far too early. She had always been like that. Anything earlier than nine-thirty would wreck her sleep for the night.

Crookshanks hopped up into bed, and she pulled him to her and snuggled her face into his fur. He gave a plaintive meow.

"It's nothing, buddy," she whispered. "Things are just off right now."

Crookshanks gave a deep purr, and she sighed as she clutched him to her, trying not to let the negative thoughts get to her.

Couples fought. Of course they did. It didn't mean he didn't care about her. It didn't mean she didn't care about *him*. They were just in... disagreement.

What would Hermione need from him to make her go back and talk to him about it?

An apology. An acknowledgment that he did something wrong too.

Yes, that was the thing that was most grating about this. Hermione had done something wrong. Her something was probably worse than his something, and she could acknowledge that. But he wasn't blameless, and until she knew he understood that, she would stay here and mope with Crookshanks.

Suddenly the latch on the Lover's Box glowed, and Hermione glanced at it, biting her lip.

She didn't want a nightly flower tonight, not when they were at odds with each other. He still sent them every night they slept apart, though those occasions were becoming less and less frequent.

Maybe it's a note and not a flower.

She had to admit it was still a bit early for a flower. He knew what time she usually went to bed.

She chewed her lip. She was curious, but she was also feeling rather stubborn. Maybe she wanted to mope just a little bit longer before she looked at it.

To her surprise, Crookshanks meowed loudly and hopped out of her arms.

"What the...?"

But he just cast a baleful look at the Lover's Box and quickly exited her room.

Hermione frowned. That was strange. But then she sniffed, and she realized there was an odd smell that was growing stronger. It was faintly smokey and acrid. She sniffed again and realized it was coming from her Lover's Box.

Utterly baffled now and no longer able to hold back her curiosity, Hermione opened the box, and started to cough as the strong stench of burned hair emerged from it. It smelled *terrible*.

God, was this his plan to get her to come back to the Manor? Smoke her out of her own flat?

Her eyes were watering slightly from the smell, as she peered down into the box, and then they widened as she slowly reached in and pulled out the thing inside of it.

It was the invisibility cloak, and he had set it on fire. That was the awful stench – it was the smell of demiguise hair burnt to a crisp.

Hermione's hands were shaking slightly as she pulled it out and, despite the terrible smell, tried it on.

It didn't work.

Hermione dropped the cloak on the floor and exhaled as she sat back down on her bed, something easing inside of her. He had destroyed it for her. She told him it was a hard line, and he sent her proof that he wouldn't do it again. There was no accompanying note — the gesture spoke for itself.

Hermione knew he could acquire another cloak easily enough from the Weasleys, but she didn't think he would. If there was one thing she knew about Draco it was that he believed in hard limits. He followed them far more stringently than Hermione did.

She had given up her time-turner, and now he had given up his cloak. They were back on equal footing.

Except it wasn't quite equal, because she had broken the rules much longer than he had. She had known it was something he wouldn't like while she was doing it, and the same didn't necessarily hold true for him.

He should have been able to figure it out though.

Hermione sighed as she thought about it. He should have figured it out, but Draco could be a bit single-minded about some things. He was well-intentioned but sometimes he didn't consider the full scope of her feelings when he was making his plans. She knew he tried, but he didn't always get it right. Perhaps he really hadn't thought of it in that way. She certainly hadn't told him she didn't like it until tonight. And within an hour of her articulating it, he sent her proof that he wouldn't do it again.

What, then, would make them even?

Punishment.

That word whispered through her brain. Hermione didn't know what he had in mind for it. She didn't know if he was still interested in doing it. Whatever it was, she knew she could tell him no if it felt like too much or it was unfair.

If she took it though, they would be square again. And then afterwards maybe he would touch her and care for her and do all the things that made her feel warm instead of this cold sadness she had been feeling ever since coming back to her flat. She was hesitant, but she wasn't a Gryffindor for nothing.

She slowly rose and made her way out of her bedroom and toward her fireplace. She took a deep breath and threw some powder into the fire, spinning away and arriving in his bedroom just a few moments later.

She stepped out and came to an abrupt halt.

He was shirtless, dressed in a pair of joggers, his body flung onto a deep chair in the sitting area, staring at her with an inscrutable expression on his face, though something about his eyes appeared almost dead as he looked at her. His hair that was usually so well-arranged was disheveled, as though he had been running his hands through it. He was holding a glass of firewhiskey, slowly swirling it around before he took a sip. His eyes never left hers, and she saw the life slowly coming back to his face, though oddly his expression didn't change one bit.

He was occluding, she suddenly realized with a jolt. He had been occluding, and now he was lowering his walls since she came back.

Hermione bit her lip nervously and clasped her hands. "Draco, I... came back. For my punishment. Maybe."

A glimmer of something she couldn't identify crossed his face. "Maybe?" he finally asked.

Hermione exhaled. "Well I just... don't know what you have in mind."

He said nothing to this, but continued to stare at her.

Hermione was chewing her lip, her nerves building, waiting for him to say *something*, anything, but he didn't. He was just brooding, never taking his eyes off of her face, and then her courage failed her.

"Nevermind," she said quickly, turning around and grabbing some powder from the mantle. "I'll just –"

She threw powder into the fire and started to step into it when she heard a light clunk and a strangled cry come from behind her. She spun around to find Draco's head lowered, his hands gripping his hair so hard his knuckles were turning white. She blinked in confusion.

"Draco?" she asked curiously.

His head whipped up, and the expression on his face made her falter. He looked like he was in pain.

"Please don't run," he whispered.

Hermione opened her mouth, but he was speaking again.

"You always run. Always. And I'm trying to let you, but I can't, I just... I can't. I..."

He had a slightly manic look on his face now as he kept tugging his hair.

"Draco..." she said slowly. "I'm not running away, I just –"

"Need some time to think, I know. Away from me. Away. That's what you said. *Away.*"

Hermione's mouth snapped shut. Inexplicably, a memory from when he was strung out on that pain potion rose in her mind.

"Please angel, stay with me. Don't run away from me again."

Had she run? Is that what she did when she needed to think?

Yes, whispered a voice in her mind.

She ran that night she was Jeanine, assuming that any type of relationship with Mark after their time together was futile and wanting to get away before he lowered her defenses any further. Then she met Draco again and stayed away for weeks after he made his first real move to show her he was interested. When she saw Ella kiss him she fled instead of letting him explain. And tonight she had been angry and left after dinner to sort her own thoughts.

She had always needed space and time to think. Draco seemed to know this about her and gave it to her gratuitously. She had never stopped to think about how it affected him.

She slowly approached him, and hope but also guilt sprang up on his face.

He feels guilty because he asked me to stay.

“Draco, is it... hard for you?”

He gave her an incredulous look. “Hermione, I bought a house for you when I was seventeen years old in order to imprison you so you would stay safe and couldn’t leave me again. Of *course* it’s hard for me.”

Oh. Right.

“Then why didn’t you come to the flat?”

Now he looked almost sad, as he shrugged.

“You said you wanted to go away. I was just trying to give you what you needed. But I’m bad at it, I can’t...”

He made a frustrated noise again.

“You give me a lot of space,” she said carefully.

He nodded. “I know you need it. I really try, sweetheart. I do fine with it when you aren’t angry with me, but when you are...” he made a hopeless little gesture. “I just think I’m going to lose you all over again, and it will be another seven years before I win you back.”

Now Hermione was feeling guilty. She had never thought about it from his perspective before, not really. She realized Draco was right: when she ran, he chased. She might crave space when she was angry to process her feelings, but he craved togetherness. Hermione didn’t *enjoy* going to bed in the middle of a conflict, but she could do it. When Draco was in that position, he found a way to break into a secure part of the Ministry to be with her so he wouldn’t have to sleep alone. The fact that he had left her alone at all tonight was surprising, and she suspected that the only way he managed it for as long as he did was through occlumency.

She approached him and lowered herself onto his lap. Immediately his arms snaked around her, and she felt him clinging to her, shaking just a little. She sighed and sank into him.

“I love you, and you aren’t going to lose me just because we had an argument,” she said quietly.

He said nothing, he just cocooned himself around her, holding her in place so she couldn’t leave.

“Is that why you burned the cloak?” she asked hesitantly, “so I would come back?”

She felt him shake his head. “No, I burned it because you said I crossed a line. I wanted you to know I won’t do it again. I didn’t think it would make you come back.”

She nodded a little.

“Sweetheart...” he added, “I’m sorry I spied on you. I just wanted to be sure about what you were doing before I confronted you, that’s all. I’ve only had the cloak for a few days, and I only used it to watch you with the time-turner on the Playground to make sure my suspicions were correct. I won’t do it again.”

Hermione’s breath caught in her throat. He was apologizing to her too. She instinctively buried herself into him a little more, and he gave a small sigh. She felt some of the tension draining out of him.

“Thank you, it’s just... very invasive. And we’ve talked about the other invasive things you’ve done in the past. I understand why you abated my rent and did those other things for me, but I mean it. I don’t want you to intrude anymore.”

He stiffened a little. “You aren’t paying me rent.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m not saying that. I know you don’t need me to pay rent, and you’re expected to provide housing for me because of those bloody rules you follow. I’m not trying to open that up for discussion. I’m just saying I want to know what you’re doing before you do it. Don’t spy on me. Don’t just fix my life without telling me about it first – the vault in Gringotts is a recent example of that...”

She caught his dissatisfied look as she said this last bit.

“... and I’m *not* saying that I don’t want that vault! I did need your help with the goblins that day, I know I did – I’m just pointing out that you arranged my vault to be near yours without talking to me about it first. I gave you a pass for it because you were really emotional when you did it, and I do want mine near yours. I’m just saying you need to give me some agency to decide if I want your help *before* you help in the future. And for heavens’ sake, if you have suspicions about me breaking the rules, just *ask* instead of going behind my back to confirm it first.”

He nodded slowly. “Fine. I can do that. I’m trying to be better about it. The vault was because I want you there with me, and I wanted to

shove it in the goblins' faces so they understand just how important you are to me and how much they fucked up. But you're right I should have run it by you first. As for the cloak... I really didn't think of it as an invasion of privacy because I was just trying to make sure I was right before I confronted you. I didn't want to falsely accuse you if there was some other explanation for it. I realize now that the way I went about it was idiotic."

Hermione softened a little. "I thought as much. I think the rule needs to be that you don't operate behind my back unless it's meant to be a nice surprise. We both need to be more honest with each other if this is going where I think it's going. Even if it's well-intentioned, I don't want any more secrets."

"No more secrets," he agreed. Hermione thought he sounded relieved.

"And I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the time-turner," she said quietly. "I'm sorry I broke the rules. I just... I'm the only one who can solve this."

"I know," he whispered. "That's why I didn't stop you before today."

She was silent for a moment as she debated something with herself. Finally she sighed and just decided to say it.

"I did need you to cut me off. I love my job, but I have addictive tendencies with my work, and the time-turner feeds that addiction in an unhealthy way. I know that, and it's a big reason I haven't used it since medical school. I'm not saying I'll never need to use it again for a project at work, but I will tell you about it first. I'll also let you monitor my usage of it to hold me accountable so I don't do this to myself again. I promise."

He stilled, and she got the impression he was thinking hard.

"Would you be willing to sign a contract that puts that promise in writing?" he asked carefully.

She furrowed her brow and pulled back a little so she could see his face. "I think so... but why?"

He shrugged. "Alyssa won't write an engagement contract for us unless you give me something too."

"You're working on an engagement contract?"

She felt slightly lightheaded as she thought about it, but she reminded herself that she had known this was coming. Everything he had been doing was clearly pointing toward marriage, and she knew marrying somebody like him would involve contracts. She also knew that according to those blasted rules, the wizard always presented the opening offer. She had been waiting for it, but they hadn't talked about it yet.

To her surprise, he snorted at her question.

"No, I'm not working on an engagement contract because Alyssa won't write it. She says it would be malpractice to draft it the way I want it drafted, and she's so liberal compared to most other estate planners that if she won't do it, then I know nobody else will either. I've thought about just going without one, but I don't want you to have to rely on my word."

Hermione quirked an eyebrow in interest.

"In the spirit of being honest, what did you ask her to put in it?"

He shrugged. "I'm sure you can guess. Plenty of gold and some property in your name, though Blaise and Ben still have to vet it for me to make sure it can be done. A wedding within a year of signing. Breakup fees for me, that sort of thing."

"I thought you said there wouldn't be breakup fees."

"I said there wouldn't be breakup fees for *you*. If I break it, then I double your gold."

Hermione blinked. "So what if I break it?"

"Then I double your gold."

"Draco..." she said, "that makes no sense."

"Sure it does. You'll get a lot more from me if you *don't* break it. And I am never breaking it, so anything about it from my side is moot. It will never happen."

She gave him a wry look. "Anything else?"

"An obligation to provide for you in my estate plan, and I want the marriage provisions to include an escape clause for you."

She gave him a surprised look. "An escape clause?"

He nodded. "I don't want you to be married to me if you ever feel like you no longer want to be. You say you don't want to rely on me, and I'm trying to respect that. I've thought about it a lot, and I don't want you to stay with me because you have to in order to afford your lifestyle. I don't want you to be reliant on me in that way, and once the settlements are made they will be yours, and you will be wealthy in your own right whether you're my wife or not. If you *do* come to rely on me for anything I want it to be for emotional support and love, not money. If you ever fall out of love with me I want you to have the freedom and ability to leave. Wizarding divorces are rare, but they are possible if the couple agrees to an escape clause in advance."

Hermione's heart squeezed at this. It was so thoughtful. She *did* rely on him emotionally, she was starting to realize that now.

"Draco, that's..."

"The right thing to do. I need to keep earning your love. If there's an escape clause I'll be motivated to do it."

Hermione gripped him harder and stole a kiss. How could she not when he said something like that to her?

“What about you then? Won’t you have an escape clause?”

“Sweetheart, that’s ridiculous. I’m a fucking wreck without you. I’m never escaping, nor would I ever want to.”

She gave him an exasperated look at this.

“This sounds very one-sided in my favor.”

He nodded. “I suppose it is, and that’s why Alyssa won’t write it. She says you have to give me something in return. But maybe if you agree to tell me about time-turning before you do it again she’ll say it’s enough.”

He looked so hopeful her heart ached.

“And what happens if I break that part of the contract?”

His expression darkened a little. “There have to be consequences. Every single thing I might break would trigger damages for you... or it would if she would fucking *write* it for me.”

“So what would my consequences be? Returning assets to you?”

He shook his head firmly. “No. Not that. But... perhaps punishment.”

Her breath hitched. “What kind of punishment?” she asked tentatively.

She watched his eyes darkening as he thought about it, and his hands started rubbing circles on her back. “Only things you consent to. Only things that you know deep down you like.”

“Is it a punishment if I like it?”

He shrugged. “Call it a punishment if you want. We can make it a defined term in the contract.”

Hermione couldn't help a small giggle that erupted as she imagined it. "You want to put our sexual preferences into our contract?"

"Why not?" he retorted. "Plenty of couples write a contract for our kind of dynamic. If you're willing to entertain an engagement contract with me, it seems sensible to include this too."

"Hmmm..." she said. "What exactly is a funishment then?"

"You like to be edged. You like to warm my cock. You even like ruined orgasms because they make you come harder when I finally let you go. All of those things frustrate you too though, hence 'funishment.' And maybe..."

"Maybe..." she prompted.

"We could try other things too."

"Like?"

"I'd be into spanking you."

He said it casually enough that Hermione knew she could tell him no. She could always tell him no. But she didn't want to tell him no. She was nervous about it, but also curious. Still, she needed to check a few things.

"You want to hit me?"

The look on his face turned so dark so fast that Hermione blinked in surprise.

"If that's how you would experience it, then no."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "I don't understand."

Draco ran a hand over her bum slowly. "Spanking stings. It does hurt, but when done properly it also enhances your pleasure. However, if you would view it as me hitting you, then I won't do it."

Hitting is an unfair power play. It's exerting control over another person against their will. I will never *hit* you."

She raised an eyebrow. "Would you spank our children?"

"No," he said instantly. "Doing it to children is different than doing it to you. Children who are spanked don't consent to it. Obviously adults make children do a lot of things they don't want to do, but I draw a line when the methods to force children to comply turn physical."

She felt herself start to relax a little. That was how she viewed it too.

"So you want to spank me..." she said slowly.

"You did break the rules sweetheart."

"I did, that's true. And I came here to take my punishment."

"Your funishment," he corrected.

She dipped her head. "My funishment. Spanking could be... a good funishment."

He started to smile slowly. "If you're willing to let me turn that perfect arse of yours bright red, then get naked and go lie on the bed on your stomach."

Hermione was nervous, but so curious about it. She realized she was shaking a little.

"Draco, I'm scared," she whispered.

He gave her a long, slow kiss. "We don't have to."

"I know, but I want to. I'm just..."

"It will be OK sweetheart. You know I won't injure you. And if it's too much, use your safeword. I'll stop."

She bit her lip and nodded before rising from his lap and slowly taking her clothes off. She couldn't meet Draco's eye, but she knew he was watching every move. She finally glanced at him as she was heading toward his bed, and she saw his eyes tracking her, fixed on her arse. She climbed onto the bed and laid on her stomach before she felt the bed dip and Draco joined her.

"Clasp your hands together, over your head," he said softly.

She did as he requested, and suddenly she heard him whisper something, and then the feeling of silk binding her wrists. She tugged and realized he had secured her to the bed like that, though her ankles were still loose.

"On your knees, arse in the air for me," he said.

Hermione wriggled into position, her breathing getting shallow as she tensed a bit, waiting for it.

"We're going to do ten. Count for me," he said, and she nodded quickly and then she felt it.

Hermione gasped, "One!" It stung. Merlin, it stung. But to her surprise she also felt heat coalescing in her core. She realized it was making her wet. It was the oddest sensation.

"Two!" she cried, and this time it was the other cheek. She felt his hands rubbing over the place he had just spanked her gently, admiringly.

"Fuck Granger this looks so good on you," he murmured, and Hermione presented unconsciously. Her bum felt hot as the blood rushed there.

"Three!"

This one was a little harder, and she whimpered a bit.

“Four!”

Hermione was wriggling unconsciously, trying to settle that heat inside of her. She couldn't do it. Each time his hand met her arse it enhanced it.

“Five!”

“Six!”

She gasped the last number, and she felt herself shaking now and practically dripping. It hurt so much she had tears in her eyes, but it also felt so good. She couldn't understand it, *why* would it feel this good when it hurt this much?

To her surprise he gave her the slightest break, rubbing her raw skin just a little bit.

“Four more, Granger. Be a good girl for me and give me four more.”

“Yes sir,” she cried.

“Seven!”

“Eight!”

“Nine!”

“Ten!”

The tears in Hermione's eyes spilled over, both from the pain and the pleasure it was giving her. She was angling her bum toward him. She needed him to give her something to release the pressure he had just built for her. She needed him *now*.

"I'm going to put this memory in my pensieve so I can watch it over and over again," he said. "Your arse has never been more lovely."

Then to her surprise she felt him licking over the hot globes, cooling them from the sting he had just inflicted. He pulled back and blew on them.

"Beautiful," he murmured. "Just beautiful."

"Draco, *please*," she said.

"Please what?"

"Please do it. You can do it. I want you to..."

She sensed him stilling.

"You want me to do what, princess?"

"Take me like this. My arse... I want..."

She felt his hand grip her arse hard and squeeze.

"You're sure?"

"Positive. *Please*, I need you..."

"One time the regular way, and then I will. Fucking hell..."

She nodded quickly, and without further delay she felt Draco push into her cunt and start to move quickly.

"You have to do this fast Granger, I'm desperate for your arse..."

“Yes,” she gasped, and she tilted her hips ever so slightly to capture that perfect angle. Now he was there, hitting it exactly how she needed it.

“Fuck Draco, just *go*... Take it out on me...”

She didn’t know what possessed her to say this, but he made a sound behind her that was half-groan, half-growl, as he stopped holding back.

“You want to be my little fuck toy?”

“Yes...”

“You want me to fill all your holes back here?”

“God, yes...”

“Stop talking to God angel, I keep telling you that. He wants nothing more to do with you now that you’ve left heaven and found me. I’m all you’re ever going to have...”

“Good... that’s good... I...”

Hermione couldn’t say anything else, because she was breaking, and it was a big one. She cried out as her whole body convulsed, and she felt her wetness multiply.

“Oh fuck...” he said in an amazed voice.

“Huh?” asked Hermione a bit dazed, but he didn’t clarify.

Instead he pulled out gently, and then she felt that cleansing spell before he summoned something from the bathroom. A moment later she felt something big, large, almost *too* large breaching her, and she groaned as she lowered her chest all the way to the bed.

“Oh *Draco*...” she said.

This was tight, this was a little painful too, but also so delicious.

“Shit, Granger,” he gasped. “This is so... *fuck me* you’re perfect...”

He started to move ever so slowly, and Hermione was shaking, and to her surprise she felt herself getting close to climax again. It was unexpected, coming from that angle, but also undeniable. The spanking and incredible orgasm he had already given her had primed her for it. She was already so close.

“Draco, I need...” she trailed off, not able to articulate it, but he knew her well enough that she didn’t have to tell him. He responded immediately, slipping a finger inside of her and pressing his ring against her clit.

The combined pressure and sensations sent her spinning, and before she knew it she was shaking and that moment she barely had to chase caught up to her again. She saw those stars he always wanted her to see and felt almost split from her body as something came tumbling out of her. She didn’t know exactly what happened, but she felt wetter than she had ever been in her life.

“Fuck Granger,” she heard him whisper. “That’s the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen.”

He sounded stunned by whatever she had just done, and soon she felt him jerking behind her too. Hermione had collapsed on the bed, arse still straight in the air, trying to catch her breath.

A few moments later she felt herself being cleaned up, and her bindings released, and then Draco was pulling her close to him, trembling slightly as he rubbed her wrists to bring feeling back to them.

She couldn’t remember ever feeling this sated after sex before. She was exhausted and beautifully sore in all the right places.

Then Draco was talking, tripping over himself because he couldn't seem to talk fast enough.

"That was the most perfect, amazing, incredible... Hermione. I love you so much, sweetheart. Thank you. Thank you, *thank you*. Gods I've wanted to do that to you for months. Break all the rules in our contract. I want to be able to funish you all the time."

She just smiled and nestled in.

"Draco, can you do something for me?"

"Anything," he said instantly.

"Take a note to Alyssa for me next week. I have some thoughts about our contract."

Firenze's Tale

Chapter 39: Firenze's Tale

AN: Draco learns something surprising and Hermione makes a list.

Hermione

The spanking and subsequent arse breaching didn't take that long, but Hermione was wiped by the time it was over. She collapsed into Draco's bed soon afterwards, and Draco got to work. He was always very affectionate after one of their scenes, but this time felt even more poignant and ardent than usual. He rubbed a soothing ointment into her raw bum before rubbing down her back and shoulders too. The whole time he peppered her with praise, thanks, apologies, and promises.

"I'll do better for you. I'll be better for you. I promise sweetheart, I'll stop sneaking around. I'm so sorry for fucking up. You're perfect, and this is why I need you. You call me out for my bullshit. I'm so sorry. You're so beautiful. Gods I love your arse... and your brain of course, my lovely little swot... you'll save the world, and I just want you to be selfish now and then and take the things you deserve... I love you so much... you'll probably be cross with me if Alyssa ever puts together a contract for us, but you're worth it. Promise me you'll let me do it. All I want is you... No more secrets sweetheart..."

On and on it went, and Hermione found herself melting at his words, and somehow she knew he meant it. The evening had been rough, but she realized that talking about it, taking her funishment, and then letting him give her extra attention brought them back to equilibrium. They had no more secrets, and their relationship survived it.

During his ministrations, Draco kept a strict eye on the clock, and the moment it was nine-thirty, he dressed her for bed, removed her jewelry, and tucked her in just so. He joined her a few minutes later, pulling Hermione to him so tight that she was sure he felt the same relief that she did.

Hermione fell into a dreamless sleep, and neither of them set any alarms. She woke up much later than usual – around nine, which was usually an hour past the time she arrived at work – but she finally realized just how much she needed it. Even with eleven and a half hours of sleep, her body was overly tired, still craving more. And that, more than anything, told her Draco had been right to cut her off from the time-turner, even if he shouldn't have spied on her to do it.

“Draco,” she said, yawning as she rolled over to find him already dressed but back in bed with her. He was watching her with some satisfaction, head propped on his elbow.

“Hmmm?”

“I’m going to go to the Playground to run some more tests, but I’ll come back for a late lunch. If I can make progress today, I’ll take a nap before dinner.”

“That’s a fantastic idea,” he said with approval. “I want you to take the next few days to rest and get caught up.”

She nodded a little, and after a quick change and breakfast, she was soon buried in her lab, running test after test to confirm what she believed was true: the vial of blood behind the painting in the Wizards’ Parlor was centaur, and it was pristine and not mixed with anything else.

Now certain of what she had, she hurried back to the Manor, ate lunch, and then finally approached the portrait of Firenze, with Draco following her curiously.

“Firenze,” she said.

“Hello, Harry Potter’s friend.”

She smiled at this a little bit.

“Hello. Firenze, I was hoping you could answer a few questions for me.”

“Ah, questions and answers, secrets and truths. They are all part of the same circle, are they not?”

“Erm...”

Hermione had to admit, this was the part of her plan that gave her some heartburn. Getting a straight answer from a centaur was challenging. She made a mental note to call Luna for help if she couldn’t nail this down today.

“Yes, well,” she tried again, “I was hoping you could tell me about the favor you gave to a Malfoy. Can you tell us what you did to inspire this painting?”

“It was most unusual,” he said. “Centaur is bound to the stars of course, and our bodies are committed to the earth, not humankind. But once in a while, we must deviate from our planned course. For failure to do so could commit all races to strife and evil. That was the favor I gave a Malfoy.”

Bloody hell.

“To be clear,” chimed in Draco, for Hermione had filled him in on her findings over lunch, “did you give a vial of blood to Lucius Malfoy or Abraxas Malfoy?”

“Hmmm, yes, I’m afraid I had no choice. It was not fated, but the alternatives were too dire.”

“Could you... elaborate?” asked Hermione. “What were the alternatives?”

“A werewolf rising,” he said dolefully. “They are our sworn enemies – both wizard and animal. They can wield a wand but also curse with a bite. The Malfoy I helped loathed the wolves, just as the centaurs do. He encountered one in the Forbidden Forest, just after the full moon while the Dark Lord was still in power. The Malfoy man had pulled rank on the wolf and denied him of prey. In retaliation, the wolf threatened his son with an ancient curse. It would allow a wolf to kill outside of the full moon. The wolf told the Malfoy man that if his prey was taken from him again, he would inflict the curse upon his son, and he would perish.”

“Father,” whispered Draco, and Hermione turned to look at him. He looked stricken.

“Indeed,” said Firenze dolefully. “I was in the Forest that night, and I listened. I knew of this curse. The centaurs have always known of it, for it is dark magic and has been used by the wolves when they are desperate for prey. The curse has been passed down from Alpha to Alpha in the darkest pack of wolves over centuries. And the wolf the Malfoy man encountered – this Grayback – was the Alpha of that pack and the custodian of that magic. He could maim if he wished, but he also had the power to kill on a whim.”

“And?” asked Hermione, nearly breathless with wonder at the story. This was the same curse that had killed Tobias Raine and the six other people, she was sure of it.

“And the curse has never worked on centaurs, for we guard ourselves against it. When wolves wish to attack us, they must kill us with violence, not with their dark magic. When the Malfoy man left the wolf, I followed and told him this. For I could see in the stars that his son could be important. He could be the link to prevent an uprising.”

“The blood,” said Hermione slowly. “You gave him the blood.”

“I gave him blood and guidance. He questioned me for hours about my diet, my habits, the things in my environment that could make me

resilient to this curse. I told him everything I knew of it and gave him several vials of my blood for his experiments.”

“Was he successful?” asked Draco eagerly.

Firenze just looked at Draco calmly. “You tell me, young man. When the wolf attacked you, did you perish?”

Draco froze, and Hermione turned to stare at him.

“Draco...” she said softly. “Let me see your scars.”

Draco turned to her and in one swift move pulled his shirt off from his head. Hermione had seen these scars a dozen times by now, but she had grown used to them. After that day in St. Mungo’s she never examined them with a critical eye again, but now she was looking closely, tracing each claw mark.

“Do you remember what happened?”

She glanced up and saw his jaw was clenched, but he was thinking hard. “It was fast. After you all escaped from the Manor that day, the Dark Lord arrived and tortured us. Then Bella took her turn with her knife after he left because she blamed me for letting Harry take her wand. She cut me up badly, but eventually Mother stopped her. Mother had just started healing me when I heard Father and Grayback shouting about something in the gallery, and then they came into the Sitting Room, and he just attacked me. I remember it really hurt, but I don’t remember if there was a spell or not. Father was terrified though, and he and Mother dueled Greyback to make him leave. I passed out before I saw the end of it.”

“You passed out?”

He nodded. “From blood loss, yes. I was laid up for three days after they brought me back around. I took a lot of blood replenishing potion.”

“Did you take any other potions?”

He shrugged. “Yes, but I don’t remember them. Florrie kept making me drink all sorts of vile things.”

Hermione bit her lip as she traced his scars.

“What do you think?” he asked curiously.

She dropped her hand and sighed. “I think you may have been hit with it. These wounds do bleed, but usually not so much the patient passes out. If that’s true, then Lucius must have discovered the cure, Draco. You would have died without it.”

Draco had an odd look on his face as he absorbed this. “I just... I never thought he cared that much.”

Hermione’s heart broke a little, and she moved in to give him a hug. “There’s no question he had his flaws, but he did care about you Draco. I know he was harsh and firm with you, but he also loved you deeply. That was always evident, even as an outsider.”

He dropped his face into her hair, and she felt him starting to shake a little. She knew he hadn’t grieved for Lucius, not really. Between his mixed feelings about his father and the burdens with the estate, he had never taken the time for it. But now, realizing his father had done something to save his life during the war, it was finally hitting him nearly six months after Lucius was gone.

She lost track of time as she let him lean on her, and after a long while she felt his breathing finally even out and the shaking stop. He gave her one final squeeze and pulled back. His eyes were slightly red, and he swiped at them. He took a shuddering breath and then straightened up.

“Right. Well if Father can figure it out, so can you. Let’s try the Library.”

They entered, and Draco started calling books on centaurs and potions to counteract curses. Hermione sighed as she saw there were at least a dozen books to work through, and she pulled one forward until Draco stopped her with his hand.

“I still want you to nap,” said Draco. “You need it, and I can look while you do it. And this weekend, take some time to do something else. I’m no slouch at research, now that I know what we’re looking for.”

She hesitated. “You’re sure?”

“Positive,” he said firmly. “You’ve made a lot of progress today, and we should go to Theo’s tonight so you can update Harry and Theo. But I’m serious, take the afternoon to sleep, and then take the weekend off. I’ll let you know the minute I find something.”

Hermione hesitated again, but then a yawn crept across her face, and she threw up her hands in defeat. “Fine, you’re right. I need a nap.”

“Good, I’ll wake you for dinner.”

Hermione nodded and slipped out of the Library, back to Draco’s room, and within five minutes was fast asleep.

Draco

Draco was coming up short as book after book failed for him. Some part of him had known where the answer would be since Firenze told them his secret. However, before going there — because he knew Hermione would insist upon following — he decided to check the Library first. They needed to leave no stone unturned, and he was sure this was the only way Hermione would allow herself to rest.

The night before they had updated Harry and Theo, and both of them agreed it was a huge break.

"We need to find the Alpha then," said Harry. "The Alpha holds the magic."

"Well don't forget it was written down on a piece of paper on Estes' desk. So clearly the Alpha isn't the only one who knows about it anymore."

"Shit," muttered Harry. "I've looked into Estes's background of course. I don't think he's a werewolf."

"I don't think so either," said Theo. "Or if he is, he hides it very well. He doesn't have the normal scarring."

"But there must be a way to reverse the curse," said Hermione seriously. "Draco and I are both researching it. It's a huge break."

It was a huge break, and Draco couldn't believe his father had taken the threat so seriously he had worked out the solution before Draco was attacked. It made his complicated feelings about his father even more complicated, and he was grateful Hermione gave him some time to feel it the previous day.

The notion that the secret to *this* was somehow tied up with other Malfoy secrets was astonishing, but Draco was encouraged by it. The Manor wasn't always the most cooperative — he still had not found the ring he wanted to give to Hermione, hence the need to collect some backups — but he thought they might be able to coax this secret out of it. Hermione told him her theory that the centaur blood behind that wretched painting was the thing the Manor was leading her to, and Draco sensed she was correct about that. A little more time, a little more patience, and a little more searching, and he thought they — no, *she* — would be able to solve it.

She was lounging in a different corner of the Library this morning, feet curled under her while she flipped casually through an old book, scratching some notes to herself. She looked much better this morning after two full nights of sleep and a long nap the day before. He smiled to himself as she appeared lost in thought before making

one additional note and then tossing her pen aside and rising to walk over to him.

“How’s it going?”

He sighed. “Nothing so far. A couple more books to look through, and then I think we’ll have to check the Book Vault.”

He caught a look of excitement on her face and hid a smile.

“Oh I was hoping you would say that!”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. “I’m surprised you haven’t looked through it yet.”

She reddened a bit. “I was saving it.”

“Ah, of course. I should have known. My little swot would always pick books over jewelry.”

She inclined her head.

“Well you’re supposed to relax this weekend, but I suppose we could make a trip there tomorrow if these last couple of books don’t have what we need. Next week is pretty busy for me, and it will be a few days before we can go back to Gringotts. I know this is urgent.”

Hermione seemed pleased by this prospect.

“Good,” she said. “In that case, I’m going to go have a bath. Here’s my list for Alyssa.”

She pushed a piece of parchment in his hand.

“Your list?”

“Yes, the list of things from me to you that might prompt her to actually write an engagement contract for us so it’s not entirely one-sided.”

She gave a little smile at his stunned face, as she leaned down to peck him on the cheek before heading out.

Her list

Draco felt a surge of excitement. This was the clearest sign yet she was thinking about marrying him and nearly ready. He had no idea what to expect other than her promise about the time-turner, but he had seen her lost in thought all morning. He realized she must have been revisiting some of the books on courtship that outlined standard terms in engagement contracts and had put together her own list of things she would agree to. Alyssa explained that the contract would be unenforceable unless Hermione gave Draco something in return, but Draco didn't want to put any obligations on her. He thought her willingness to marry him in the first place was enough.

Draco glanced at the books he was supposed to be reading and checked his watch. There was plenty of time to finish after lunch. His curiosity about her list was far too strong to wait.

He pushed the books aside and, hands shaking slightly, turned it over and started to read.

Obligations and Promises from Hermione Granger to Draco Malfoy for Engagement/Marriage

HG will not engage in any personal or professional use of any magical object or potion that is in the joint custody of HG and the Ministry of Magic without prior notice to DM, except for classified assignments given to her by the Ministry of Magic in the course of her employment (includes use of time-turners, dark objects, decommissioned objects, restricted potions, and component ingredients). When notice is given, DM may monitor HG's use of same. HG will move to Malfoy Manor upon DM's request or will continue to live at her flat until marriage (no bound elves to preserve HG's nonexistent virtue). During times of personal conflict between HG and DM, HG agrees that she will not leave the wards of Malfoy

Manor except for prior appointments due to her job (i.e. preplanned auror raids) or patient needs/emergencies at St. Mungo's. DM will provide a private room at Malfoy Manor for HG's personal use that is within the wards so HG can think (decompression room). HG will sleep in the same bed as DM each night, except for occasions when one is traveling without the other. This includes periods of conflict and overrides HG's rights to use the decompression room during conflict. HG will provide training, education, and advice about muggle investments and muggle technology to DLM Investments on an as-needed basis including (but not limited to) computers, mobile phones, the internet, banking, and various muggle stock, bond, and currency markets that are publicly traded. HG will agree to standard confidentiality clauses related to her knowledge of any business interests or assets owned by DM or companies controlled by DM. HG will agree to a permanent nondisparagement clause related to any member of the Malfoy or Black families, alive or deceased (exception for Bellatrix Lestrange because she was truly a heinous bitch). HG will not make any public statements about her relationship with DM without his consent. HG will return any engagement settlements provided by DM if she causes a marriage not to be consummated within one year of signing. Any marriage escape clauses should be mutual. If the engagement or marriage is terminated, HG will vacate any properties owned by DM and her personal vault will be moved to a different level of Gringotts. Assets given to her by DM will be returned to DM. HG will take the Malfoy surname upon marriage. HG will not use contraceptives of any sort from the date of marriage until (i) a male heir is born alive and reaches his second birthday or (ii) three female live births have occurred, with the youngest to reach her second birthday, whichever comes first. HG reserves the right to breastfeed any children, or not, in her sole discretion for up to one year per child plus three additional months to wean. To the extent breastfeeding results in natural amenorrhea it shall not be considered a form of contraceptive. After (i) or (ii) above is fulfilled, HG and DM will mutually decide about the use of future contraceptive and family planning methods. HG will not terminate any pregnancies, whether planned or unplanned, without DM's consent, except in the case to

save her own life. All children born of HG and DM will bear the Malfoy surname. All children born of HG and DM will have first names that reference constellations, stars, or other celestial bodies in accordance with Black family tradition. HG will create an estate plan that provides for certain charitable legacies and divides any remaining assets held in her name evenly between children who are not considered the "heir" and who do not enjoy the benefit of Malfoy entailments, as is customary. Any jewelry, books, art, furniture or other personal items in HG's possession at death that originally came from the Malfoy estate will be returned to the Objects Vault. The jewelry box DM had made for HG will be given to the Objects Vault. All other personal effects, jewelry, books, or other items purchased by or for HG before or during her marriage will be divided evenly between children who are not the heir. If there is only a single, male heir born, everything will go to him after charitable bequests are made. Violation of any of these terms will give DM the right to select a "funishment" that includes edging, orgasm control, cock warming, bondage, fellatio, spanking, anal play, or any other sexual act previously consented to by HG. DM will not be obligated to let HG experience sexual release during any funishment (don't judge us Alyssa, it's all really hot)

Draco stared at her list in amazement. He was nearly breathless as he read it a second time. She was giving him everything he might want, even things they hadn't discussed like naming rights.

Draco's eyes widened as he read the provisions about children again. There as no *requirement* that Hermione have children, as was customary in contracts like this. In his contract with Astoria there were damages if Astoria didn't produce an heir within five years. That provision had felt so harsh that Draco told Alyssa to delete any references to children in his contract with Hermione. Now, however, Draco was seeing there was a reasonable compromise: Hermione's proposal didn't punish either one of them if they struggled to have children. It was simply a promise that she would not prevent them. He was forcibly reminded that he was going to marry a healer,

because she had also considered medical scenarios that his father's lawyers had not included in his contract with Astoria. He didn't understand all of the terminology of course, but he understood the gist of it and was in full agreement.

Reading between the lines he could tell she was very prepared to have three children, perhaps even four. If she became pregnant again before the third girl reached her second birthday, she wouldn't terminate that pregnancy or any others – planned or *unplanned*. Draco realized that Hermione was telling him she wanted a large family, and Draco was struck by this. Malfoys tended to stick to one or two children in each generation to preserve the estate, but why not try for three or more? And if they didn't produce a boy in three tries she was open to letting nature take its course for two more years before they even discussed contraceptives. It was wonderful, generous, and Draco fell in love with her all over again.

And then there was the other thing she included, which he knew was a direct result of their most recent fight: her decompression room. She had found a compromise between her need for space and his need to know that she hadn't left him whenever they fought. A room in the Manor for this purpose was perfect because she could be alone, but he would be able to feel her in the wards. And she was promising him that she would return to his bed at night, regardless of any fights they may have had during the day. Draco could do that. He could give her that. When she had left to go back to her flat during their previous fight it had almost wrecked him because he couldn't feel her. He didn't know if she would return to him. This was the promise that she always would.

The only thing he strongly disagreed with was her provision requiring her to return any settlements if she broke the engagement or they got divorced. Draco wasn't going to agree to that because he fully intended to ensure that she would be cared for whether she stayed with him or not. But he was pretty sure he could talk her out of this. He just needed to persuade her.

He clutched at her list like a lifeline because he thought it would be enough for Alyssa. It would commit him to fulfill the promises he wanted to make to her. And only now did he realize how much he wanted Hermione to be committed to fulfilling some of these promises to him in exchange.

“Florrie!” he called

Florrie appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Yes Master?”

“Florrie, please take this to Alyssa and tell her that I want to meet with her as early as our schedules permit next week.”

Florrie glanced at it, and her eyes widened. “You is proposing, Sir?” she asked eagerly. “Already?”

A slow smile crossed Draco’s face. “Soon, Florrie, though don’t tell Mother. She’ll go spare. And while we’re waiting for Alyssa to put together the contract, I need your help trying to find Hermione’s ring.”

Hermione

Hermione returned to the Library for lunch with Draco, and he immediately swept her in for a kiss.

“You want my babies?”

She felt herself turn crimson, but she nodded.

“Gods you’re perfect. I agree to everything on your list except returning the settlements I give you. You should consider them gifts.”

“Draco, that’s not fair.”

“It’s perfectly fair.”

She sighed. "Fine, then let me return any property and half the gold if I break us up. I'll keep half of it."

"You will keep the property and all of the gold."

"I keep the property and half the gold."

"You keep all of it."

"Sixty percent?"

"All of it."

"Seventy?"

"All of it."

"Draco."

"Sweetheart."

"Seriously, Draco, if I'm not paying damages then I have to return *something* or else it won't be binding. That's what the books say at any rate."

He paused as he considered this. "Fine. Then you keep the property and ninety-nine percent of the gold. You can return one percent of the gold if you break the engagement or marriage."

She rolled her eyes but finally nodded, and he gave her a broad grin.

"Speaking of property and gold," she said, "what is it you're giving me?"

He just raised an eyebrow. "Wait for my offer. I promise it will be a good one."

"That's what I'm afraid of," she muttered, and he just laughed before getting a serious look on his face.

“You’re really willing to negotiate this with me? I don’t want to push you into anything too fast, but I’m ready for this. I love you so much, and I would have done this years ago if I had known who you were.”

Her heart pattered, but she nodded. “Yes. My head says it’s fast, but my heart... well, I’m yours Draco. I assume this negotiation will take a little time. I know it’s best to have the terms set before we take any next steps. I read about this in those courtship books you gave me. I knew it was coming.”

He gave her another broad smile and led her over for lunch.

With Hermione’s list for Alyssa complete and Draco returning to the centaur books he had yet to review, she turned back to the research on the inscription under the lid of her jewelry box to entertain her. She worked on it all afternoon, and by the time Florrie called them for an early dinner she had worked it out. She placed her pen to the side and read it one more time.

*When, in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,
I all alone beweepe my outcast state,
And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries,
And look upon myself and curse my fate,
Wishing me like to one more rich in hope,
Featured like him, like him with friends possessed,
Desiring this man’s art and that man’s scope,
With what I most enjoy contented least;
Yet in these thoughts myself almost despising,
Haply I think on thee, and then my state,*

*Lark to the lark at break of day arising
From sullen earth sings hymns at heaven's gate;
For thy sweet love remembered such wealth brings
That then I scorn to change my state with kings.*

It was one of Shakespeare's love sonnets that also touched on self-loathing and disgrace. The speaker hates himself and wishes he had the peace and happiness that other men have. The ending, however, says that when he thinks of his lover, the self-loathing recedes. That love gives the speaker so much that he would never trade places with anybody, not even kings.

It was poignant, but fitting. The outside of the jewelry box referred to their past and all the pain Draco inflicted on both of them through his behaviors and beliefs years ago. The inside of the box was the present, when they had come full circle, and her love gave him everything he needed: forgiveness, support, and trust. It was another reminder that he viewed the things she could give to him as being just as valuable as the things he could give to her.

God she loved him. Screw her head, her heart wanted to marry him.

Hermione was so overcome by the message inside of her jewelry box that she hurried over to Draco, pushed his last book aside, and flung herself into his lap.

"Oomph," he said in surprise as she started peppering his face with kisses.

"What's this?" he asked, laughing a little.

"The jewelry box. I finished the translation..."

He smiled, as she kissed him all over before pulling back. "Thank you Draco."

"No, thank *you*. I mean it, sweetheart. Anything I can give you pales in comparison to what you give me. I can hardly believe you forgave me, let alone decided to love me. I'm the luckiest bloke in the world."

She melted a little and kissed him before rocking her hips toward him. He gently pulled her back.

"Save your energy," he said. "There will be plenty of time for that at the club tonight. In fact, you had better eat and then go get ready."

Hermione felt a shot of nervous excitement.

"Draco, I don't remember what Jeanine looks like. I only turned myself into her one time."

"I remember," he said quietly. "Go eat, then head upstairs to get dressed. I'm so close to the end of this last book I want to finish it first, but then I'll join you."

She nodded at this. "And what am I wearing?"

"Rosie knows. Just call her to bring it to you. And no bra or knickers. I'll transfigure you once I get upstairs."

Hermione bit her lip. She wasn't sure what Draco had planned, but she trusted him to know what he was doing. She was eager and a little anxious, but she couldn't wait. Draco would take care of her tonight.

She slipped off his lap and saw his eyes tracking her progress as she left the Library and made her way to the Dining Room, where she had a hurried dinner alone before heading upstairs to his room. There she called for Rosie who arrived with a beautiful dress and gloves, though Hermione gulped when she saw it. Unlike Pansy's dresses that often had lining and bras discretely sewn in, this had

nothing. It was the thinnest silk, almost diaphanous, and white. She would be showing everything.

Hermione took her time to arrange her hair, apply some make-up in the way Pansy had taught her, and then undressed before slipping on the wisp of a dress. She turned to look at herself in the mirror and nearly gasped. It was floor-length, but so delicate. It clung to her curves and was held up by thin straps that crossed her back. The fabric disguised her most obvious scars, but her nipples were clearly peaking under it, and there was a high slit up one leg. She certainly wasn't naked, but her arousal would be obvious. She shuddered with anticipation.

She pulled on the strappy gold heels Rosie had laid out, gloves up to her elbows to hide her mudblood scar, and the chandelier earrings she had picked out from Gringotts earlier that week. The gloves were fingerless, which struck her as odd until she remembered what they would be doing tonight. Draco had made sure she could still touch and feel.

She was pulled out of her reverie by the door opening and Draco coming to a complete halt while he stared at her. He had already transfigured himself as Mark, and Hermione looked at him in slight disbelief as she was sent back in time to that night.

His jaw was more square, his eyes a dark brown, and his hair the same color as Harry's, though much more controlled and wavy. His nose and lips were the same, but he would be unrecognizable.

"Fuck me," he muttered, as his eyes roved over her.

Hermione swallowed. "Ready to transfigure me?"

He nodded slowly. "Yes, but I'm not changing your lips. I only want to kiss you."

She smiled at this, her insecurities about doing this as Jeanine easing a little. He raised his wand and got started. It took nearly

fifteen minutes, but then she turned in the mirror and found herself staring at Jeanine. It was an odd sensation, and she glanced back at Draco, who was now getting changed into something that looked like a muggle tuxedo.

“Well?” she said nervously.

He paused and studied her before sighing. “I was such an idiot.”

“What?” she asked in confusion.

He shrugged. “You’re similar enough to you that I can’t understand how I never saw it. I should have guessed years ago.”

“Will people know —”

He shook his head firmly. “No, not at all. People see what they expect to see. I can see it, but I know who you are. I’m just saying I *should* have known back then, given that I was at your parents’ house the same night. There was no reason for you to guess, but I should have.”

“So you see Hermione when you look at me now?” she asked hopefully.

He nodded. “Yes, you’re still my Hermione. Now one last thing,” and here he pulled out a wide gold choker that coordinated with her earrings and put it around her neck.

“What’s this?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

His eyes darkened as he looked at her in the mirror. “A collar of sorts. Just for tonight, sweetheart. I don’t plan on leaving you, but if we get separated for any reason, nobody will touch you while you’re wearing this. They will know you belong to somebody else.”

Hermione nodded quickly. She didn’t want anybody but Draco touching her or trying to interfere with her tonight.

“Ready?” he asked, holding out his hand to her.

She took a deep breath and placed her hand in his.

“Ready.”

Weasley's Wizarding Wax

Chapter 40: Weasley's Wizarding Wax

AN: This chapter has no plot whatsoever. If kinky smut isn't your thing, no worries. We'll see you for the next chapter.

Hermione

Hermione stared up at the stately home, with some surprise. They were out in the countryside, at the gate of what looked to be a country house for landed gentry. It wasn't as large as Malfoy Manor, but it was fairly sizable.

Hermione clutched her cloak to herself more tightly, as Draco checked in with an elf at the gate.

"Draco Malfoy and his guest," he said, showing them a letter.

The elf reviewed it and nodded.

"Has your guest ever been here, Sir?"

"No," he said. Then he turned to her. "Sweetheart, come over here for a moment. They'll need you to sign the standard waivers."

Hermione glanced through them quickly and saw the predictable language about consent to touch, safe words, and the use of drugs or alcohol on the premises. She signed her name, and then the elf waved them through the gate, and they headed down the lane to the front door.

"The public rooms are on the first floor, the private rooms are on the upper floors," he said. "I'll get the key to our room, and then we can

go play.”

Hermione’s stomach was in knots, but she nodded quickly as Draco opened the door to reveal a surprisingly lush and welcoming foyer with a lift, stairs, and then solid doors leading to what were, presumably, the public rooms.

“No nudity in here, nor in the corridors to the private rooms,” said Draco quietly. “There’s another set of stairs that connects the public rooms to the private ones, but coming and going, everyone is to be clothed. The public rooms are clothing optional.”

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded as Draco approached a witch behind a small desk and retrieved the key to their room.

“This way, sweetheart,” he said, grabbing her hand and tugging on it, leading her up the stairs. At the top Hermione turned to find something that reminded her of an elegant hotel. Draco caught the look on her face.

“Surprised?”

“Yes, actually. I guess I was expecting... less discretion.”

He grinned. “That’s coming up. And you should be warned, George Weasley is a member and will be here tonight. I told him we would be here in disguise, so he probably won’t recognize us. But knowing him, I doubt he transfigures himself.”

Hermione gulped. She had been expecting it, but she wasn’t sure what *that* would be like.

“Draco, if it’s too much...”

“Say your safe word, and I’ll remove you immediately,” he said. “No questions, no judgment. This is meant to be fun and sexy. If it makes you uncomfortable, we’re done.”

She exhaled and nodded as he pulled her to one of the rooms and unlocked the door.

She entered curiously and glanced around. It was surprisingly elegant, not at all like the bordello she had been imagining in her mind. The furnishings were rich, the fabrics lush and clean in lovely neutral colors, and Hermione saw an enormous box with a large red bow on the bed.

“What on earth is that?”

Draco just grinned. “George’s Christmas gift.”

“Pardon?”

“Didn’t I tell you? We’ll be testing some new Weasley products. They’re giving away samples tonight.”

“Good lord,” muttered Hermione, and he just laughed.

He helped her out of her cloak and brushed her skin a bit while he did it.

“You’re stunning. Everybody who is into women is going to go mad for you. But I’m not letting you out of my sight tonight.”

“Good, I don’t want you to.”

He gripped her waist. “Nobody will be touching you, and you won’t be touching anybody but me. The only other rule you need to know about is the alcohol policy. They do provide it, but the staff have the right to perform sobriety charms on anybody they feel is overindulging. Anyone who is drunk is escorted off the premises, and all the private rooms have sobriety wards to prevent anybody who is drunk from entering them. So please feel free to have a glass of something to take the edge off, but don’t drink too much.”

She nodded.

“Ready?”

She took a deep breath and then nodded again.

“Then let’s go sweetheart. I’d tell you to get that cunt nice and wet, but I don’t think I need to do that tonight.”

Hermione turned crimson, but gave him a small smile, as he pulled her toward the door and led her down the hall toward a rear staircase. She heard music, voices, and even the occasional moan coming from the room below.

She gripped Draco’s hand hard as they descended the staircase, and then Hermione found herself in a dimly lit room with quite a few scantily clad people. There was a round sofa in the middle of the room with chairs nearby, some of which were rigid and others meant for observation. There were several poles placed strategically around the room, and Hermione saw a woman dancing on one. Hermione was surprised to hear holiday music, but it was fast and hot — not at all like the staid versions she was accustomed to hearing in shops. She saw a few staff walking around with refreshments and – *good Lord* – a naked George Weasley handing out various products from behind a table draped with a purple tablecloth that contained the logo, “*Weasley’s Wheezes for the Wet and Wild Witch and Wizard.*”

Hermione came to a complete halt as she stared at him, and she felt Draco come up behind her and slip an arm around her waist as he started to lick her neck and tease her nipples through the very thin dress.

“What do you think?” he whispered. “Is his cock better than mine?”

Hermione’s head fell back against Draco’s shoulder. “No,” she murmured.

“Is he like your brother?”

“No, none of them were like my brothers... Harry’s my brother, not the Weasleys.”

“Does it turn you on?”

Yes, said the voice in her head, especially while Draco was touching her like this. She just nodded, and he gripped her waist.

“Good. You can look, but don’t touch. Do you want to pick up something from his table?”

“No,” she whispered. “I just want to watch. And I want you to touch me. We’ll see what he left us in the room later.”

She felt Draco nod behind her, “It looks like most of the products in here are their edibles anyway. The other things are in the private rooms.”

Hermione saw he was right. There was edible body paint that one couple was using. Another couple was using magical bindings that required teeth to remove. Hermione saw them vanish once the removal mechanism was activated, and she raised her eyebrow at this. George had found a way to make them single-use in order to sell more. Hermione also saw a woman coating an odd substance on a man’s cock before kneeling down to lick it off. To Hermione’s surprise it was all mess free and didn’t drip, even though it looked awfully like honey.

Draco released her waist and grabbed her hand as they slowly made their way around the room before settling into a chaise lounge in one corner, which was mercifully out of the view of George. Draco seated her between his legs so she had a clear view of the room, and Hermione watched in amazement as a man she didn’t know bound a woman she also didn’t know to a rigid chair nearby using one of George’s products. The woman was totally nude, and the man began to touch her, lick her, and tease her. Before long another woman came over to join them, and she and the man worked

together to bring the bound woman to climax before biting her bindings and vanishing them.

Hermione was spellbound, and she realized her breathing was getting shallow as she watched them, utterly transfixed before looking around for something else to observe.

As she surveyed the room she realized she was a bit different than the others. Compared to most of the women in here she was dressed rather modestly. Her dress clearly showed her nipples tightening under it, but most of the women were in corsets, skimpy lingerie, or nothing at all. And not one other person was wearing white. Hermione stood out, and she saw several people casting curious glances at her. She felt her blood heat as she realized Draco had dressed her like this to attract attention. In a room full of nearly-naked people, the ones who were mostly clothed were drawing interested looks.

Suddenly she felt Draco's hands circling her waist from behind.

"I'm going to touch you now," he murmured. "Do you want to stay clothed, or do you want to bare something for the group?"

Hermione's heart was racing. "Don't let them see too many scars. It might identify me. But anything else... it's up to you. I don't know what your limits are. I'll safeword if it's too much for me."

Draco nodded into her shoulder, and she felt him kissing her slowly, languidly, and she made herself relax back into him as he eased her into it. He moved one hand up to cup her breasts, and the other hand moved under the slit of her dress as he spread her legs open on the chaise lounge.

She realized the fabric was hiding the burn scar on her thigh, and Draco hadn't totally exposed her core yet, but as he started to move his fingers in slow circles against her inner thigh, there was no question what he was about to do to her. Hermione saw several pairs of eyes drift toward them to watch, and she shuddered.

“You like it,” he whispered. “I know the attention is making you wet. Pretty soon I’m going to show the room your gorgeous tits. Then I’m going to show them your sweet cunt. And you, my perfect girl, are going to give them a fucking show and make them know that *I* am the only one who gets to touch you like this. Your body is *mine*. Your orgasms are *mine*. They’re going to know that you let me use you as my fucktoy whenever I want to because I’m in full control of you like this. And I want you to come so hard that every person in this room wishes they were us.”

Hermione’s heart was racing, but she nodded, as her eyes drifted closed.

He moved one hand to her shoulder and teased the strap down, revealing one breast. As the cold air hit it, Hermione started to quiver and more eyes turned to them to watch. Draco took his time with it, as he always did, circling her nipple slowly before giving it a pinch and twist that made her gasp.

“Do you see how beautiful you are compared to them?” he murmured. “Just one tit and already half the room wants you.”

She was slightly surprised to find he was right. There was another couple having sex that was attracting some attention too, but Draco’s slow seduction of her was being noticed.

To her surprise he didn’t reveal her other breast, but instead whispered into her ear, “Lean back and put your hands around my neck.”

She reached behind her and clasped her hand behind his neck as he suggested, and it made her arch her back and press her breasts forward. Draco released her nipple and ran his hand down her side, and now the room had a perfect, unobstructed view.

Draco’s mouth was on her, licking from her ear all the way to her bare shoulder.

And then the hand that had been running light circles on her inner thigh moved to grasp her dress, and he moved it to the side to open her core to the room while keeping the fabric strategically draped over her burn.

Only now did she fully appreciate what he was doing. He was showing off her body, exposing her, but also keeping every notable scar hidden just as she had asked. He knew her body so well he didn't even have to look as he revealed the breast without the burn from the horcrux beneath it and put her in a dress with a slit that was up the opposite leg from her fiendfyre scar. She was unidentifiable like this, just as she asked, and yet he didn't have to make her fully nude for others to watch.

He moved his hand to her free thigh and just let people look for a moment. She felt him growing hard behind her as Hermione started to melt with the stares and light teasing he was giving her neck.

She started to pant.

"Already hot for it, Granger? There are five men and two women masturbating to the sight of you like this."

Hermione stared out at the crowd through hazy eyes and saw he was absolutely right. He was hardly doing anything at all, just putting her on display and publicly claiming her. Two men started to approach them but then came to a halt as Draco growled a little and gripped her waist with one hand and thigh with another. The message couldn't be more clear: they could look, but not touch. They weren't allowed to interfere. They shouldn't even approach her or Draco would intervene. She was there to be something beautiful and erotic that might give them fantasies, but that was all. Draco was the only one who could actually have her.

"How wet are you, angel?" he murmured.

"So wet," she groaned.

“Then I want you to show them just how wonderfully you come for me. I dressed you in white because you’re so beautifully innocent. That’s why they can’t tear their eyes away from you. But I want you to give them an orgasm that would make your God in heaven blush. Keep your hands around my neck and come just like this for me.”

Hermione sucked in a shuddering breath, and then Draco’s fingers were on her, rubbing her clit in punishing circles, making Hermione start to shake. He latched onto her shoulder and started peppering her in marks, over and over again, claiming her as his.

“Draco... *please*...”

“Patience, angel.”

Hermione’s eyes fluttered closed, and she clutched at Draco’s neck as he brought her to the edge before slipping one finger inside.

“Fuck Granger, you’ve never been this wet this early... do you like knowing that half the room is tossing off to you right now? Do you know how jealous this makes me, but also how powerful? You’ll only moan for me, won’t you angel?”

With that he twisted his fingers, and Hermione released a deep groan, and she forced her eyes open to see that they certainly had an audience now. Two couples were mimicking what Draco was doing to her. Several others were masturbating on their own. Even George Weasley had come over to see the commotion, and Hermione caught his eye for a split second, as she started to moan again.

“You’re watching him, aren’t you? Your ex’s brother, my business partner. Fuck my fingers and show him what his brother missed.”

She locked eyes with George, and somehow she knew that *he* knew exactly who she was. It should have been mortifying, but like that day at Gringotts it empowered her. She and George had always been friendly, but she knew he thought she was uptight. She was

proving him wrong by being here tonight. Unconsciously she started to thrust her hips forward, and Georges's eyes widened, and his hand dropped to his own cock and started to pump. She gave him the tiniest smirk, before another twist of Draco's fingers made her eyes roll back as she released another moan.

It was building, and now she was close, shuddering and gasping, and then finally she felt a hot gush as she broke with a cry. Draco stroked her for a few more moments to help her come down from it before finally sliding his fingers out and holding them up for everyone to see. The slick she had left on them was glinting in the low light.

"Open up angel," he said at a normal volume so others could hear.

Automatically Hermione's mouth dropped open, and he placed his fingers in her mouth to suck. She did it slowly, licking every bit of herself off, and she could see the crowd relishing it, several men in particular masturbating harder. A moment later, a couple people came, including George Weasley, whose eyes were glued to her while he did it. A staff member stepped forward to clean up the mess.

Hermione smiled a little to see it, and Draco reached up to gently release her hands from around his neck and then adjusted her dress to cover her again.

"Upstairs," he said. "I'm ready to have you all to myself."

He also said this loud enough for others to hear, and Hermione saw several disappointed and jealous looks thrown their way. Again she exchanged a look with George, and he gave her a small salute before turning back to his table.

Draco was gripping her hand like a vice as he pulled her up the stairs and down the carpeted hallway and toward their room. He opened the door, maneuvered her through, and then spun her around to push her against the door.

Only now could Hermione see his face clearly, and he looked feral. But she only had a moment to digest it before his mouth was on hers, kissing her frantically as he laid claim to her lips. He thrust his hardness into her, moving himself against her before he finally pulled back and stared down at her.

“That was so fucking hot. I can’t believe how perfect you were. And now I’m going to play with you sweetheart. I want at least three more from you tonight.”

Hermione felt her knees shaking, but she just nodded, as he pulled back and slipped both straps off of her shoulders so the dress pooled around her ankles.

“I like you in gloves and heels,” he said. “Go sit on the bed for me, and we’ll open our present.”

Hermione turned around and walked toward the bed. When she got there, she glanced back and saw Draco had released his cock and was stroking himself as he watched. She reached the edge of the bed and leaned over for a moment while looking back at him, and in three strides Draco was behind her pinching her arse.

“Don’t do that unless you want me to wreck you.”

“*Please*,” she begged, as she presented to him, and within seconds she felt him thrusting into her, still fully clothed.

Hermione let out a strangled cry as he started to pound her. “I’m going to come, Granger. I almost came in my pants downstairs watching everyone want you, and now you’re giving me your arse so I’m going to do it. But *you* won’t, not yet,” he growled, and a moment later she felt him spurting hot inside of her before immediately pulling out.

Hermione was on the edge of her own orgasm, but he stopped, ruining it again. Hermione collapsed forward, shaking, as she felt his spend running down her legs.

"I told you to sit on the bed, not threaten my self-control with your arse. Next time you'll listen," he said.

Hermione felt tears prick her eyes. She needed to come again, she *needed* it. But he had left her hanging, and it was agonizing. She let out a pitiful little mewl, and immediately Draco's hands were on her again, gentle, coaxing, as he rubbed her back.

"Draco please," she pleaded.

"I know, sweetheart. You've done so well tonight. You were absolutely perfect downstairs. You gave me a little cheek just now, but you took your funishment beautifully. And when I finally let you go again, you're going to sing for me. Can you sit up for me? Do you need anything?"

Hermione slowly rose, and Draco helped guide her to the bed. She leaned against him and sighed for a moment.

"Water," she finally said.

He grabbed some water for her off the nightstand. "Take a moment. Then we'll open our gift."

Hermione took her time, and she felt her pulse steadying after a few minutes. She still felt frustrated, unsatisfied, but some of the brain fog was clearing.

"What's in it?" she finally asked.

Draco gestured for her to open it, and she saw several things inside. There was a package of some of their mouth-release bindings, something that looked like Peruvian instant darkness powder, a sheet of something that appeared to be stickers, and eight small pots of a substance, all in different colors.

"The bindings were their idea, but the rest of these were mine," commented Draco.

Hermione glanced at him and bit her lip. "So what is it?"

"You saw the bindings in action downstairs. The stickers are cold spots. I can put them anywhere and give you a hit of cold in a targeted area and control the temperature. They make hot spots too, but I didn't ask for those tonight."

Hermione bit her lip. "And the powder?"

"A modification of Peruvian instant darkness powder. It will be dark for you, not for me. I just have to touch it with my magic, and then I'll be able to see perfectly."

Hermione shuddered a bit at this. "And that?" she asked, pointing to colorful vials.

"Weasley's Wizarding Wax," said Draco with a little smirk.

"Oh my God," she said, and he chuckled a bit.

"It's fairly close to muggle wax, but with a few improvements. For one thing, it only sticks to skin, not hair or fabric. It will cling to you, sweetheart, but it won't wreck the bed. And peeling it off doesn't take your hair with it. No body oil needed."

"And?" she asked, because she could tell there was more.

He shrugged. "And it will stay hot until I make it cool and harden. I could leave it on you for hours, and the temperature will never diminish until I tell it to."

Hermione stared, her heart pounding. She wondered if this was too much. The voyeurism, exhibitionism, and then the ruined orgasm had sent her into a state. Now he was proposing sensory deprivation and extreme temperature play, presumably at the same time she was bound. Hermione was nervous. Very nervous.

"Draco..." she said slowly.

“Hmmm?”

“It might be a lot,” she confessed.

He studied her carefully. “We certainly don’t have to do this. None of it. We can take it home and try it later or just bin it.”

“No, I want to, I just...” she hesitated.

She *did* want to. It was just so many new things at once.

“Tell you what,” he said slowly. “We’ll do one at a time. If you want to add the next thing, we’ll add it. If not, we’ll stop. I won’t add anything new until you tell me.”

Hermione nodded quickly.

One at a time.

“Binding first,” she said softly. Binding she could do. Binding was something they had done before. Draco leaned in for a soft kiss.

“Then lie down on the bed spread eagle for me.”

Hermione moved and suddenly realized he had never cleaned her up. “Draco...” she said, looking down between her legs askance.

To her consternation he just smirked. “I’ll clean you up when I’m done. For now, I want you to feel every bit of me.”

Hermione shuddered a little bit but said no more as she centered herself on the bed and watched as Draco peeled off her gloves and then fastened the new bindings to her wrists and ankles. They were firmer and less flexible than the silk they had always used before. Hermione took a deep breath and made herself exhale.

“Good?” asked Draco as he ran a hand from her neck down the length of her body. His touch was firm and not teasing, and it served

to ground her instead of making her more worked up. It felt calm, certain, in control. It was exactly what she needed.

“Yes,” she nodded. “The cold dots next.”

He nodded a bit and she watched with bated breath as he peeled them off the sheet and studied her for a moment. He placed one on her hip, and suddenly Hermione felt a shot of cold. It wasn't quite as cold as an ice cube, but it was close enough to make her skin prickle with goosebumps and her nipples tighten involuntarily.

“You're lovely like that,” he murmured as he pulled off another dot and stuck this one on her inner thigh. On and on he went, placing them near her most sensitive areas until she had six spots almost pulsing with cold. Hermione shivered and found herself already straining at her bindings. She turned to look at Draco and to her surprise she saw he was stripping naked too and already starting to become erect again as he watched her fight the cold.

“Draco,” she gasped. “I need...” she trailed off as her eyes squeezed shut.

He put another firm hand on her, and again it centered her.

“What do you need?”

“Hot. The wax... I'm so cold... *please*...”

She saw him give her a lazy smirk. “Then pick your color sweetheart.”

“Green,” she said instantly. “And red. It's almost Christmas.”

He chuckled a little as he pulled the small pots of wax out of the box and reached for his wand to tap them.

“True,” he said. “It's also rather Slytherin and Gryffindor.”

She watched with huge eyes as he poured the first bit of red wax on her, and Hermione flinched and then groaned. It was hot – just a shade too hot – certainly not so hot that it would burn, but hot enough that the first hit was a bit uncomfortable before her body adjusted to it. It was adjusting though, and she didn't *need* the wax to cool once she got used to it.

“You're my canvas,” he said. “So beautiful...”

He poured a little green on her now, this time just to the left of one nipple, and Hermione groaned again. The hot, juxtaposed with the cold, was driving her mad, and again she felt herself straining her bindings.

The heat on her body was nothing compared to her core, but Hermione could no longer tell how much of dampness she felt between her legs was her own body and how much was the remnants Draco had left behind. She felt so wet, unbearably wet, as he poured yet more wax across her lower abdomen.

“Draco,” she gasped.

“Hmmm?” he asked.

“Can you vanish the powder if I need you to?”

“Immediately,” he said.

“Then do it,” she said, summoning all of her courage. “This is so intense. And I think... Draco, I want it. If it's too much I'll tell you.”

She turned to take one last look at him, and she saw him watching her carefully to make sure she was certain. He must have seen the truth on her face, because suddenly he smirked and reached into the box for the powder. He closed his eyes for a moment while he touched his magic to it. When he opened them his pupils were huge, blown out by what he had already done to her and what was coming next.

“I’ll see you on the other side sweetheart,” he said.

It all went dark.

Draco

Draco thought that the Peruvian instant darkness powder modification ranked as one of his top ten greatest ideas of all time. He learned from that time he used it in the Room of Requirement when he had to use his Hand of Glory to guide the Death Eaters into Hogwarts. Theo also confirmed that it worked well for sensory deprivation – or it *would* work well if one of them could actually see. Evidently when Theo and Luna tried it she accidentally elbowed him in the face and nearly broke his nose.

And so Draco took the idea to the Weasleys to modify it so that anybody who touched their magic to it before it activated would be able to see through it, while their partner would not. They also tweaked it so it could be vanished immediately in case safe words were used.

It was better than blindfolds because it was complete. It was total, absolute, oppressive darkness with not even the slightest hint of light that could pierce it. Draco knew the Weasleys also had a version that deadened sound too – and again it was one way so the person in Hermione’s position wouldn’t be able to hear anything, while the person in Draco’s could hear a safe word. That had also been one of Draco’s ideas.

Draco had considered the enhanced version with sound deadening, but he decided that might be a step too far with everything new they were doing tonight. Besides, he liked to talk dirty to her, and he knew it turned her on. As it was, when Draco darkened the room, Hermione tensed, and Draco gave her a moment to adjust.

“Alright?” he asked.

“You can see?” she confirmed.

“Perfectly. You’re lovely like this. How are you doing?”

“I’m OK. It’s just –”

She cut herself off as Draco dropped some wax on her, and she gasped in surprise.

“Oh God!”

Draco decided to forgive her for talking to God this time. His perfect girl had tried so many new things tonight, she was bound to forget. He could scarcely believe she had let him show her off like that in the public room – the experience on Draco’s end had been both titillating and excruciating. He had intended to stay longer, but she put on such a good show that Draco was nearly breathless with jealousy by the time it was through. Still, the feeling of having every eye on them – on *him* – as he escorted and controlled the most beautifully innocent participant tonight and opened her for the world to see was nothing short of exhilarating. He had dreamed of it but had never done that with a partner before, and it had exceeded his wildest expectations.

He knew he was pushing her with the other things he specifically requested from George. And that was why he forgave her for her little slip-up. She was going farther, harder, than he had ever asked her to go before, and as usual she was hitting the mark and then racing past it.

Draco finally touched one of the rivulets of wax, all of which were still hot, and he murmured the spell on the side of the jar, and immediately it cooled and hardened. Hermione gasped as he peeled it off with one hand. He repeated this twice more before turning back to the wax and drizzling some directly over one nipple.

Hermione nearly shrieked with surprise, and her hips started to buck.

“You like that?” he asked. “You like it when I paint your tits?”

She just made an incoherent noise, as she twisted and turned, straining to be released.

“A little more,” he said. “Christmas colors suit you.”

He drizzled some on her inner thighs where he fondly watched his cum drying, and again she started to wriggle in surprise.

Draco gave her a moment while he stroked himself and stared at her. She was utter perfection like this, and he already knew he would be coming again soon.

As she finally started to still, Draco touched the wax on her nipple to cool and harden in, and then he pulled it off while pouring wax on the other simultaneously.

At this, Hermione nearly lost it, and she was writhing, straining for more.

Draco decided he had enough teasing. He wanted to take her again, just like this.

He cooled and peeled off the wax around her inner thighs before climbing on top of her.

“What are you —?” she started to ask, but then she groaned as he entered her and started to move.

“This is why my wax modification is a good one,” he grunted, as he picked up the green and poured it back on her nipples. She cried out, arched, and Draco felt the telltale fluttering that told him she was close.

“I can fuck you without getting it everywhere,” he said. “It will stay on your body no matter how hard I pound that dirty little cunt of yours. And I can peel it off and do it to you over and over again because it’s the perfect temperature for repeat play.”

He started to move faster and cooled and peeled the wax on her abdomen and both tits to lull her into a fall sense of security. And then as he felt her getting closer and closer, he picked up the red and the green jars and saw they were near to the bottom. He didn't drizzle this time, but simply dumped the last bit of it on her breasts all at once.

She shrieked and exploded, and Draco felt that beautiful pull inside of her, trying to coax him to come too. But he had every intention of making her come twice more in rapid succession, and he didn't let up the pace as he pressed his ring into her clit.

She jerked, and started to shake again.

"You're so fucking dirty for me like this. All mine. Every fucking bit of you is mine. How many weeks of fantasies did you give Weasley tonight? How often will he be tossing off to that memory of you? He's going to want you now, they all do. But they can't have you because You. Are. Mine."

He twisted his ring into her clit, and she came again, crying out as he felt another gush. Now she was starting to shake uncontrollably.

One more. Give me one more sweetheart .

Draco continued to move as he quickly cooled and peeled the wax he had just dumped on her. He removed the wax to find her breasts beautifully flushed and heavy for him, her nipples hypersensitive. He quickly removed the cold spots too so now it was just Hermione and him, and he leaned down and laved her poor nipples and breasts with his tongue. They were hot and overstimulated.

She was gasping, moaning, but Draco continued to lick them gently, soothingly, while he snapped his hips into her. He felt his own release getting closer, as Hermione too started to build one more time.

He raised his head and memorized her like this.

“What did Leontes say about Hermione as she came back to life? *O she’s warm! If this be magic, let it be an art...* You’re just like her, you know? Innocent, loyal, untouched by any man but your own. And fuck Granger, you’re a goddamned piece of art.”

He gave one more thrust, and she finally broke with a cry that sounded utterly exhausted, and then Draco let himself be pulled over too.

Fully spent, he continued to move gently, drawing her down from the peak. For Hermione’s part, she had gone limp, and Draco reached up to stroke her face. She gave a little sigh and turned her head, and Draco exhaled in relief. She hadn’t passed out then. She was just floating.

Good. She earned it tonight.

Draco slipped out and bit each of her bindings to release and vanish them, chuckling a little at the Weasley’s ingenious method to make bondage products single-use. Then he vanished the powder and cleaned up the double mess he had left between her thighs before summoning a few other products George had left for him in the loo, all devoted to the aftercare Draco loved to give.

When they discussed this line of products, Draco insisted on expanding into aftercare too. George, and especially Ron, had been skeptical at first, but after a few visits to the club George came around to Draco’s way of thinking. They had a whole line of products that helped stabilize body temperature and soothed chaffed skin and healed lovebites. And of course they had their famous bruise paste, which they simply repackaged for their adult line.

He opened a balm for chaffed skin, and Draco rubbed it into Hermione’s wrists. They were red and marked from the bindings, which were stiffer than she was accustomed to. Then he switched to the temperature stabilization cream and began to rub it into her breasts first. She twitched when he touched her, but didn’t resist, and her rosy nipples that were hot to the touch from the rounds with the

wax started to cool and return to their normal color. Draco also rubbed it into the areas where he had placed the cold dots, immediately warming them up.

With that complete, Draco gave her a slow massage with a tiny bit of magically mess-free body oil, bringing feeling back to her extremities while he waited for her to come back to him. At long last her hazel eyes opened a bit blearily.

“Draco?” she whispered.

Draco stretched out against her, and he felt her nestle into him a little bit. “You were so perfect, sweetheart. You did so good. I’ve never seen anything like it. You’re a dream.”

He felt her smile a little, but she didn’t say anything.

“Do you need water? A pain potion?” He prompted.

She just shook her head and snuggled in harder. To his slight surprise he felt her shudder and then a wet spot appeared on his chest as he heard a sniff.

She was crashing harder than usual. Typically she wanted to talk after one of their scenes, but he must have pushed her so far tonight that the drop she was feeling was beyond words. He just pulled her in close and let her tears escape.

“Sorry,” she sniffed.

“It’s normal to feel a drop after an intense scene,” he said. “You never have to apologize for it. Let it out.”

She just nodded, and Draco knew that she was probably already aware of this. Several of the books she had read talked about drops. They were driven by hormones, and she was a healer, after all. Still, reading about it and experiencing it were two different things.

Eventually he felt her shaking slow, and she gave another sniff.

“What are the rules about staying here? I’m so exhausted.”

“We have the room until noon tomorrow,” he said. “So we can spend the night if you want.”

“I didn’t bring any of my things...”

“I can call Florrie,” he offered, but she shook her head as a yawn caught her. “Don’t bother. I’ll just...”

Draco saw her fading before his eyes, and he sat up and made quick work of her shoes and jewelry before coaxing her to take a mild pain potion. Despite what she said, he was certain she was sore. Finally he pulled the covers around her and slipped in behind her, pulling her close to him. She was naked and so was he, and Draco had to admit it felt decadent.

“Sleep sweetheart. You earned it. You went beyond my wildest dreams tonight.”

“We’ll come back, Draco. I loved it. And I love you.”

Draco’s heart leapt at her sweetness. He was sure he would never tire of it.

“I love you too, Hermione.”

The Book Vault

Chapter 41: The Book Vault

AN: Hermione gets closer to an answer and learns something surprising about house elves.

Hermione

Hermione woke up with the feeling of lips on her stomach. It took her a moment to realize that the dark head of Mark, who bore the lips of her boyfriend, was kissing down her stomach and gently opening her legs.

“Draco, what...?” she asked blearily.

“Breakfast,” was all he said, and then he settled in between her thighs for long, lazy licks. He was unhurried, exceedingly gentle, and for once he wasn’t trying to mark her. He was tracing patterns with his tongue as he sucked and nipped.

“Give me a soft one this morning,” he whispered.

It was odd, Hermione supposed, having soft and romantic sex in one of the many bedrooms of The Ruby Slipper, but something about it worked. Draco was attentive, practically reverent as he brought her near the edge and then moved up to spoon her and slipped inside of her to help her finish. He gathered her in his arms, just as he had the night before, and she felt positively enveloped by him.

When she crested she did it slowly and tumbled over herself in a way that felt like she was falling into something soft and safe. Draco’s own release took no time from there, and he finished by

capturing her lips and kissing her deeply, slowly. He was snogging her like his life depended on it, and it made Hermione giggle.

“What?” he said, smiling at her laughter.

“Just you. I never thought sex here would be romantic.”

He looked at her askance. “I’ve told you I can do romantic sex.”

“Mmmm. You can, that’s true. Although I can’t help but notice you seem to favor dirty sex when it should be romantic. And now you’re giving me romantic sex when it should be dirty.”

He gave her a wolfish grin. “Just keeping you on your toes. Now then. How about some *actual* breakfast?”

Hermione’s stomach rumbled in response, and he raised an eyebrow knowingly.

“Good. It should be here any minute.”

“Should I put on some clothes or…”

He just waved her off. “The staff doesn’t care if you don’t.”

Hermione felt a bit more exposed in the daylight, and she hid under the covers when she heard a knock and Draco called for them to come in. The scent of coffee, however, was enough to make her poke her head out of the sheets once she heard the door close again.

“Breakfast in bed,” he said simply, bringing over a tray for her that contained all of her favorites.

They tucked in after Draco tugged the sheet down to expose Hermione’s breasts.

“We should do this at the Manor or your flat sometime,” he said, admiring the view.

She just rolled her eyes, but when she dripped some jam on her breasts she let him lick it off.

“So I was thinking we should go to the Book Vault this morning,” said Draco. “I can have Florrie bring us some clothes, and we can apparate straight to Diagon Alley.”

Hermione was pleasantly surprised by this. “You don’t mind then?”

He shook his head. “No, you seem more rested. And Merlin knows you’re going to want to spend hours poking around in there. It’s really not that big, but you *are* Hermione Granger.”

She rolled her eyes at this, but nodded before hesitating.

“What?” he asked, seeing the look on her face.

“It’s just... Florrie will know I’m here with you.”

Now Draco rolled his eyes at *her*. “First of all, Florrie is bound to keep my secrets. Second, she loves you. Third, who do you think helped with your dress for last night? She and Rosie both knew what we were doing.”

Hermione bit her lip, but decided that when he put it like *that*, there was really no harm in letting Florrie see her here with Draco. She and Rosie were already aware that Hermione slept over rather often.

Hermione finished breakfast and slipped into the attached bathroom to start a shower. A few minutes later, Draco joined her and began to soap her up.

“Draco...” she murmured.

“We’re at a sex club, Hermione. What did you *really* expect? Besides, you criticized me earlier for being romantic instead of being dirty. I figure we can get dirty while we get clean.”

And with that, Draco pushed her forward and took her in the shower.

Hermione then discovered the various grab bars at any number of odd heights, one of which was perfect for this particular position.

“Draco...” she gasped, as he thrust into her from behind.

“What, Granger? *Fuck me...* your cunt... so tight like this...”

“We should... install these bars... in the Master bath... at the Manor...” she gasped in between thrusts.

“Goddammit, yes ... I’ll put it... in our contract... *fuck...*”

It wasn’t long after that when they both started to come *again*, and now Hermione was truly wiped.

“You’re going to have to carry me to the Book Vault,” she moaned, as she slid down the shower to sit on the floor.

Draco just laughed and cleaned her gently, carefully, before lifting her out and wrapping an enormous towel around her.

“This is your favorite part, isn’t it?” she suddenly asked him. “All the stuff afterwards.”

He gave her a small smile. “Perhaps.”

When they walked back into their room, they found Florrie had returned while they were in the shower and had laid out clothes for both of them, along with Hermione’s charm bracelet and a tiny box with a bow on it.

“What’s this?” she asked, as she approached it.

“What do you think?” he asked in amusement. “Surely you can guess.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him and opened it to find a charm in the shape of a high heel, encrusted with tiny rubies.

“Of course,” she chuckled as she picked it up and added it to her bracelet. “I suppose you ordered this one as soon as I said I would go to the party?”

He just winked at her.

“Well thank you, it’s lovely.”

He gave a satisfied nod, and she smiled a little as she studied her bracelet. She had nine charms now, and it was nearly full. There would be space for two or three more, but at the rate Draco was going it wouldn’t be long before it was complete.

He seemed to sense the direction of her thoughts because he said, “When that one’s full, I’ll start another for you. Plenty of witches have more than one bracelet.”

She gave him a soft smile and stood on her tiptoes to kiss him before pulling back. “I doubt many have one quite like this, Draco. Every one is a tiny piece of art. And the platinum and gemstones... you add them every single time. Most witches just have charms made out of silver.”

“It’s no less than you deserve,” he insisted.

He grabbed her hand and turned the bracelet slowly on her wrist, studying it with some satisfaction. He nodded to himself and then smiled. “Ready?” he asked.

Hermione nodded and slipped her hand into his. He led her out of The Ruby Slipper and around some hedges outside the gate so they could finally reverse their transfigurations. It was odd because it was no longer jarring to see Draco as Mark. His expressions, his mannerisms, and his voice were all so *Draco* that she realized it didn’t matter what he looked like. She would always recognize him.

Draco gripped her hand and turned, pulling her through the darkness to arrive a moment later at the top step of Gringotts. The guard

goblin scowled at her a bit, but said nothing, and once again Hermione felt that rush of gratitude toward Draco for helping her manage them. They took the now familiar cart ride toward the Malfoy level, alighting on the marble-covered terrace as Draco turned to open the Objects Vault. Hermione was practically quivering with excitement. There were a couple more vaults she needed to visit, but this was the one she had been most excited to see. She had intended to save it for the very end, but now that she knew the answers to the werewolf curse might be in here, she was desperate to get inside.

Draco ignored the goblin's glare as he broke protocol and gestured for Hermione to open the door to the Book Vault.

She did it slowly, relishing the familiar feeling of entering a room full of old books, and she reminded herself that these were old, rare, *valuable* books. At first glance she could see that many of them were pristine. These were the ones the Malfoys wouldn't risk leaving on a shelf in the Library, lest they be opened and their spines cracked.

"We're opening them," said Draco, as though reading her thoughts. "Open anything that looks like it could be on point."

Hermione took a deep breath and nodded as she began the search. Draco and Florrie were both right that the room wasn't very big. It was about the size of her library on the Playground, with shelves that wrapped three walls and a small, four person table with chairs in the middle. Hermione raised an eyebrow at this because it was fairly obvious that many of these books were not meant to be read. Then again, there was space for it. Perhaps the Manor had placed the table and chairs here for them.

Despite the small size, Hermione's jaw dropped as she passed book after book that she knew was very rare or in pristine condition.

"A mint condition, first edition of *Moste Potente Potions*? A copy of *Darkest of Arts*? Draco, the only copy I have ever seen was Dumbledore's, and I stole it. I never did return it to the Hogwarts

library... Oh! And *Fearless Fate*? We all know Divination is nonsense, but that book is positively *famous*. Draco, this is just extraordinary..."

She spun around when she heard him chuckling to himself on the other side of the room, and she flushed a bit. "What? You know I like books."

"Of course you do. After we're married, you'll be able to get in here without me, and I'll probably never see my little swot again."

Hermione rolled her eyes, but felt her heart jump at how casually he said this, as though it was a foregone conclusion at this point.

It was. It is. He just has to ask me.

Well no, that wasn't entirely true. They had to have the engagement contract ready to go first. They had to wait an acceptable amount of time. There was an order to it because of *courtship* and *rules*.

Hermione and Draco worked in silence for a time and she turned this over in her mind. She found herself huffing a bit.

"Stupid pureblood courting rules," she finally muttered.

"What was that?" he called.

Hermione harumphed. "I was just saying that we could elope tomorrow if it wasn't for the damned courting rules and contracts and all that nonsense. Then I could come in here whenever I wanted."

She glanced at him and saw he had gone completely still, as he stared at her.

"You would... do that?" he said carefully.

Hermione turned scarlet and looked away. "Your mother would kill us, Draco."

He made a discontented sound, and she heard him move toward her. She felt his arm slip around her waist. "Ignore that for a moment... would you?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. As a little girl I dreamed of a big, fairytale wedding like lots of little girls do. Today though? I'm so famous that it's just going to be a pain in the arse. Slipping away and eloping sounds divine. But we can't do that, Draco, you know that. It would kill your mother, it would kill our friends. We have to do *something* that involves them, and I don't mind giving your mother a big society wedding for her only son. I really don't. As much as I might want to elope, we can't surprise everybody like that. And the engagement contract is sensible, it really is."

"But..."

"But I like your Book Vault."

He chuckled. "You want to marry me for my assets, Granger?"

"No, I want to marry you for your Book Vault, Malfoy. And possibly the Matisse paintings."

He laughed a little and gave her a light kiss before sighing. "Fine. You're right. But if you ever want to say fuck it and gain immediate access to the Book Vault, just tell me. I'll handle Mother."

Hermione hummed a bit, and he moved away, but she couldn't help but fantasize about it a little. They worked for another twenty minutes in silence, Hermione still marveling at the treasures contained in this little room.

"Speaking of slipping away," Draco suddenly said in a casual voice that immediately made Hermione suspicious, "we should talk about your Christmas gift soon."

She raised an eyebrow at him. "My Christmas gift?"

“Mmmhmm,” said Draco. “I was thinking we could go somewhere for a couple days.”

Hermione paused and turned to look at him fully. “You’re serious? In the middle of all —”

He raised a hand. “I know. But you and I both know the Ministry practically shuts down the last two weeks of the year except for the gala. I don’t know what your holiday plans are, but I was hoping we could spend it together. Maybe we could spare a couple days to go somewhere too.”

She saw he looked a little nervous, but also determined.

“I normally work on Christmas,” she confessed. “I used to spend it with the Weasleys, and I still go there for dinner, but ever since dumping Ron it’s felt odd to be there Christmas morning. I usually just go to the clinic.”

He blinked and frowned. “Hermione... if that’s true then spend Christmas with me this year.”

She felt her breath catch a little. “I... alright. I suppose we can do that.”

He started to give her a slow smile as he moved toward her. “Good girl. And say you’ll take a couple days to... *slip away*... with me. Anywhere you want to go. We’ll make it happen.”

Her heart ached. She wanted to do it. Oh how she wanted to do it. But she felt she couldn’t spare the time with everything else they had to do.

“Draco,” she sighed.

“Hermione,” he coaxed. “We have a couple weeks before Christmas, and you’ll be time-turning half days again starting tomorrow. But you’ve been burning out, sweetheart. Even during the break you’ve

taken this weekend you've been working – working on the engagement contract, working on the inscription from your jewelry box, and now working in the Book Vault. Give me a couple days to whisk you away somewhere for a short break with no work. Just the two of us. We can come home early on Christmas Eve and spend Christmas Day at the Manor. I know you well enough to know that as soon as we're back you'll be working again, even if it's just research in the Library."

"You're sure?" she whispered.

He walked up to her and tucked a curl behind her ear as he nodded. "I'm positive. That's what I want to give you for Christmas this year. Any place you want to go. Anything you want to do."

Where did she want to go?

"Any place?" she confirmed slowly. "Even... muggle?"

He gave her an amused smile. "As long as you'll silence me when I start talking about Merlin, we can go all muggle if you want. I actually promised Ben a big bonus if he would help me book it if that's what you want to do. And yes to any place. I've already talked to Kingsley about getting portkeys for it. He said he would be happy to authorize it."

She smiled a little, and his eyes warmed.

"Well..." she said slowly, "with two days I don't want a huge time change. That will wreck me worse than working through it will."

"That's sensible," he acknowledged.

"And I know we could go to a beach somewhere, but..."

"But?" he asked, with a teasing smile.

"Well, I just really love Christmas. Or I used to love Christmas, before I lost my parents. Every Christmas since then has either been

violent with the war, sad because of loss from the war, or depressing because I'm working instead of celebrating."

He nodded a little. "How can I fix that this year?"

Hermione smiled a little shyly. "Can we go to Germany? The muggles do these incredible Christmas markets. My parents took me once when I was a little girl. I don't have very clear memories of it, but I do remember it was magical. It was the thing that made me love Christmas, and I've always wanted to go back."

"Muggle Christmas markets?"

To her relief, he didn't sound put out at all. He actually sounded intrigued.

"Yes," she nodded enthusiastically. "They're almost like festivals with booths and food and drinks. There are lots of stalls for artisans too. Many towns host them. The larger cities have seven or eight different markets on all at once – or even more – and they just take over whole swaths of the city. Sometimes they're even themed. It's just so... *Christmassy*. And it's the right time of year for it."

"Done," he said. "Pick a couple cities you want to visit then, and we'll go to their markets. I'll find us a nice hotel to base ourselves out of for a few nights. We should be able to apparate around Germany without any problem once we get there."

Hermione beamed. She couldn't help it. She knew she shouldn't take time off, but as Draco pointed out it was really just two days. She sensed they were closing in on the solution to the curse. Perhaps she would have this solved before their little getaway.

He smiled at her excitement. "And now that you've agreed, let me give you a reward for being so cooperative," he said.

"Oh?" she asked.

Draco nodded and handed her a book. "I just found Father's journal."

Hermione gave herself a couple of hours in the Book Vault to check for cursed objects and pant over the rare books while Draco devoured the journal at the reading table.

Finally he spoke.

"I think I found it," he said softly. "A lot of it is in shorthand, but..."

Hermione hurried over, and he flipped the journal around to show a list of ingredients for a potion that included centaur blood and a series of notes about the preparation method, though Hermione could see Draco was correct and much of it was in shorthand.

"Draco..." she breathed, as she read the ingredients again, mentally putting together the steps.

"What do you reckon?"

She nodded slowly. "This could be it. I don't understand all the shorthand, but I can make educated guesses about a lot of it. And the ingredient list is here. I have everything at the Playground, except..."

"Except?"

"Plimpies. I could get some from Luna I suppose, but I think I saw some in the Potions Vault."

"Take it," he said.

Hermione gave him a small smile and nodded. "I'm going to try this Draco. It looks like the potion takes about five days, but there are long stew periods as part of it if I'm understanding his instructions correctly. In fact, it seems fairly straightforward — I had theorized some of this myself, but the centaur blood was the missing link,

along with a few ingredients that I now recognize as part of a centaur's diet. I ought to be able to work it out within a few tries if this is really it."

She glanced at him and saw he looked pleased. "So you'll be able to take some breaks then?"

She nodded. "If I start tomorrow I can do three rounds before our getaway. And yes, I'll have some days off to work on the estate while it's brewing. I'll only have to sleep on the Playground a few nights and..."

"No," said Draco shortly. "Sleep with me."

She gave him an exasperated look. "There is a middle of the night step partway through."

"Have Florrie apparate you then."

"I'm not waking her up in the middle of the night for it," said Hermione sternly. "Honestly Draco, I'm used to it. My sofa is very comfortable."

He grumbled a little at this but finally said, "Fine. Stubborn little witch..."

She walked around the table and brushed her fingers through his hair as she slid into his lap.

"You love me for it."

He leaned his head into her hand and his gray eyes bored into hers. "You know I do. Even when it infuriates me."

She smiled a little as he leaned in to nuzzle her neck. Right on cue her stomach rumbled.

He chuckled a little. "I need to feed you."

She sank into him and nodded. She was hungry, but this was also lovely.

“Draco,” she said.

“Hmmm?”

“Can we go back to the Manor for lunch? I promised Rosie I would eat with her in the Elves’ Lounge today.”

He smiled a little at this. “That’s fine, but I won’t be joining you. I have more research to do this afternoon.”

Hermione frowned. “On what?”

“House elves.”

“Pardon?”

He shrugged. “I’ve decided to learn more about them.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes, but nodded a little. “Alright. Well if there’s anything I should read too...”

He gave her a stern look. “I’m not adding anything else to your plate.”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. Then let’s get the plimpies, and then we can go back.”

Hermione rose and pulled Draco to his feet to follow her. They left the Book Vault and ducked into the Potion Vault for the plimpies. Soon they were floo’ing to the Study where Draco gave her a peck before heading off the Library, a rather determined look on his face.

Hermione just shrugged to herself and made her way down to the Kitchen.

“Hello Rosie!” she said to the little elf, who gave her a toothy smile.

“Hello Miss Hermy! Is Miss ready for lunch?”

“Of course,” said Hermione. “I’m starving.”

Rosie smiled, but Hermione sensed something was a bit off. Still, she reached out for Hermione’s hand like usual to lead her down the small hallway with portraits of waving elves and back into the Elves’ Lounge. Hermione settled herself at one of the small tables featuring a large and scrumptious-looking pasta dish. Rosie wandered over to a tall cabinet where the elves kept their dishes and crockery to retrieve some plates, and Hermione couldn’t help but notice Rosie’s shoulders were slumped as she shuffled back to the table. Hermione began to serve up both of them, as Rosie’s eyes started watering.

“What’s wrong Rosie?” asked Hermione

Rosie sniffed. “Florrie is telling Rosie that Master Draco is marrying Miss soon.”

Hermione felt a small burst of excitement at this news, but she suppressed it as she shot Rosie a look. “Well I doubt it’s going to be *that* soon. He and I still have quite a bit to work out, and he hasn’t been courting me that long. I thought he was supposed to court me for at least a year before we’re engaged, according to the rules. And then we have to plan a wedding after that.”

Rosie nodded a little, but she looked down at her plate, and her ears drooped. Hermione suddenly felt awkward.

“Erm... is that a problem?” she asked hesitantly.

Now Rosie looked at her with huge eyes. “No Miss! Rosie is hoping very much that Miss becomes her Mistress. The Manor is needing one, Miss.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes. “Then why do you seem upset by it?”

Now Rosie looked a bit embarrassed. "Rosie is liking to have lunch with Miss and pretend she is Miss Hermy's elf. But when Miss is the Mistress, then Miss Hermy will bond with a different elf than Rosie."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "Rosie, I don't intend to bond with *any* elves."

Rosie looked at her in confusion. "But Miss must! All the Mistresses is having elves!"

Hermione sighed. "Rosie, I don't agree with it. I won't be doing it."

Rosie looked a bit hurt. "Why is Miss not agreeing?"

Hermione shrugged uncomfortably. "It feels like slavery to me. I know Draco is paying you all now, but you still can't tell him *no*. That really bothers me. I would consider hiring a free elf, but I'm not going to bond with one."

"But Miss Hermy must if Miss is wanting elves to have their magic!"

Hermione paused and frowned. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Rosie."

"The bond, Miss. Tis the bond that lets elves answer a call. Free elves is not answering their masters because they is having no masters."

Hermione blinked. "But Florrie can answer to me when I call her."

"Yes Miss because Florrie is bound to Master Draco, and Master Draco is ordering it. If Florrie is not bound to a master ordering it then Florrie cannot hear your call."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "Are you absolutely certain about that?"

Rosie shrugged. "Rosie is thinking so, Miss. Elves is not liking to be free because elves cannot hear a call without a bond. The bond is

giving elves their full magic.”

Hermione suddenly remembered that Draco was researching elf magic at this very moment.

“Rosie... have you ever told Draco this before?”

Rosie nodded. “Yes, Miss Hermy. Master Draco is coming to me to ask about elf bonds. He is bonding with Florrie when he is going to Hogwarts, and he is not remembering well. Nonnie and Rosie is taking care of Master Draco as a baby.”

Hermione cocked her head. “Why didn’t Draco bond with you instead of Florrie?”

Rosie’s eyes got wide. “Oh Rosie is a Manor elf, Miss. Manor elves is bound to the house and the Master while he is here, Miss. We is not bonding with the Master or any other family member personally.”

Hermione frowned. “That’s ridiculous, Rosie. You helped take care of him.”

Rosie shook her head firmly. “No, ‘tis how it is done, Miss. The Manor elves bond is not the same as elves for a master or mistress personally. Personal elves is hearing their masters’ call anywhere in the world, Miss. The master is not having to be in the house to do it like he is with Manor elves. Elves like Florrie is ranked above the Manor elves, Miss Hermy, because they can hear their master in places that elves like Rosie cannot. That is why...”

Rosie sniffed, and her enormous eyes started to water again.

“What, Rosie?”

“Tis why when Miss Hermy is becoming my Mistress she is having a different elf and won’t need Rosie anymore!”

Hermione gaped a little as Rosie dissolved into tears, before she stood and ran over to hug the little elf.

“*Rosie*,” said Hermione firmly. “Rosie, listen to me. I most certainly will not be bonding with any other elf. I really enjoy our lunches, and I love it when you help me with things. If I do marry Draco, it won’t change a thing between us, I promise.”

Rosie quieted a bit, but she was still hiccupping and sniffing a little. “But Rosie is sure Master Draco is finding Miss an elf soon.”

Hermione pulled back to make sure Rosie could see her and arched an eyebrow. “I’ve made it very clear to Draco I will not be bonding with any elf. Like I said, I would hire a free elf, but I want elves to be able to tell me no.”

Rosie looked at her with some consternation, and Hermione could tell that Rosie didn’t believe her. Suddenly Hermione had an unpleasant thought.

“Erm... Rosie... if I *do* marry Draco, will I be bound to all the Manor elves too? Like he is?”

Rosie shook her head. “I is not thinking so, Miss. The Manor elves is always commanded by the Master because he is in control of the Manor. He is usually telling the elves to follow the Mistress’s orders too or other family members, but if the Master’s orders conflict we is having to follow him.”

Hermione nodded slowly. “So is that why Malfoy wives always have a personal elf? And the children do too? Because the only person who is really in control of the Manor elves is the Master?”

Rosie nodded a bit sullenly. “Yes, Miss. Master Draco is young for his transition to Master. Most of the Masters get personal elves when they is starting Hogwarts or just before, and then they is keeping their personal elf for many years before they is having Manor elves too.”

Hermione was fascinated, despite herself. “And when a Master gets the Manor elves, what happens to his personal elf?”

Hermione had a suspicion based on Florrie's room size compared to the others, but she had never discussed this with Rosie before.

"Oh his personal elf is in charge of the household, Miss. Florrie is telling the Manor elves what we is to do. Master Draco can command the Manor elves one by one, but he is usually telling Florrie and then Florrie is telling us."

"Are you bound to follow Florrie's orders then?"

"If they is from Master Draco, yes. We can feel it, Miss."

"Fascinating," she said quietly. "But you're certain there has to be a bond for the call to work? Or for you to be able to feel it when Florrie is passing on an order from Draco?"

Rosie shrugged, and looked down at her knees. "I is thinking so, Miss. I is..." she trailed off and hesitated a little.

"You're what, Rosie?"

She looked uncomfortable, and glanced around to make sure they were alone. "When Master Lucius was here, I is wishing to be free," she whispered. "I is wishing not to have all my magic. He is ordering Dobby to make us do things we is not liking to do."

Hermione's heart broke for the little elf, and she pulled her in for another hug.

"You weren't the only one, Florrie. He treated Dobby horribly."

Rosie nodded. "Dobby is not like the other master elves, Miss. He is wearing dirty things and fighting his master's orders when he could. But I is liking Dobby very much."

"He was very brave," said Hermione sincerely. "He saved my life, you know. He also saved Harry Potter, Ron Weasley, Luna Lovegood, Garrick Ollivander, Dean Thomas, and a goblin named Griphook as well. He was a hero."

Rosie looked at her solemnly. "Master Draco is much better, Miss Hermy. I is hoping my future masters is more like him. I is liking to have all my magic now."

Hermione gave a small smile at this. "I'm glad to hear that. Although... I do wonder about that, Rosie. When Dobby showed up to rescue me that day, he was sent by Dumbledore's brother. It all happened so fast, I wonder if he had found some way to answer Aberforth's call even though he was free. I suppose it's possible they were together before Aberforth sent him, but we never had a chance to ask."

Rosie looked a bit curious at this, before sighing and shrugging. "Tis not mattering, Miss. Master Draco is finding an elf for Miss Hermy, Rosie is sure of it."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "And what makes you think that?"

Rosie looked at her like she was daft. "Because he is wanting Miss to move to the Manor. That is why he is asking Rosie about elf bonds. Miss is needing an elf for her reputation."

"Bloody hell," muttered Hermione, rolling her eyes at this. "Look Rosie, I'm not bonding with an elf in a way that makes it so the elf can't say no to me. I've made that very clear to Draco. It's even going into our engagement contract. So I'll either move in without one and we won't worry about my reputation, or else I won't move in at all until we're married."

Rosie still looked skeptical, but cautiously hopeful now. "Miss is truly not wanting a different elf?"

"Not even a little bit, Rosie."

Rosie gave her a slow smile, and finally Hermione smiled too and rose to go back to her side of the table.

“Now Rosie,” said Hermione, “tell me what you know about the Aviary. I’ll admit I’ve been avoiding it, but I think it’s finally time I search it this week.”

Terms of Engagement

Chapter 42: Terms of Engagement

AN: Draco has a brainwave and makes his opening offer.

Draco

Draco was sitting in a small, modern conference room in their new headquarters for DLM Investments and DLM Properties. Ben had spent quite a bit of time getting something called a computer and the internet set up, along with something called a projector. Ben had really leaned into the fact that they were in a muggle building, and Draco had to admit that after the little Ben had shown him, Draco was stunned by the speed and degree with which muggles could connect with one another.

Draco knew that Hermione was prepared to train him and Blaise in the muggle side of finance and technology, and she had recommended a few books for Blaise to read while her work on the estate was wrapping up.

“I’m not terribly advanced at muggle finance, but I do manage my parents’ finances and investments. They think I’m their financial advisor. Their memories aren’t that great after the memory charm, so I handle everything for them.”

“You can do it from England?”

“Yes, Draco, *honestly*. I keep it very simple for myself, and the muggles have recently invented something called online billpay. I can do it from anywhere in the world.”

As it stood, Draco felt a bit out of his depths with it, but he could see the advantages of learning about muggle technology. Ben certainly worked faster and more efficiently when using muggle devices, and Draco learned that Ben had always used muggle technology when it came to the muggle real estate work he did. It was sensible, of course: muggle law firms would look askance at documents written with ink and parchment. Ben explained that his prior firm gave him a budget for a home office for most of the muggle work he did. He could operate electronics there, unlike in the magical building where the firm was based.

“It was bloody obnoxious to floo back and forth every time I needed to change a document after a client meeting,” said Ben. “The partners talked about moving into the muggle world now and then, but they could never get enough people on board to actually do it.”

Watching Ben work had been inspiring for the others on Draco’s team, and Hermione’s enthusiasm for muggle expansion caught on as well. She explained the concept of the muggle stock market to Draco and Blaise during their last visit to Theo’s house. They had listened in slight disbelief when she described it to them, and Blaise in particular was fascinated.

“So I can just buy these stocks or groups of stocks, and I can do it on the open market without having to be invited to invest in the business first? And transactions settle the same day?”

“Yes,” said Hermione. “There are thousands of companies in the muggle world that are publicly traded that way.”

Blaise was very keen to dive in, and Draco thought he knew why: Blaise was preparing to court Pansy.

“I want her, mate. Ben was right. I made a total hack of waiting as long as I did to ask her out, but I need to court her to make her parents happy. I know they really like me, but I need to be able to come in with a strong position so they tell Pucey to take a hike.

Between the new job with you and this stock market business I think I'll be able to convince them."

Draco was pleased Blaise was finally taking the steps he needed to take to lock Pansy down. Draco advised him to just go to the goblins for a Lover's Box if he didn't already have one. In Draco's view that would bring Lorna Parkinson around faster than anything else. Blaise gave him a thoughtful look, but then nodded firmly.

"You're right mate. I don't have a Lover's Box because we don't really court the way you lot do. But fuck, if it would get Lorna to stop making hints about Pucey..."

"It will, trust me," said Draco knowingly. "None of Pansy's sisters received one. Lorna is desperate for one of her girls to get one."

Blaise's eyes widened a bit, and then he smiled. "Brilliant."

But now Draco was here looking around at his small team: Ben, Patrick, Blaise, and even Alyssa were all here to discuss quite a few things they needed to get caught up on.

"I received Hermione's list," said Alyssa, "and I think it will be enough for an engagement contract."

Draco smiled in relief. "Excellent. And the real estate that's part of it?"

"I've checked," said Ben. "Neither parcels are part of the entail. You can do anything you want with them. We can have transfer documents wrapped into the engagement contract so the first one is transferred to her as soon as it's signed if you wish."

Draco nodded. "Yes, let's plan to do that. Blaise, do you have a sense of how much gold needs to be held back for the entailed portions of the estate?"

Blaise nodded. "I'd say around twenty-five percent. That should be enough to support the historic needs of the estate after backing out the income that is produced by it."

"Good," said Draco. He took a moment to do some quick math on a scrap of parchment.

"Alright, this is what I want to do. Hermione gets the real estate we discussed upon our engagement, and she can have the other piece of property upon marriage. Five percent of my gold will go to her when she signs the engagement contract. It doubles if I break the contract, but that's never going to happen so it's a moot point. Then when we're married she gets another fifteen percent of the gold outright so that we hold it 80-20.

The children who are not the heir will each receive customary marriage settlements out of my eighty percent, plus a selection of items from the Objects Vault which I will enumerate when they are born. They will also receive one of the other Malfoy residences on the continent upon their marriage or my death, whichever comes first. They will own it free and clear and can do whatever they want with it – sell it, live in it, I don't give a fuck. No restrictions.

When I die the heir will receive the entailed portions of the estate, the remaining items in the Objects Vault, and thirty-five percent of the remaining gold. That should be sufficient to support the estate without diluting him, after the other marriage settlements are accounted for. Hermione will receive everything else, including unentailed real estate and business interests. If she predeceases me, then her portion of the gold and unentailed real estate will be split evenly between any children who aren't the heir. The business interests will be split evenly among all children, including the heir if he's mine. That's really as fair as I can make it."

Draco looked around to find his team staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

"It's very generous," said Alyssa carefully.

"Well she's going to be my wife, isn't she?"

"Yes, but Draco... this is far more than your mother received."

Draco shrugged. "I don't care. My parents' marriage is not the thing I want to model here. I want to make sure she's protected the moment she says yes to me, regardless of whatever comes later."

There was some murmuring at this, but Alyssa was nodding as she took quick notes.

"Alright," she said. "I'll put this together and send it over to her lawyer for review."

"Her lawyer?" asked Draco curiously.

Alyssa nodded. "Yes, Percy Weasley reached out and said he was representing her in this. It's a good thing too, Draco. I can do her estate plan, but I really can't represent you both in this."

"Can Weasley send her bills to me?" asked Draco, frowning a bit.

"No," said Alyssa firmly. "It's really best if you don't pay Weasley. The moment the contract is signed she will have no trouble paying him herself. Besides, Weasley's fees aren't bad. He's a Ministry lawyer and represents a lot of Ministry personnel on a reduced fee schedule. The Ministry picks up half of the tab. It's one of the perks of working there."

Draco pursed his lips, but nodded. "Fine," he said shortly. He didn't love it, but he supposed she could afford it while the contract was being written. She spent so much time at the Manor these days that he had organically assumed most of her living expenses at this point. He knew that going behind her back again was out of the question. In any event, he fully intended to get this ready as quickly as possible so he could propose and lock her down. After her

comments about eloping, Draco knew she was ready. He had selected an alternate ring from the group she picked out, and now all that was left was getting the engagement contract arranged in form. They would sign it after he proposed.

Draco forced his eagerness back down. Alyssa had warned him it might take several rounds of revision before it was ready to be signed, and he had to be patient. He browbeat his distracted mind to make it to focus on the next thing they needed to discuss.

“Patrick,” he said, “have you been able to finish the diligence on the buyer for that land deal?”

To Draco's surprise, Patrick gave him a perturbed look. “No,” he said. “It's a series of shell companies, but they have not been willing to release the name of the ultimate owner. I've asked a dozen times.”

Draco studied him curiously. “Really?”

Patrick nodded. “Yes, and something about it feels off. They are being so cagey about their capitalization that I know they're trying to hide something. But they're still willing to make most of the standard representations in the contract for sale.”

Draco frowned and turned to Ben. “Does that bother you? Not knowing who the ultimate buyer is?”

Ben wrinkled his nose and shrugged. “I don't love it, but it's not a deal-killer. The purchasing entity certainly exists and for land record purposes that's all that really matters. It wouldn't be the first deal I've done where the buyers stayed private.”

Draco nodded slowly. “Alright,” he said. “In that case, what about diligence on your end?”

“So far so good,” said Ben. “I received confirmation of the boundaries from the survey company, and the title company is looking at it now. The environmental report came back clean with no

major pitfalls. And the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures approved the sale.”

Draco stared hard at Ben.

“What did you say about Magical Creatures?”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “They approved it,” he said slowly. “They have to approve all sales of vacant land in case there are magical creatures that use it for their habitats. It’s standard.”

Draco studied Ben. “And who in the Department approved it?”

Draco already knew in his gut what the answer would be, and sure enough Ben said, “Alan Estes. He doesn’t usually do them himself anymore, but this sale is large enough that he wanted to review it personally.”

“Of course he did,” said Draco softly. “Fuck.... fuck!”

He stood suddenly, and everyone in the room looked at him like he had gone mad.

“Stay here,” he said. “All of you. Order lunch if you need it, I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

He left them all watching him with concern as he turned on the spot and apparated directly to the Ministry of Magic. He strode through the atrium, thinking quickly and hoping that everybody he needed was in the office today. He got into the lifts and pressed a button, tapping his foot impatiently as he waited for it to stop at the DMLE level.

He strode out and ignored the odd looks he was getting as he made his way toward the auror department. It had been years since he had been here, but he still remembered the way. He would never forget it. He shoved open the glass doors and came to a halt at the receptionists’ desk.

“I need to see Harry Potter, please,” he said. “It’s urgent.”

She just raised an eyebrow and looked at him skeptically. “Mr. Potter doesn’t have any appointments today.”

“Please go tell him that Draco Malfoy needs to see him about a case. He will see me, I am certain of it.”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible, Mr. Malfoy. Mr. Potter is very –”

“Draco?” asked Harry’s voice, and Draco whipped around to find Harry entering the glass doors behind him.

“Oh thank Merlin,” said Draco with relief. “I have news.”

Harry’s eyes widened, and he ignored the spluttering receptionist as he pulled Draco into the nearest conference room.

“What is it?” asked Harry shortly.

“Not here,” said Draco tersely. “But we need to talk to Theo, and Hermione might as well hear it too. Can you get Theo? Alan Estes should not see me anywhere near his department. I’ll grab Hermione from the Playground if she can spare the time. My whole legal team is gathered, and we all need to talk.”

Harry blinked, but nodded slowly. “Sure, I can do that. I’ve been down in Magical Creatures a fair bit.”

“Good, I’ll see you soon then,” said Draco, as he gave Harry the address of the building.

They exited the conference room and went through the glass doors before splitting at the lifts. Draco went down to the Playground and Harry went to Magical Creatures.

A few minutes later, Draco was barging into the Playground, and Hermione looked up at him in surprise. “It’s a bit early for the time-turner,” she said.

Draco nodded. "I know, and you can have it soon, but we need to talk to Harry and Theo urgently. Are you free?"

She looked intrigued and glanced at her bubbling potion. "Give me ten minutes, and I can be," she said. "I'll have a long stew period after this next step."

Draco nodded and sat in a nearby chair to wait.

"This is distracting," she muttered, as she diced the plimpies she had taken from the Potions Vault.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Draco couldn't help but smirk. "You know it turns me on to watch you work."

She rolled her eyes, but shushed him. "I need to concentrate."

Draco fell silent and watched as she carefully counted the portions of plimpie and stirred six times between each piece. Finally she nodded to herself and went to a nearby sink to wash up.

"Ready," she said, as Draco rose to lead her out.

"Are you going to tell me what it's about?" she asked, as they headed toward the atrium.

Draco shook his head. "Not here."

Hermione cast a curious look at him, but said nothing more as they got to the apparition point.

"Apparate to my office building," he said quietly. "That's where we're meeting everyone."

Hermione nodded and turned on the spot, and Draco followed a few seconds later, landing directly in the conference room. He looked around and saw Harry and Theo were already there, much to his relief.

“Alright Draco, what’s going on?” asked Harry.

Draco looked at Ben and Patrick. “Tell him about the land deal.”

Ben raised an eyebrow. “That will waive privilege, Draco.”

“Fuck privilege, I’m not going to sign it if it’s what I think it is. Tell him, Ben.”

Ben studied him a moment, but then nodded. “Very well. DLM Properties was approached just after we formed to see if Draco would be interested in selling a large tract of land that one of its subsidiaries owns up in Northern England. It’s a couple thousand contiguous acres. They’re offering a very good price for it, so we’ve been vetting the deal.”

Patrick jumped in. “I’ve been looking into the corporate history of the buyer, and it’s a brand new company which isn’t unusual. However, it appears to be owned by a series of shell companies, and I haven’t been able to identify the person who controls them yet.”

Harry narrowed his eyes at this, as Hermione and Theo listened curiously.

“And I’ve been doing the land diligence,” said Ben, interjecting again. “I told Draco a few minutes ago that the survey is done, and the environmental report came back clean. Alan Estes also signed off on the deal from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures. It was just the standard review of raw land purchases to make sure no protected magical creatures inhabit the area.”

Now their eyes got huge.

“Estes reviewed it?” asked Theo sharply. “He *never* reviews land deals anymore.”

Ben shrugged. "Like I said, it's a large one – a couple thousand acres – and Estes said he wanted to review it personally because of the size. Why are you lot freaking out about it?"

"Because he's under investigation," said Harry shortly. "Although that needs to stay quiet."

Harry turned to Theo. "Estes never reviews them?"

"Not anymore," said Theo, shaking his head. "He always delegates land deal reviews."

"Can *you* review it?" asked Hermione suddenly. "Do you know what to look for?"

Theo nodded. "Yes, of course."

Harry nodded, and Draco saw the fire lit in his eyes. "How long will it take you?"

Theo hesitated. "For a couple thousand acres? Maybe two weeks or a bit longer if I call in sick and drop all my other work for it."

"Do you mind?" asked Harry.

"No, not at all," said Theo. "I'll lose my sick time at the end of the year anyway."

Harry nodded. "Perfect. Ben, please give the records you have to Theo. Do *not* tell anybody about this. Theo needs to check Estes' work before anything else happens."

Ben glanced at Draco, who nodded in confirmation, and he pulled a large file of information out of a stack of folders and passed it to Theo.

"Patrick," said Draco, "I want you and Ben to both dig to see if you can figure out who owns those companies. Feel free to engage Alyssa's firm to help or a muggle law firm if you need to. I don't care

what it costs. Just make sure the other side has no idea we are looking that hard.”

Patrick’s eyes widened, but he nodded. “Sure thing.”

“And in the meantime,” said Draco, now looking at both of them, along with Blaise, “keep turning drafts of the purchase agreement. Make bullshit changes if you have to so the deal stays live. Make excuses to be late with your turns. Just stall for us, will you? Buy Theo a couple of weeks to look into it.”

They all nodded. “Is this about –” started Patrick, but Harry cut him off.

“It’s really best if you don’t know the details, but I’m sure you can make an educated guess given what *The Prophet* has been printing recently.”

Their eyes widened. “Fair enough, we won’t ask questions,” said Ben.

“Good,” said Harry. “Just do what Draco asks you to do. Keep a low profile and don’t raise any red flags for the other side of your deal. Please try to find out who the buyer is while Theo works on his part of it. Let’s plan to reconvene right after Christmas.”

“We should be able to drag it out that long without any trouble,” said Patrick. “We’ll blame the holidays.”

“Perfect,” said Draco.

“I’ll fall ill this afternoon,” said Theo. “I’ll work as fast as I can on this.”

“Thank you,” said Harry. “And Hermione? How is the cure coming?”

“I’m doing what I can,” she said quietly. “It may take a few tries, but I should get it eventually. The only people who know I’m working on it are in this room, Kingsley, and the trauma healers at St. Mungo’s.”

Draco nodded, and then gave a fierce look around the room. "Hermione's involvement in this stays classified until Harry's investigation has concluded, do you understand? It's for her safety."

Everyone looked a bit surprised at the fierceness of Draco's gaze, but they all nodded quickly.

"We don't even know what the investigation is about," said Alyssa smoothly. "Anyway, you're talking to a room full of lawyers and a financial advisor. We can all keep a secret."

Draco smiled in relief. "Thank you. Alright, well I would say that was one of the most productive meetings I've ever had. I'll call in lunch, shall I?"

Hermione

"Damn," Hermione muttered, as she stared at the curse spreading across the mouse's body.

She had known it wasn't likely she would nail this potion on her first try, but she couldn't help but hope. The situation with the werewolves was becoming precarious. There had been another round of attacks – this time four people were killed – and again the victims appeared to be unrelated to each other and unconnected to the werewolf community. It was simply a means of inspiring terror to force the Ministry of Magic to negotiate.

Hermione had not been called in to reverse the curse on the victims because the trauma healers knew it was no use. She felt a measure of relief that she hadn't seen it this time, before feeling very guilty for her thoughts. She tried to push it aside though. Her highest and best use wasn't being called away to the trauma room. She needed to be working out the potion.

Her heart sank a little as the curse continued to spread across the mouse's body, though she had to acknowledge it was slower than

she had previously observed. That was the first real bit of progress she had made since starting her experiments, and it told her she was on the right track. Trying to view her failure in a positive light, Hermione buckled down and looked over Lucius's journal again, thinking about the things she might tweak for her next try. She spent the next couple of hours scratching out new instructions for herself before calling it for the day. She would start again in the morning, even though it was a Saturday. Hermione was determined to squeeze three attempts into her schedule before she and Draco left for Germany.

Hermione checked her watch and realized it was time to meet with Percy Weasley. He had sent her a note to say that Alyssa provided a first draft of the engagement contract and asked for comments back as soon as possible. He wanted to review it with her first. Hermione steeled herself as she left the Playground and made her way to Percy's office. She just knew Draco was going to go overboard with his opening offer, and she would have to pull him back a bit. He had been unwilling to tell her what the contract contained and just said he would send it to her as soon as Blaise and Ben confirmed that he could do what he wanted to do.

She exited the lifts and walked down the hall with the administrative offices. After the war Percy had gone back to law school at the behest of Kingsley. He now headed up a small team of lawyers who worked for the Ministry and represented the Ministry whenever it needed legal advice. They also represented Ministry employees in personal matters, though never against the Ministry itself.

Hermione had dithered about contacting Percy for this, but he was the only lawyer she knew, other than those already hired by Draco. The courtship books she read stressed the need for each side to have their own representation, so here she was. She had always gotten along rather well with Percy, but this was still a bit *personal*. She sighed as she knocked on the door.

"Come in!" his voice called, and Hermione pushed open the door to find Percy behind a handsome desk, horn-rimmed glasses gleaming.

"Hi Percy, I hope I'm not late," she said as she slipped in and shut the door.

"Not at all," he said, motioning for her to sit down.

They made small talk for several minutes until Hermione finally said, "Well? Draco won't tell me what's in his opening offer. He's been deflecting every time I ask."

Percy gave her an inscrutable look. "Well it's quite generous," he said slowly, "and I would suggest accepting his terms because you're not likely to do better than what he proposed. Though I must say that the entire concept of 'funishments,' is not something I've ever seen before. I have to ask... is he treating you well?"

Bloody hell.

Hermione sighed. She should have expected this. George and perhaps Ginny would have understood her dynamic with Draco. But of course Percy was the most uptight out of all of the Weasleys.

He's asking because he cares.

She reminded herself of this and tried not to look as annoyed as she felt.

"It may not be common, but that was put into the contract at *my* request. Those are activities that he and I do anyway, and I had to give up something to make the contract binding. He was resistant to any significant monetary damages going from me to him."

Percy hesitated a moment, but then nodded. "Fine. Well it's quite unorthodox, but I suppose it can be viewed in a similar light as a witch agreeing to bear children. That's a standard provision and is thought to be sufficient consideration for an engagement contract."

Hermione inclined her head. "What's his offer then?"

Percy cleared his throat. "Getting engaged gives you the right to free and clear title to the building where your flat is currently located. The transfer documents will be linked to the contract, and it will automatically occur once the engagement contract is signed. He will pay any legal fees you incur for the transfer or for future lease negotiations. I understand there is a commercial portion of the property too. All income from the property is yours of course."

Hermione blinked. She probably shouldn't have been surprised by this, but it still startled her. He was giving her the entire *building*?

He's making sure I never pay rent again. I can keep the flat forever if I want to.

It was far too much, but Hermione felt a sudden rush of affection for Draco. She knew she would live at the Manor with him soon, but she really adored her flat. Giving it up permanently would be hard for her. This would also let her keep an eye on the Browns.

"Alright," she said. "What else?"

"Upon marriage, he will also transfer a cottage in Somerset to you. It's near the seaside. He calls it 'the Safehouse' in the contract."

Hermione stared at Percy. "He's giving me the Safehouse? But I've never even seen it!"

Percy shrugged. "According to Alyssa your flat is sufficient for you as a single witch. If you break the engagement contract, it will always be yours. But if you marry him and have children, he also wishes to provide a home in your name that would be suitable if you choose to divorce him in the future. It's a five-bedroom cottage."

"The cottage is *five bedrooms*?" she asked in amazement. "That's not a cottage, that's a bloody house!"

Percy gave her a knowing look. "Well be that as it may, he seems to think it would be large enough for you to live comfortably with several

children. The escape clause Alyssa inserted includes a split custody agreement for any children if you divorce, and it's no fault. That means you can leave him at any time, and he seems to be arranging things in advance to make it as amicable and easy as possible if you choose to do that."

Hermione's heart was racing now.

"Alyssa also says the warding on the Safehouse is almost as good as the Manor. Draco feels it would be secure enough for you and any of his children to live there indefinitely," Percy added.

"He's right," she said softly. "I've never been there, but... well, I know it's very safe. My flat is too."

Percy inclined his head. "That's my understanding. Now as for gold, he will transfer five percent of his gold to you when you sign the contract. Gringotts is aware this is being negotiated, and the contract is magical. The transfer will occur automatically as soon as the second person signs the document. Then another fifteen percent will go to you if you get married. There is a one percent break-up fee for you if you break either the engagement or the marriage before children are born. If you have any children together then there are no break-up fees for you. If he's the one who causes the breakup of either the engagement or the marriage, then your gold will be doubled."

Hermione was staring at Percy, and she could see him turning a bit red. "Percy," she said slowly. "How much?"

He looked at her a bit awkwardly. "Well the exact amount isn't known because his balance changes daily. But Alyssa estimates the first tranche when you get engaged will be about seventy-five million and _"

"*Seventy-five million!*" she shouted.

Percy winced, and rubbed his ear. "As I said, it's very generous."

“God, I’m going to kill him,” he muttered as she slumped into her chair. “Percy, you have to turn that down. It’s crazy.”

Percy looked sharply at her. “Hermione, it’s not crazy.”

“Of course it’s crazy! I know he’s rich, but –”

“He’s a billionaire,” said Percy shortly. “Hasn’t he told you?”

Hermione hesitated. “Not in so many words, no... I mean, he did say that settlements from a witch would have to be nine figures to move the needle, but I never *imagined*...”

“He’s a billionaire in terms of available gold,” said Percy. “That doesn’t include his business interests or the value of other assets like real estate. He might be a multibillionaire if you include those things as well, I have no idea. My point is, he can afford it. You’re still only getting twenty percent of his gold. He’s keeping eighty percent, along with most of the revenue from DLM Investments and DLM Properties.”

Hermione slid down in her chair again. “It’s just excessive,” she said.

Percy shrugged. “In terms of the number of galleons, perhaps. But it’s not that unusual on a percentage of assets basis. I often see engagement contracts where the witch is bringing between ten and twenty percent to the table. Of course, this is working in reverse, but –”

“God,” muttered Hermione.

Percy sighed. “There’s a little more.”

Hermione looked at him skeptically. “What more could there *possibly* be?”

Percy cleared his throat and looked down at his notes. “Well, there is the matter of the basic outline of his estate plan. It mirrors yours somewhat, though if he dies first then you are to receive the

unentailed property, business interests, and a portion of gold for life before it becomes part of *your* estate plan. If you die first, then most of it goes to the children who are not the heir. Alyssa says she will be writing coordinating estate plans for you both during the engagement period.”

Hermione nodded. This was one thing she and Draco *had* discussed in advance over the previous week. She hoped for more than one child. The entail meant that it would never be perfectly fair, but she didn’t want everything to go to the heir unless he was their only child.

“Fine,” she said.

“Also,” added Percy, “he’ll be starting a charitable foundation in your name that is seeded with fifty million galleons, with a commitment to donate twenty percent of net profits from DLM Investments and DLM Properties on an annual basis. You will be chairman of the board and will be able to direct grants made from it. It survives the escape clause, so you will still be in charge, and he will still have to fulfill his commitment to make annual donations, even if you get divorced.”

Hermione’s eyes widened.

“Further,” continued Percy, “He’s allocated one million for the Manor and –”

“Oh for *heavens’* sake!” said Hermione. “I’ve already picked out all the bloody furniture from the Objects Vault!”

She could tell Percy was struggling not to smile. “Yes, well, evidently the Malfoys often welcome a new bride by adding something to the Manor for her. Draco’s wedding gift will be an expansion of the Library to include a separate muggle reading room. It will also serve as your decompression room. Alyssa added a footnote that says, ‘Draco seems to think Hermione will need the Manor settlements for books.’”

“He’s ridiculous,” she said faintly. “He’s absolutely, utterly ridiculous.”

“And lastly, he specified some rather specific renovations to the shower in the Master Suite. I confess I’m not sure what he’s getting at with it, but the contract says he will install an unlimited number of benches or grab bars with your advice and consent.”

Hermione turned crimson and cleared her throat. “Ahem, yes, well as to that... oh sod it, Percy, don’t worry about that section. It’s everything else that’s completely unreasonable.”

Percy gave her a knowing smile. “Well go home and fight with him about it if you must,” he said. “But as your lawyer, I need to advise you to take his offer. It’s generous, it’s fair, and you are giving up quite a bit of bodily autonomy in exchange for it. I’ll reiterate to you that it’s really just two properties and twenty percent of his available gold that goes to you outright until he dies. The charitable foundation is a wonderful idea, and it can do a great deal of good in the wizarding world. Alyssa says he’s going to do that regardless, but he seems to think you will run it better than he would. That’s why he put it in the contract. The settlements for the Manor are a tiny drop in the bucket compared to everything else.”

Hermione sighed. “Fine. I’ll think about it, but I’m going to try to make him see sense. This is truly absurd.”

Hermione rose, and Percy rose too, handing her some parchment.

“Here’s the contract so you can look at it yourself, along with my notes. Alyssa is eager to get a response, but there’s really no rush. You need to be comfortable with it.”

Hermione thanked him and made her way toward the Ministry atrium before floo’ing to the Manor for dinner.

“Rosie!” she called, as she stepped into the Study and saw that Draco wasn’t there.

Rosie appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Yes Miss Hermy?”

“Rosie, is Draco in?”

“He is in the Dining Room, Miss. He is waiting for Miss before eating.”

“Thank you,” said Hermione, before she stomped out of the Study, down the hall, and then flung the door to the Dining Room open.

“Good evening, sweetheart,” he said, rising as she walked in. “How did your potion turn out?”

“Oh —”

Truthfully, Hermione had forgotten all about the potion in light of her meeting with Percy.

“It didn’t work,” she said shortly. “I’ll try again tomorrow. But *Draco*, I have to talk to you about this absolutely *ridiculous* contract and —”

Draco cut her off by kissing her.

“What was that for?” she demanded.

“For being adorable,” he said. “I love it when you shout at me.”

She huffed, and he just smiled fondly at her. “But *why* Draco?” she asked. “It’s so excessive and —”

Draco cut her off with a serious look. “I’ve told you why. I want you to marry me and stay with me. I also want it to be fair to you. If you ever decide you don’t love me, I don’t want you to feel like you’re trapped because you’ve grown accustomed to a certain lifestyle or because you don’t have a place that’s really your own. I need to keep earning your love through our whole marriage. Knowing that you could escape with very little inconvenience on your part will keep me accountable. Besides, for months now I’ve thought of both of those properties as yours. And the gold is nothing for me. I will still retain

plenty, and what I give to you will be replenished through my lifetime.”

Hermione’s heart pattered at his words, and she felt herself wavering. She understood why he wanted to do it this way, it just felt so unnecessary.

“This is truly unbelievable,” she muttered.

“Believe it,” he said, with a satisfied grin. “Besides, you can complain all you want, but we both know you aren’t going to win this.”

“Why the hell not?”

He raised one eyebrow. “Because if you don’t agree, I’ll just propose and do it anyway. You know I can.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “You *wouldn’t*.”

“Of course I would. I think it’s sensible to have a contract – I would like to have the legal right to finish you of course – but frankly, I’ll do that anyway too. The contract doesn’t really do anything at all except give us an escape clause. The rest of it will happen whether you sign the damn thing or not.”

The softness Hermione had been feeling evaporated in the face of Draco’s stubbornness. She huffed and crossed her arms. Draco kissed her on the nose.

“Take a little time to think about it if you must, but I’m serious. I’ll reject anything you send back to me that is less than what I’ve offered. If you want me to negotiate with you, ask for more and see what I say.”

“I certainly will *not!*” she insisted.

Draco shrugged. “That’s up to you. But consider my opening offer to be as low as I will go. Now come sit down, I need to talk to you about something else.”

Hermione grunted at him, but allowed Draco to maneuver her into a chair.

“What then?” she asked, a bit ungratefully.

“I want to talk to you about getting an elf,” said Draco seriously.

Hermione’s eyes widened. “Absolutely not! I told you, I won’t –”

Draco held up a hand to silence her. “I’m not talking about bonding with one in the traditional way. I’ve done a lot of research on this, and I think I found a way to link a free elf with you so they can hear your call. Rosie seemed to think that Dobby had something like this during the war, and I spent the last few afternoons at the Hogshead getting all the details from Aberforth Dumbledore.”

Hermione blinked. “And?”

“And I think it can be done. If you are willing to try it, I’d like to free Rosie and make her yours. She absolutely adores you and wants to do it. She’s a bit nervous to be free, but I promised her I would bind her to the Manor again if my little experiment doesn’t work and she wants the traditional bond again.”

Hermione stared at him. “And the others?” she asked softly.

“If it works for Rosie, I’ll talk to the others about it too,” said Draco. “If they agree then none of them will be bound to the Manor anymore, so I’m pretty sure it will break their link with the Objects Vault, but I think that’s a small price to pay. I won’t force them to do something they don’t wish to do, but my hope is it will work for Rosie, and then the others will come around as well.”

Hermione suddenly rose and hurried over to the other side of the table to fling herself in Draco’s lap, as she kissed him frantically.

He laughed a little and leaned in to let her do it.

“Are you still angry with me?” he asked.

“I’m furious,” she sighed, as she peppered kisses on his cheeks and to his ear. “But you’re also the most wonderful man I’ve ever met.”

He chuckled and pulled back a bit to look at her seriously. “Will you consider it? I want you to move in, sweetheart. Crookshanks too of course. I want the world to know about it, and that means you need an elf that only answers to you and not me. Rosie desperately wants to be your elf, even though it’s unconventional to elevate a Manor elf for that role. She’s already taking wonderful care of you though, and I know how much you like her. Let me do this, please.”

Hermione started to give him a slow smile. “As long as she’s free and can tell me no or leave me... then yes. I would do that, Draco.”

He grinned broadly. “Good girl. And officially, you can have the *Capacious Extremis Suite* since it’s next door to my room. The Manor added a connecting door during the transition, you know. I think it wanted us to live in sin.”

Hermione laughed with delight. “Well I *did* cast that spell just before going on the run during the war.”

He raised his eyebrows. “I figured as much. I’ve never cast it myself.”

Hermione blinked. “I thought it was *Sectumsempra* that you never cast?”

Draco shook his head. “No, I’ve cast that one before. I didn’t hit my target with it, so I suspect the Manor was referencing the time Harry used it against me when it chose it for my room... but I did cast it a couple times during the final battle against other Death Eaters. It was *Capacious Extremis* that I’ve never cast. I didn’t understand why the Manor assigned that name to that room until I fell for you and realized it must have been one that *you* have cast before.”

Hermione smiled and nuzzled in. “Alright. So that’s my room.”

“Officially,” he said. “Unofficially you’ll be in my bed every night sweetheart. I don’t want to sleep without you.”

Hermione gave a contented sigh. “I love you Draco.”

“I love you too, Hermione.”

Memories of Us

Chapter 43: Memories of Us

AN: I promised you magical sex in magical places, didn't I?

The note at the end contains a small spoiler for the chapter.

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Hermione

Hermione's second attempt at the potion failed too, but again she made improvements. The bleeding on her mice slowed even more than it had with the first iteration, and it told her she was getting ever closer to the solution. She refused to allow herself to become discouraged. Finding Lucius's journal had been an enormous stroke of luck, and it had saved her weeks, if not months, of experimentation. She was sure she would finally crack it with her third attempt or the one just after it. She just had to be patient, methodical, and careful to observe the changes from one attempt to the next.

On the bright side, between the long brew periods for the potion and the half-days time-turning to prep ingredients on the Playground, she finally had enough time to work on searching the outbuildings of the estate, and that was a relief. Draco's amnesty period expired on the second of January, but she really wanted to complete it before leaving for Germany. She told Draco that once it was done she could stop using the time-turner, and it would make her enjoy their getaway much more to know that project was over.

When he heard this news, Draco canceled meetings with everyone except for Alyssa, and he threw himself into the search with Hermione to help her reach the finish line before their trip. They spent two full days in the Heir's House and found nothing, though Hermione looked around it curiously as Draco regaled her with stories from his childhood.

"That's where I impaled the wall with my broomstick when I was three," he said, pointing to a patched area. "Father was furious."

"No, *I* was furious," chimed in Narcissa, who had surprised them by joining them for the search of that particular building. "You punctured my wallpaper. It was antique, turn of the century. It was absolutely impossible to repair it, so we had to paint over it."

Hermione had been amused to hear Narcissa's stories about the house where she raised Draco when he was very young. They moved into the Manor when Draco was five, after Abraxas passed away. It was only after the second day of searching that Narcissa finally got around to telling them the reason she was there.

"We need to host a ball for your courtship," she said, as they were tapping the floorboards with their wands. "It's a bit late for the first one, but the fall and the holidays are so busy I thought it best to put it off until the middle of January."

Draco rolled his eyes, but smiled a little at Hermione's panicked face.

"Narcissa, that's really not necessary..." she started.

"Nonsense," she said airily. "It's perfectly proper. If you don't have any strong opinions about it –"

"I don't," said Hermione quickly.

" – then I'm happy to arrange everything and consult with Pansy directly about your dress. How does the fifteenth of January sound?"

Everyone should have recovered from New Year's by then, and I'm not aware of any other society events happening that weekend."

"Erm, fine," said Hermione, giving Draco a look that clearly asked him to rescue her from this, but he just smirked and shook his head.

She glowered at him.

"Well I must say you're far more cooperative than I was expecting," said Narcissa with some pleasure. "In that case, I must leave you both to it, as I'll need to begin planning."

Hermione and Draco watched Narcissa sweep from the living room in the Heir's House before apparating once she reached the outdoor, and Hermione spun to scowl at Draco.

"This is entirely unnecessary."

He shrugged. "Mother will handle it. All you have to do is show up looking lovely."

"Is that why she spent the last two days with us, then? She was trying to butter me up?"

He smiled a little. "Well I did tell her you might take some convincing."

"I thought we weren't keeping secrets anymore," she grumbled.

He just laughed as he walked over to her. "That fell in the category of 'surprises,' and not 'secrets.' Besides, you read those books. You knew this was coming."

Hermione *had* known it might be coming, though Narcissa was right that it was a bit late. Hermione hoped she had gotten a pass for it, but of course she should have known better. Narcissa would never say no to an opportunity for a party.

After the Heir's House, they searched the Mausoleum, which was a bit morbid but only took half a day with both of them checking each crypt. Unsurprisingly there was nothing there either.

"He loved my bloody ancestors," said Draco. "He never would have risked hiding something in the Mausoleum where a curse could be triggered. It might damage the marble."

The Greenhouse and the Stables were both clear too. The Greenhouse was still in use and like the Kitchen, and Hermione was sure nothing would be found there. The Manor elves grew any number of edible and ornamental plants in it, and they spent a great deal of time there.

The Stables had been a more likely hiding place because they were no longer in use. However, upon discovering nothing of interest there either, Draco offered to turn part of it into a cattery for Crookshanks.

"You don't have to suck up to me like that," said Hermione with amusement.

Draco looked at her askance. "Sweetheart, this is sucking up to *Crookshanks*, not to you. He's much smarter than me, and I have to stay on his good side. He wouldn't hesitate to smother me in my sleep if I put a toe out of line."

Hermione wasn't terribly surprised to discover that Draco had added a stipulation to install a cattery in part of the Stables in the next draft of the engagement contract he sent to her. Hermione still insisted he was being ridiculous about the Safehouse and the gold, and they had come to a standstill with it while neither of them agreed to budge.

"I'll give you until the new year to think about it," said Draco. "Then I'm going to turn up the pressure to get you to agree to my terms."

By the time Hermione was reaching the halfway point of her third attempt of the potion, the only things she had left to search were the

Aviary and the Magical Objects Vault in Gringotts. Draco declared they could knock out both in a single day.

Hermione spent that morning at the Playground working on a few more steps of the potion before returning to the Manor and turning back a couple hours for the final search of the grounds and vault while the potion stewed. Draco held out his hand for the time-turner and pocketed it after Hermione turned it in for the day. She hoped this would be the last day she had to use it.

“Why did you save the Aviary for last?” he asked in amusement, as they set out for it.

“Because I don’t like birds,” she said, as she gave him a long-suffering look.

“Who doesn’t like birds?”

“Me.”

“Is that why you don’t have an owl then?”

“Hmmm, I tolerate owls. There’s no choice really, being a witch and all. But birds are creepy, Draco.”

He laughed at her. “We can look quickly then. There won’t be anything in it.”

“What makes you say that?”

Draco shrugged. “Father adored his peacocks.”

Hermione wrinkled her nose, but gave a resigned sigh as he moved toward a brick wall on the edge of the garden, with vines growing over it and a single wood door in the center of it.

“It’s in here?” she asked curiously.

“Yes, it’s always been a bit camouflaged.”

Hermione quirked an eyebrow but watched as Draco opened it cautiously, and she stepped in to find a very large, green area, overflowing with plants and perches at various heights, along with a small pond and even a waterfall.

There were half a dozen albino peacocks strutting around, their feathers long and lush. Hermione also saw three owls on the perches. Hermione recognized one owl as Draco's and another as Narcissa's. Presumably the third owl was Lucius's. He practically scowled at them.

"Bloody hell," muttered Hermione, as she stared around in amazement.

"That's Quentin," said Draco pointing to one of the peacocks. "And then we have Piers, Giles, Horatio, Digby, and Leopold."

"God, Lucius was poncey."

To Hermione's consternation the peacocks all turned as one and glared at her. She gulped and backed away slowly.

"Sweetheart, they're harmless."

Hermione was shaking her head furiously. "No. No thank you. You can do this one by yourself Draco. I'll stay right out here and wait."

He watched her in amusement, but waved her off, and Hermione slipped back through the door and leaned against the brick wall, her heart finally slowing. She really did *not* like birds, especially large ones.

Twenty minutes later Draco emerged and gave her a thumbs up.

"You couldn't have possibly searched the whole thing," she said.

He rolled his eyes. "I'm telling you, the Aviary was one of the last places Father would have placed a cursed object. But if you would

like to go in there and check for yourself, you're more than welcome."

"Ah, no. I'm fine here, thanks."

He gave her a small smile. "That's what I thought."

They spent the rest of the morning with some unexpected free time, and Hermione could scarcely believe she had completed the search of the Manor. With only one vault left to search, perhaps this project really *would* be completed today. It was an odd feeling after nearly five months of work.

"Let's go to one of the cafes in Diagon Alley and then pop into a shop or two before we head to the bank. The Magical Objects Vault is really quite small."

Hermione nodded agreeably and apparated away, soon finding herself ensconced in a booth in a small pub. She ate a hearty stew and felt remarkably at peace with the world now that the end of the Malfoy project was in sight.

As usual, Draco watched her carefully, but Hermione finished every bite, and before long he was tugging her away and back out into the cold, amid the bustle of people finishing up their holiday shopping. Christmas was only a few days away.

"Come on, let's take a little detour to the bank."

Hermione shrugged and let him lead her, until she came to a halt as she realized where he was heading. It was the entry to the side street with all the goblin shops that had banned her. He tugged on her hand, but she didn't budge.

"I can't go down there," she said quietly.

Draco looked at her knowingly. "Yes you can. Come along."

Hermione bit her lip but followed cautiously, clinging to Draco's hand like it was a lifeline. She caught a few goblins staring at them through the windows, but Hermione tried to look straight ahead until Draco finally turned and pushed the door to the jewelry shop open.

"What are we doing in here?" she whispered.

"I just need to place an order," he said. "Look around, sweetheart. See if there's anything you like."

At this, Draco broke away from her and headed to the back of the shop, and Hermione was frozen, alone at the front.

She started to turn around and hurry out, when to her surprise a goblin approached her and said, "Madam's bracelet is very fine. Please. Allow me to show you around the shop."

Hermione blinked. She knew that Draco had handled the Gringotts goblins, and he made veiled references to having treated the artisans similarly, but Hermione had not had the courage to see for herself. She nodded cautiously and followed the goblin who was pointing out piece after piece. Hermione was only half-listening, while keeping watch on Draco out of the corner of her eye. He was speaking quietly, gesticulating with his hands, and she had no idea what he was ordering. But whatever it was, he seemed completely oblivious to the fact that Hermione was alone with a goblin. She took a deep breath and made herself focus.

"...and these make excellent wedding bands of course. All the usual enchantments. And over here we have the corresponding bands for wizards. That may be of interest in the near future, yes? And then of course, our case of charms, though I won't bore you with that. Mr. Malfoy is extremely particular...."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and finally decided she had to say it.

"Why are you being nice to me? I understand why the goblins at Gringotts have changed their behavior, and I know Draco's been

commissioning my charms from you. But surely he isn't spending so much gold here that it would convince you to treat me any differently. He has a whole vault full of jewelry he's offered to give me."

The goblin paused and shifted a bit uncomfortably. "Suffice to say we have considered the matter closely," he said stiffly.

"And...?" prompted Hermione.

"And it is in our best interest to treat you as a member of Mr. Malfoy's household."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "And the others?"

"I believe you will find that our brothers in neighboring shops are similarly minded now."

Hermione opened her mouth to say something else, when she heard Draco's voice behind her. "Did you find anything?"

She shut her mouth and shook her head. "No, we were just chatting."

He looked at her a little sharply, but nodded. "Alright then, let's head back to the bank."

Hermione followed him quietly out of the shop and down the alley toward the bank.

"Draco... what did you say to them?"

"Nothing," he said.

She looked at him incredulously. "I don't believe you."

"Believe it. I told the wood shop that I would take future commissions to the continent if they couldn't let bygones be bygones. But that was all."

“There’s no reason to commission anything at all though,” she said.
“Even the charms... my bracelet is almost full.”

He shrugged. “That may be true now, but you never know in the future. And it’s like Gringotts isn’t it? They were being rude and treating you poorly. I won’t tolerate it.”

“And you swear that’s all you said to them?”

“I promise. I have never talked to any of the other shops. The artisans have always been more aware of who butters their bread than the bank goblins. They have real competition with wizarding and even muggle alternatives to their products. The bank goblins have always enjoyed a near monopoly, and that’s why they’re such arseholes.”

“So in the future...”

“You can go into any of the shops. They will be perfectly cordial to you. They know it will do them no good if they continue to hold a grudge against you.”

Hermione felt some of the tension in her stomach ease at this. She wasn’t terribly surprised he threatened to take his business elsewhere, but she thought he must have threatened them with far more than that. Despite how elaborate her charms were, he really *wasn’t* dropping thousands of galleons in their shops on a regular basis, or at least she didn’t think he was. Most of the gemstones on her charms were things he already owned. His influence there wouldn’t be outsized like it was at Gringotts. Hermione felt surprisingly upbeat that this was all it took.

“Alright... well then, what were you ordering?”

He turned and twinkled at her. “Another thing that’s classified, I’m afraid.”

Hermione groaned, but couldn't help but smile a little as they entered the bank and soon found themselves back in the cart, on the wild journey down to the Malfoy vaults. Hermione was oddly eager as they approached the Magical Objects Vault. Other than the Book Vault, it had been the one she wanted to see the most, and she had saved it for the very end.

Draco gestured for her to open the door, and she entered a small room that seemed to glow a bit. The air fairly crackled with residual magic from the things inside of it. The collection wasn't large – Hermione thought they could check everything for curses within an hour – but she was absolutely fascinated by the objects inside of it. She walked slowly past a pensieve, several amulets, a small collection of musical instruments that could play themselves, a few pairs of omnioculars, something that reminded Hermione uncomfortably of Mad-Eye Moody's trunk, and even...

"Is that your Hand of Glory?" she asked in a disapproving voice.

Draco just grinned. "Guilty."

Hermione huffed a little, and she turned to find several enchanted mirrors and lanterns, a wizarding tent that she assumed was much more posh than the one she was accustomed to, an entire wall of broomsticks that she knew would make Harry green with envy, and various articles of enchanted clothing.

As she passed one shelf she came to a halt and then turned to look at Draco with her eyebrow raised. He just smirked at her.

"What is this?" she asked, pointing to the empty shelf with a small card propped against it.

Currently on loan to Hermione Granger.

"Oh that's for the time-turner," he said. "Speaking of which..."

He plucked the card off the shelf and pulled her time-turner out his pocket. He placed it on the shelf with a flourish.

“You’re done with it for now. We’ll finish this room this afternoon, and then the estate will be complete.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped. “We can’t keep it in here! It’s a Ministry artifact!”

Draco tutted at her. “After I discovered what you were doing, I engaged a specialist at Alyssa’s firm to look into it to see if I could make a case that you were doing something illegal with it. I was hoping to convince you to slow down. According to him, we can reasonably take the position that the time-turner is yours to keep with no restrictions. That means it belongs in the Magical Objects Vault whenever it’s not in use.”

“Draco, this isn’t my vault yet.”

He waved her off. “Details. Besides, it’s no different than the Potions Vault is it? We both know where this is headed. It will be yours soon enough, once you finally accept that I’m not bending on our contract.”

He walked toward her slowly, purposefully, and Hermione felt that telltale heat begin at the expression on his face.

“So I take it you’ve checked the objects in here already?” she asked softly. “Since you took the time to make that little card?”

He nodded a little. “Yes. I thought it was the most likely vault to contain cursed objects, and it’s small. Everything’s clean, though you’re welcome to check yourself.”

She cocked her head as he reached out and gripped her waist. “Why didn’t you tell me that?”

He shrugged. "You wanted to see it, and I thought we could celebrate the end of the time-turner with a little... play."

She raised an eyebrow. "Play?"

He smirked and reached for her hand and tugged her over to the stone bowl she recognized as a pensieve. She had never been inside of one – it was Harry who took the pensieve adventures, not Hermione and Ron. She looked at it warily.

"I thought you might want to... revisit," he said.

He touched his wand to his temple, and a silvery strand of memory pulled away, and he dropped it into the bowl. Hermione's heart started to race as she stared at the silvery substance swirling around, and then back at Draco, who looked eager.

"Interested?"

"I—"

Hermione was certainly *interested*. But she had no idea how something like this worked. She had never been inside of one herself, and Harry had never given her as many details about his experiences as she wished. She was surprised to realize just how nervous this made her.

Still, she found herself nodding, and a pleased look crossed Draco's face.

"Good girl. I can tell you're a little apprehensive, but you're so brave and curious. And since you're willing to do something out of your comfort zone, I'll even let you do the honors and get yourself off."

She looked at him incredulously. "You know I can't get myself off."

"Of course you can," he said, gesturing toward a corner in the room Hermione hadn't thoroughly explored.

She was confused, but she wandered over to see what on earth he meant, and then she saw them: her vibrators.

Her jaw dropped, and she spun to look at Draco who was giving her a positively evil smile now.

“I thought you kept them in your nightstand! And these are *not* magical objects! They’re muggle!”

He just grinned and walked toward her. “I personally think they’re *very* magical. And the Manor seems to agree with me, because it placed them here not even a week ago. They went missing, and then I found them in here the very next day when I came to clear a shelf for the time-turner.”

“This is unbelievable,” she muttered.

Draco shrugged. “I told you the Manor wants us to live in sin. Now I know you’re partial to the purple one sweetheart, so grab it and let’s go.”

Hermione bit her lip and hesitated a moment, but then grabbed it and walked over to Draco.

“Will this even work? Can you take things into the pensieve with you?”

He shrugged. “You can bring clothing and wands. I don’t see why a vibrator is any different.”

She hesitated and looked warily at the swirling silver. “Have you ever been inside of it?”

“Mmmm, a few times,” he acknowledged.

She glanced at him. “And we won’t get stuck?”

“No, we’ll be ejected when the memory is done. I gave us a few to watch. There will be plenty of time to get off before it’s over.”

“And what happens to the.... erm...” she trailed off.

“Excess jizz?”

“Christ.”

He laughed. “It seems to disappear.”

“So you’ve done this before?”

Draco moved quickly and cupped her sex with his hand. “Of course I’ve revisited my favorite memories of you. How could I resist watching you come for me over and over again?”

Hermione bit her lip, and Draco’s eyes flicked down to watch.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s play.”

Hermione nodded and grasped his hand before reaching out to touch the silvery substance in the pensieve. A moment later she was pulled into the darkness.

Draco

Draco *might* have set the whole day up for this very moment. Possibly. Maybe.

Despite being together for several months and using her vibrators himself, Draco had never seen *Hermione* use them before. He blamed a combination of being utterly obsessed with touching her and her own shyness around him for this major oversight. She was far more confident now than she had been when they started their sexual explorations of each other, but he still caught blushes now and then when he had her pose for him or when he stared at her.

Draco sensed that the first time she used them to get herself off in front of him it would be best if she had something to distract her. He found them in his nightstand one night and actually tried calling the

Manor for help as he thought about it. For the first time ever it responded to him.

You'll see, was all it said.

Draco was startled and then confused when nothing more seemed to happen after that. But when he discovered her vibrators in the Magical Objects Vault he knew exactly what to do.

Later Draco tried calling the Manor again to interrogate it about where it had hidden Hermione's ring, but it refused to cooperate.

Typical.

Still, Draco had to give it credit for a truly fantastic idea. He would give Hermione something to watch – memories he had seen several times before – and then Draco could watch *her*.

They landed with a thud, and he watched Hermione look around her bedroom at her flat. Memory Draco was on the bed, naked, staring at the door to her bathroom where Memory Hermione was getting ready.

"It's like being on stage..." she whispered.

She was right of course. Pensieves showed a single person's memory, but not necessarily their viewpoint. The magic recreated everything as though it was something they could watch live. It meant that she could see Draco's body too and not just the things he observed.

"Watch what comes next," he whispered, as he came up behind her and tugged on the edge of her jumper. Automatically she raised her arms while her eyes were peeled on the scene, and Memory Hermione came out of the bathroom as Memory Draco rose and strode toward her, grabbing her hand and dragging her to the bed.

"I remember this," she said.

“Mmmm... keep watching.”

She barely noticed as he removed her bra, but as he tugged on her pants she kicked her shoes off and let him get her fully naked.

“My clothes...”

“They’ll be kicked out of the pensieve with us. Make yourself comfortable and watch.”

Hermione slowly moved to a chair in her room and sank down on it. “I didn’t know I could sit on the furniture,” she murmured.

“You can,” he said, as he leaned against her dresser and ignored the Memory Draco who was pulling Memory Hermione on top of him and stared at the real Hermione instead. Real Hermione’s eyes flicked toward him, and he just shook his head.

“Ignore me. Watch us instead. Do whatever you want to do to yourself.”

She took a shuddering breath, but after a few moments he watched her relax as she devoured the scene in front of her.

“Draco, what are you doing...?” Memory Hermione gasped.

“Fulfilling a fantasy,” said Memory Draco as he laid down on his back and gripped Memory Hermione’s hips hard.

“What fantasy?” she breathed.

“The one where you sit on my face,” he said, and then he jerked her toward him and Memory Hermione cried out as she grabbed the headboard for support. Memory Draco pulled her down on top of him and began to feast.

Real Hermione’s pupils were wide and her skin was turning splotchy with the flush traveling down her cheeks and chest. Draco watched intently as one hand crept down to grip her breasts and the other

that was still holding her vibrator moved down further. She clicked the button and nothing happened.

“Too much magic for muggle electronics,” she whispered.

Draco should have anticipated this, but he thought quickly. “Use it just like my cock then.”

She spread her legs wide, and Draco couldn’t tear his eyes away as he watched the vibrator almost disappear inside of her. It was long and thinner than he was, but he had never seen it from such a perfect angle before. As if in a dream he moved toward her, unbuttoning his pants and then sank down on his knees to stare. His hands slipped into his own pants as he stroked himself slowly. He was going to take his time and enjoy every fucking moment of this.

Once again her eyes flicked to him, and he shook his head quickly. “Ignore me. Watch the memories of us.”

She took a shuddering breath and nodded as her gaze moved back to the little show that Memory Hermione and Memory Draco were giving her, and before long she was moving the vibrator in and out. It was so large, and it just *disappeared* inside of her. Intellectually Draco knew his own cock did the same thing, but he had never had such a good look as he was getting right now. Over and over again it happened, and he couldn’t tear his eyes away from it.

“...gonna fuck you right into this mattress Granger...” came Memory Draco’s voice from behind him.

Draco knew what happened next. Memory Draco flipped Memory Hermione on her stomach and started to pound her. He could hear the slap of skin behind him, and soon the real Hermione was moving the vibrator in time with Memory Draco’s thrusts.

“Come on angel...” whispered Draco as he stared intently. He could see she was starting to tremble and beginning to writhe as she found the most comfortable angle, then she twisted her wrist a bit and...

She broke with a cry at the same time Memory Hermione did too. Draco couldn't believe how perfect she looked, with her eyes glassy and mouth open, her hands digging nail marks into her breasts as the vibrator emerged slick with her want, and now the memory was dissolving and reforming to be The Ruby Slipper.

Memory Hermione was with Memory Draco in the party room, and Draco had just opened the slit of her dress to expose her to their audience. Real Hermione's chair from the prior memory morphed into one of the free chairs scattered about the room, and Draco was happy to see she would have a perfect view.

"Oh God..." muttered real Hermione as she stared at the picture they made together.

"Give me another," demanded Draco, and automatically Real Hermione slipped her vibrator back in. She seemed even more transfixed this time as she stared at herself, posed and perfect as Draco led her to her first truly public climax.

Real Draco was pumping harder as he got even closer to her cunt, and he suddenly found himself murmuring words of encouragement to her.

"I could look at you like this forever..."

"So hot and tight..."

"You're being so good for me aren't you? You're going to give me another memory of you just like this..."

He heard sounds behind him that told him Memory Hermione was approaching her release, and before long Draco's favorite part of the memory echoed around the chamber.

"Open up, angel."

Real Hermione's face scrunched, and she gasped as she watched herself suck on Memory Draco's fingers. Real Draco knew that Memory Hermione's eyes rolled back, and she sank into Memory Draco, as though overcome by the delicious thing she was tasting.

Draco saw a small gush as Hermione came a second time, and now she was starting to slide down in the chair as though exhausted.

He had gotten to see two perfect moments from her, and he idly wondered if he could watch a memory within a memory. He would try it next time he came to the Magical Objects Vault.

The memory around them dissolved and formed one last time, and this time the real Hermione looked at it in confusion. She found herself sitting in a chair in his bedroom and Memory Draco was alone. He was writing to Hermione through the Lover's Box as he started to wank.

Real Draco pulled Hermione to her feet and guided her over to the bed. Then he spun her around and bent her over so she was propped on the other side of the bed from Memory Draco.

"Watch me," he said. "This was your birthday. You gave me proof that you came night, but you've never seen what it did to me."

Hermione kept her eyes peeled as the real Draco pulled out a jar of lube from his pocket and made quick work of his cock. He grabbed the vibrator from her hand and carefully breached her arse with his cock while slipping the vibrator back inside of her cunt.

"Oh *God!*" she cried, as he sank himself into her, but Draco saw she was still making herself watch as Memory Draco eagerly wrote with one hand and pumped with the other.

The green vibrator arrived through the Lover's Box, and the real Draco started to move his hips and the vibrator gently in and out of her. She was so tight like this, so *unbelievably* tight. It took all the self-control he had, but he forced himself to hold back until that last

moment. Memory Draco started to come and then real Hermione started to as well.

“This is...” she moaned and spasmed, but Draco didn’t stop.

“Keep going...” he gritted out, and she opened her eyes one more time to see Memory Draco staring at the purple vibrator reverently before swiping the slick off and licking it.

“*Fuck...*” she moaned, and Draco felt her topple over one more time, this time finally pulling him with her. Draco spent himself quickly. He had the presence of mind to pull both himself and her vibrator out of her body just as the memory ended and the pensieve kicked them out.

They landed in a heap on the floor of the Magical Objects Vault, her clothes strewn about and the vibrator clattering into the corner as Draco let go of it to break their fall. Hermione collapsed on top of him, still naked, and shaking a little. Draco reached up to grab his wand from the ledge, and he waved it to clean them up before tossing it aside. He wrapped his arms around her and felt her nestle herself into him.

Gods but he loved this part the most: the very end, where she turned herself over to him so sweetly. Her mind stilled and instinct just took over as she buried herself into him.

He rocked her a little, feeling all the tension slowly drain out of her as the shaking stopped and her breathing evened out.

“Hermione,” he whispered.

She said nothing, but just sighed and nestled in harder. It was as though she was trying to wrap herself around Draco’s heart.

Draco knew she had done that a long time ago.

After several long minutes he felt her pull back and look at him with a hazy expression. "That was..."

She sighed again and put her head back on his chest, as Draco chuckled a little.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"Mmmhmm."

"And do you agree with me that your vibrators qualify as magical objects?"

At this, he heard one of his favorite sounds in the world: a tiny giggle that dissolved into her laughter, and soon she was clinging to him because she was laughing so hard.

He smiled broadly as her laughter died away, and she raised her head to look at him one more time.

"I don't know if they're magical, but I suppose you're right about one thing."

"What's that?"

"The Manor really does want us to live in sin."

AN: I recently reread the fourth book and realized that Harry and Dumbledore both sit in the courtroom watching Barty Crouch's trial. That told me that pensieves generate solid things inside of them that allow visitors to sit or lean. It struck me as odd, but then I started thinking about what else visitors could do in a pensieve together and that's how we got to this chapter.

I was tempted to write the memory in a memory scene, but this fic is long enough already, and I think that would make my brain melt.

That being said, please feel free to imagine what that must be like because you know Draco's going to try it.

Der Weihnachtsmarkt

Chapter 44: Der Weihnachtsmarkt

AN: Hermione gives Draco some homework.

Draco

Hermione's third attempt at the potion failed as well, but she was surprisingly upbeat about it.

"I'm so close. I really think I'll get it on the next try. There's just one more tweak to make. What I have slows the spread quite a bit, it just doesn't *stop*. I think I'll have it solved by the new year."

In Draco's view, this was fantastic news, because it meant the end of some of her stress was in sight. Hermione had agreed to take two days off for their trip, and Draco agreed that when they arrived back early on Christmas Eve morning she could start what would hopefully be her final round of the potion instead of putting it off until after Christmas. She explained that she would only need a couple hours for it early on Christmas Eve, and then she would have the rest of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to herself while it brewed. She swore she wouldn't do other work during that time and would allow herself to enjoy the holiday. She wouldn't have to go back to her lab until Boxing Day.

It was a compromise both of them could live with, especially in light of the bombshell opinion piece that had been published in *The Daily Prophet* the morning they were due to leave for Germany.

We Are Not Them

By Anonymous Contributor

I am a werewolf. I have lived on the fringes of wizarding society for most of my life, holding odd jobs when I could and begging for scraps when I couldn't. I was bitten as a child by Fenrir Greyback who turned so many of us before he was killed during the Second War. Because of my condition I never attended Hogwarts. I was forced to learn magic at home, under the watchful eye of my mother. We lived in the outskirts of a small village, living on the meager income my father had left to us before Grayback killed him and turned me.

With her son a werewolf, Mother could not work because she had to watch me. My condition was a secret, but I had her love and support, and I became a competent wizard despite the odds. When Mother died I sold the house and lived off of that money for as long as I could before entering the wizarding world and starting my transient existence. It's not been easy, especially in recent weeks when others of my kind have been terrorizing the wizarding community who are not afflicted with my condition.

Werewolves are people. We turn into monsters one night per month, but otherwise we are no different than you. Some of the things the rogue werewolves are asking for should have been instituted decades ago. The moment Wolfsbane was invented it should have become freely dispensed. I have had the pleasure of taking it once and only once – and it was the best full moon of my life because I kept my mind and slept in my own bed, albeit as a dog and not a human. Wolfsbane allows a werewolf to manage his condition. It serves a public good by keeping others safe. It should be readily available to any werewolf who wants it.

Something as simple as free Wolfsbane would have taken the fire out of the message I received from the leader of the New Pack. I do not know how they found me. I rarely disclose my condition to others, and I am unregistered. But somehow the New Pack identified me and asked for me to join their cause.

They wish me to commit violence to take what should have been ours. They want representation, rights, a potion, protection for their land, and even a separately functioning government. Some of those things I agree with and others I think go too far. But I do know this: I will not be violent, nor will the few others whose company I keep.

The New Pack is loud, but it is small. They are trying to rally the werewolves through rhetoric, promises, and even coercion. They are not unlike the Death Eaters who were the most extreme of the blood purists, willing to commit violence to create a society that they thought was superior to the one they lived in.

Many of you reading this had blood prejudices not that long ago and some of you still do. But most of you weren't Death Eaters. The violence scared you, disgusted you, and you kept your head down and stayed out of it as best you could.

The werewolves are the same. I think I can speak for the silent majority when I say that many of us agree with some of these principles, but we disagree with the method. Inciting violence to get our way is not the best path. Anything given to us through force can be taken away again, and the few sympathetic ears we have in the wizarding community will go deaf before listening to us again.

I write now to the Alpha of the New Pack: stop the violence. Negotiate as a man, not as a wolf. Find those in the Ministry who have ties to our community and let them be your mouthpiece to persuade those who would be against you. Stop harming innocent men and women just to prove your point.

I have turned down the New Pack, and I am not the only one. I beg you: please do not let the worst of my kind be the brush with which you paint the rest. We are not them.

In the few hours between *The Daily Prophet* being delivered and their portkey to Germany activating, Shackbolt responded to the article with enthusiasm, getting on the Wizing Wireless to

reminisce about Remus Lupin and other werewolves like him who had not aligned with Grayback. Shacklebolt also backed up the article's statement about the New Pack being rather small, comprised entirely of unregistered werewolves. Those werewolves the Ministry knew about – and even a few that were unregistered – had been interrogated and confirmed this point.

It improved Hermione's mood a great deal. The problem, which had felt insurmountable just a few weeks ago, now felt like it would be solved and solved soon. Hermione's potion would remove the leverage the New Pack had over the Ministry. Meanwhile, Harry and the aurors were in the process of rounding up those who were a part of it. They had apprehended three so far, though none of them had been able to disclose the name of the Alpha. He was known to them only during his transformations.

And so, with the sincere belief that it would all be over soon, Draco and Hermione made their way to the portkey office at the Ministry of Magic the evening of December 21 to catch their portkey to Berlin. They would be spending three full nights there and using it as their home base to apparate to markets in several different cities. Hermione was practically bouncing with excitement.

"Ooooh I can't wait! You packed your boots and gloves, right?"

"Yes."

"And your hat?"

"Yes."

"Scarves? Layers? The weather is hit or miss, and most of the markets are outdoors."

"I have all of it, sweetheart."

When their portkey landed at the German Ministry of Magic, they were greeted with an efficient "*Willkommen*" before being hustled off

to the apparition point. There, they picked up a map of all the permissible public apparition points in Germany and listened to a short, but serious lecture from a nearby guard about German apparition.

“You may apparate from your place of residence to any magical area. However, our laws are strict about apparition in the muggle world. If you are staying in the muggle world, you may only apparate between your hotel room and the points on the map. If you apparate anywhere else in the muggle world, we will know, and you will be apprehended and charged.”

The guard then took the details about their hotel for the German Ministry’s records.

“We’re staying at a place called the Waldorf Astoria,” said Draco, reading the piece of paper Ben had given him with all of the details for their trip.

“Excuse me?” asked Hermione, spinning around to stare at him.

“What? Is it not nice? I told Ben to find some place nice.”

“It’s extremely nice,” grumbled Hermione.

“Well perfect. That’s where we’re staying for the next three nights.”

She rolled her eyes, but once they were finally in their hotel room Hermione’s jaw dropped at the view, and Draco came up behind her to admire it too. They were in a suite, high up in something Hermione called a skyscraper, and they had a panoramic view over the city.

“Draco, this is fantastic,” she said enthusiastically.

Draco found himself agreeing with her wholeheartedly.

Draco discovered that muggle hotels were a bit slower than wizarding ones, but they were no less luxurious. Hermione found a movie on the television, before ordering room service for dinner. The

movie was engaging, the food was tasty, and the bed was large and decadent. Draco rather thought he could get used to this.

After a late night and lazy morning, Hermione declared it was time for their first market, and they apparated to Munich, quite close to Marienplatz Square. Draco's eyes widened when they turned the corner and saw it.

Dozens of stalls covered in green awnings and holiday lights were spread out before them. Muggles were bundled up and talking, laughing, and shopping as they moved from one to the next. Draco saw many of them were walking around with food and drink, while children darted from place to place. Not long after they arrived, live music began with tunes Draco thought he recognized as muggle holiday music. Hermione's eyes sparkled with excitement.

"Come on!" she said, grabbing his hand and pulling him into the crowd.

It was enormous and busy, but Draco soon decided it was positively delightful. Hermione looked like a child again, as she clutched his hand and pointed out things to him under her breath.

"This market is rather famous for the nativity scenes. I think I'd like to get a small one to take back! We need to look at all the options first though."

"Do you believe it then?" asked Draco, as they began their hunt for the perfect nativity scene to decorate Hermione's flat.

"Not really," she said. "My parents were rather religious though, at least until they found out I was a witch."

"You never told me that," he said, eyeing a stall with a remarkably realistic looking sheep. Even the fur was wool.

She shrugged. "Well magic turned everything on its head of course. But until I got my Hogwarts letter, we were weekly attendees at

Christ Church in Hampstead. I went to primary school there and everything.”

Draco found himself a bit fascinated by this. “Do you want to raise our children with muggle religion then?”

Hermione shot him a look. “I just said I’m not religious, but...”

“But...?” he prompted.

She shrugged. “Well it’s a cultural thing as much as a belief thing for me. The muggle religious buildings in England and the continent are stunning. Many are true masterpieces of muggle architecture. You don’t have to believe it to appreciate it. And muggle art is filled with religious stories from all over the world. I *would* like my children to be knowledgeable about it. If they go into a muggle church and see a stained glass window with a man, a boat, and several animals I want them to know what they are looking at.”

“Which is what?”

“Noah. *Honestly*.”

Draco grinned. “Tell me another then.”

“Alright. Maybe the window has a muggle knight fighting a dragon.”

“Muggles know about dragons?”

“Of course they don’t, they think they’re fictional,” she said. “It’s a *story*.”

“I would have no clue then.”

“It’s St. George and the dragon.”

“Give me one more sweetheart.”

“Fine, let me give you a simple one. Maybe there are three kings with gifts and a baby on the window.”

“The first throuple?” he asked innocently, and her jaw dropped as she smacked him playfully on the shoulder.

“You are *terrible*.”

“Well it’s only a guess. I wouldn’t have the foggiest idea.”

“It’s the three Magi Draco, *honestly*. They are all around us.” She gestured toward the stall in front of them.

“I see sheep, cows, something that looks like a place to store hay, and a woman in a headdress. No kings.”

“*He’s* a king,” she said, pointing to a figure in the back.

“That’s not a king, that’s a wizard in traditional garb. I have a cloak just like it that I’ll be wearing to Mother’s ball in a few weeks.”

She gave him a marvelous eye-roll at this, but she couldn’t stop the small smile that pulled on the corner of her mouth.

“Well be that as it may, I suppose the answer to your question is that I don’t need my children to be religious. I do, however, want them to be more informed about the muggle world than *you*.”

“Fair enough, sweetheart. Perhaps you can find a book for me to read on the topic. I would never wish to misinterpret muggle artistic renderings of The Great Flood.”

She spun around and saw his eyes were twinkling. “You little liar. You knew about Noah.”

“Ah, in fact, I knew about *Norah*. She was a witch from Mesopotamia who became very angry when her muggle husband started making eyes at another woman. She tried to curse him with a bolt of lightning, lost control of her weather charm, and caused quite a bit of

rain before it could be corrected. It's not my fault the muggles got the protagonist in the story wrong."

She was chuckling now. "You are so full of shit."

"I'm full of something, that's for sure. Something I'd really like to leave inside of you tonight."

"Christ."

"He's right there, if you'd like to buy him."

After a couple of hours their search for the perfect nativity scene concluded with a small set of olivewood figurines that were a bit abstract. Draco had to admit they were beautiful and more decorative than festive. It would look very nice in Hermione's flat or even the Manor, once they ousted Narcissa's furniture.

Late that afternoon they apparated to Nuremberg, where Draco got to see the magic of muggle holiday lights at night. He couldn't help but be charmed by it, especially as they lit Hermione's face.

Here they strolled through the booths with the famous bratwurst and glühwein, which Hermione loved though Draco found a bit sweet. She had been absolutely right: it was festive, romantic, and fun to pretend to be muggles in this place. Hermione hadn't looked this relaxed in weeks.

That night they returned to their hotel rather late, and Hermione approached him a bit cautiously as she made her way to bed. Draco saw she was holding something behind her back.

"What's that you're hiding from me sweetheart?"

She took a deep breath. "Your Christmas gift."

He raised an eyebrow. "You're not waiting until Christmas to give it to me?"

She pursed her lips a little. "Perhaps we can do it on Christmas, but there's some advanced planning that needs to go into it first. And you gave me my gift a little early, so I thought I could return the favor."

Draco was intrigued. "Alright. Come show me then."

She was starting to blush deeply, and Draco cocked his head to watch, but she walked toward him slowly. "It's this."

She held out something that looked like a large report, bound in a way that told Draco it was part of the Ministry archives. The very first thing he noticed was the "Classified" stamp across the top.

Then he read the title.

Observations and Analyses of the Space-Time Continuum and the Use of Time-Turners for Magical Self-Interaction

by Hermione J. Granger

Draco's heart started to pound.

"Sweetheart... what's this?"

"It's the report I wrote for the Ministry after medical school. I've used time-turners on a regular basis more than any other person alive in England today, and I agreed to write about my experiences when Kingsley issued it to me."

"And...?"

"And I need you to read it. Before I give you your Christmas gift."

Draco's silver eyes were boring into her hazel ones now. "What's my Christmas gift?" he whispered.

He already knew the answer, and fuck he couldn't believe she was going to do this. He had never asked. He never once thought she would go along with it. But there was only one reason she would be giving him this report to read.

"Your fantasy. A two-person threesome."

Goddammit.

Draco didn't know what to say. He licked his lips and just stared at her. She started to look a little uncomfortable.

"Is that... still something you want? Or were you joking?"

"I wasn't joking," he said quickly, wanting to reassure her. "I'm just stunned. Give me a moment."

She relaxed a little and watched him process this. She was willing to have a threesome with him. Draco had always wondered what it would be like, but he knew he was too covetous to ever really do it. That night of Secrets and Truths had been eye-opening when he finally landed on the only way he would ever allow himself to explore it. He had fantasized about it, especially once he learned Hermione actually had access to a time-turner. But after watching her under the cloak he saw how careful she was with it. He never thought she would be willing to break the rules like this.

"Tell me about the report," he said.

She lifted one eyebrow. "Well I'm willing to have a threesome with you, but I don't want to destroy the space-time continuum while we do it. I've put a lot of thought into it, and there are some notes in there for how I think it could be done as safely as possible. Reading the report is a prerequisite if you want to be the one who turns."

"I do," he said quickly. He knew that most wizards would probably want two witches, but Draco wasn't lying when he said he wanted to have her twice.

She smiled a little. “Then happy reading. We can do it once your homework is complete.”

Draco read late into the night, marveling at his girlfriend's brilliance. She had recorded every interaction with herself that she had during medical school, and Draco learned quite a bit. She tried to avoid herself, but she concluded it wasn't required to keep the space-time continuum intact. The open question – and the thing she had never resolved even for herself – was what would happen if the future self didn't behave in precisely the same way the past self could recall.

Would changing something the past self recalled rip the space-time continuum in half or would life plod on without any concern for small variations? Was time linear or did it function with closed loops? Was there one timeline or an infinite number? Were those who time-turned predestined to do so or was it always an aberration of what had occurred in the past?

These were the questions that used to be explored in the Time Room in the Department of Mysteries, and according to Hermione they had never been resolved to anybody's satisfaction. Before Hermione Granger, most of the Unspeakables who studied time would make very small jumps – just fifteen or thirty minutes into the past. Occasionally they would jump a couple of hours, and that was what Hermione had been permitted to do at Hogwarts.

But once left to her own devices, she started jumping for half days and the occasional whole day during medical school, and she concluded it was perfectly fine. She theorized one could go back weeks or even years and relive those portions of one's life, though she didn't recommend it. The time-turner in her possession only went backward, not forward, and every time she turned back she had to wait for the present to catch up again.

Hermione also theorized that human bodies continued to age regardless of what time they were in. That meant Hermione was biologically eighteen months older than her official age. She had

spent so much time turning back hours for Hogwarts and then medical school that she had spent well over a year in the past. Draco's heart sank when he read her theory that her natural death date would be eighteen months earlier than it otherwise would have been had she not time-turned. She was twenty-five officially, but approaching twenty-seven biologically.

She was still young, but this news gave Draco plenty of motivation to marry her and make those babies as quickly as possible. And he hoped to limit her future forays into the past to encounters with him, like the threesome they would be trying soon. They would age together that way.

They discussed Hermione's report as they walked around Cologne the following day, marveling at the interior of the enormous muggle cathedral that dominated the skyline while they did it. It was right next to the market they would soon be visiting, and Draco had to confess he was taken aback by how stunning it was.

"You read my notes then?" she asked, as they strolled arm in arm.

"Yes," he said, "and I think you're right that it's risky, but I'm eager to try to it."

She hummed a little at this. "Your biggest challenge will be keeping your future self quiet until your past self leaves. You're quite vocal during..." she dropped her voice to a whisper, "sex."

"I could limit the thing my future self says to 'oh fuck,' if you'd like," said Draco at a perfectly normal volume.

Hermione, unsurprisingly, gave him a scandalized little shove on the arm, and he grinned at her.

"Hush Draco, we are in a muggle church for heaven's sake! And I'd be more inclined to tape your future self's mouth shut so you can't say anything at all."

“What I would like to know is how your future self always behaved perfectly around your past self. I know you didn’t speak much, but your past encountered your future quite a bit.”

Hermione sighed. “I tried to keep it limited and innocuous. I don’t necessarily remember things like whether my future self tucked her hair behind her ear or whether she yawned or wrinkled her nose when walking near my past self. That being said...”

Draco could tell she was debating whether to tell him something or not. He waited her out.

“Well let’s just say that I *personally* think that small changes known only to the time-turned individual wouldn’t be catastrophic. I turned so much that I have always suspected I wasn’t perfect when my future self had to do it all over again. I’ve never actively tested it though, and most of the unspeakables who used to research it thought it could be destructive. That’s why they developed rules about not being seen by the past self. I don’t necessarily agree with that theory, but the consequences if I’m wrong are too severe to risk it, so I never tried. That’s why my future self barely spoke to my past self except to say my identifying phrase.”

Draco nodded slowly. After reading her report he came to the same conclusion. Hermione encountered her future self often enough that the notion her future self behaved in *exactly* the same way twice didn’t seem realistic to Draco. If she did then it meant time was predetermined, and nothing about that was particularly comforting. Draco preferred to believe there was free will, and small changes that a time-turned individual made that were noticed only by himself wouldn’t cause such a huge ripple effect that anything serious would happen.

Still, Draco now understood why a threesome was tricky. Even if his future self said nothing at all, his past self would have explicit memories of his future self doing any number of dirty things.

“So if my future self doesn’t come at exactly the precise time my past self remembers, we could destroy the space-time continuum?”

“Theoretically,” said Hermione. “It would be best if your future self didn’t come at all until your past self leaves to turn back.”

At this Draco pulled her close and whispered in her ear. “That’s impossible. I’ll be filling both sides of you at exactly the same time. You know I can do it.”

She shuddered, but nodded, and Draco saw she was rather pink. That was what she wanted too.

“Draco,” she whispered.

“Hmmm?”

“It excites me, but...”

He lifted an eyebrow.

“It makes me nervous too. You’re larger than my... *you know.*”

Draco cupped her face. “I know. But I’ve been in both places now. I promise I will be studying up while you’re back in the lab tomorrow to make sure I know what I’m doing so I don’t hurt you. I haven’t stopped thinking about it since you gave me that report to read.”

She gave him her slow smile, and he leaned in for a deep kiss.

“Draco, if we destroy the world by doing this...”

“At least we’ll go out with a bang, right?”

She grinned. “You’re terrible.”

“You’re the one enabling my fantasy.”

“I suppose that’s true. It’s highly illegal.”

“It’s highly sexy.”

She rolled her eyes at him, but she was still grinning as she tugged his hand and pulled him out the door of the church and around the corner to the market.

“Oh Draco,” she sighed as she looked at it happily. “Today I want to find an ornament. Come on.”

They spent the afternoon browsing booths. With so many selections to choose from it took several hours to find Hermione’s favorite. Eventually they settled on a simple Christmas tree in white ceramic. Hermione had their names and the date added in gold, and she wrapped it up gently as she pocketed it to bring it back to England with them.

They spent the remainder of the day picking up small gifts for their friends, Narcissa, and the elves. They had quite a collection of consumable muggle treats that weren’t common in England, but for Rosie Hermione found a small, elf-sized tea set that reminded her of their lunches and teas together. The muggles had clearly intended it for children, but it was surprisingly elegant, and Hermione thought it was perfect for her friend.

That night, Hermione slipped into bed, and Draco pulled her close, inhaling the scent of her.

“Draco, I had a wonderful trip,” she said. “Thank you so much.”

He smiled and kissed her. “I’m glad you had fun. I did too. This was a great idea.”

“Maybe we can come back again someday.”

“We could make it a tradition.”

She looked at him with wide eyes. “Really?”

He nodded. "Of course. I want to spend my life with you, Hermione. We should make our own traditions. This was a fantastic break, and we barely scratched the surface. I think we should do it every year. It's family friendly too, so we won't have to stop when we have children."

She smiled broadly and rolled on top of him, kissing him frantically.

He laughed as she peppered kisses down his throat before pulling back.

"I love you so much Draco Malfoy."

His breath caught as he stared at her in the low light of their room. She was beautiful like this, her curls rioting and her eyes sparkling. Draco reached up to cup her face.

"I love you too, Hermione Granger. And I love this: doing life with you, starting traditions, just enjoying what we have together."

She gave him her sweetest smile and leaned down to kiss him again, which Draco immediately deepened. It wasn't long before he teased her clothes off and rolled her over so he could kiss every inch of her. He did it slowly, ardently, before he finally buried himself inside of her.

He didn't take his lips off of her as he rolled his hips and coaxed out those pretty gasps and deep sighs he loved to hear so much.

"Give me a gentle one," he whispered. "We'll be dirty soon enough. But tonight... be sweet for me."

And she was. She was so sweet Draco's heart hurt as he felt her come apart for him. This was everything he wanted in the world, right here.

Draco finished a moment later, and wrapped her up tight after cleaning them up.

“Not too sore?”

“No,” she whispered. “Not at all.”

“Good. You need to save your energy for what’s to come.”

She hid her grin at this, and Draco chuckled before turning serious again.

“Hermione, there’s something I want you to promise me.”

“What’s that?”

“Whenever you time-turn from now on I want you to promise me that I can spend the same amount of time in the past as you.”

She furrowed her brow. “Why?”

He stroked her face. “You’re more than two years older than me now. Our birthdays put you almost nine months older than me, and you gained another eighteen months with your time-turner.”

“I know,” she said softly.

“I know witches usually outlive wizards, but I don’t want our age gap to get any bigger than it already is. I just... I couldn’t stand it if you died years before I did because of all the time you’ve spent in the past.”

Her expression turned serious. “I understand. That’s why I only use it for something important.”

“I know you do. I just want us to keep up with each other. If you need to go back in time, then I want to do it too. I’ll just hang out in the Library or something, but at least our age gap won’t keep growing.”

She looked at him with something like wonder.

“Alright,” she said softly. “You can keep up with me.”

“Thank you, sweetheart. That’s all I ask.”

Draco's Playground

Chapter 45: Draco's Playground

AN: Draco is both sweet and spicy.

If explicit kink is not your thing, stop reading once you get to the ***

AN2: I've finished writing the final chapters, and I'm in the process of cleaning them. I've been posting 1 chapter per day, but I will try to work in a double update sometime this weekend. That means I'm anticipating the final chapter (which is a bit of an epilogue) to go up on Monday. I appreciate all of the comments and support! I'm bad at responding, but I read every single one!

Hermione

Draco and Hermione returned to England early on Christmas Eve, after taking a morning portkey back to the British Ministry of Magic. Hermione gave Draco a kiss farewell, as he took their luggage through the floo to Malfoy Manor, and Hermione went to the Playground for what would hopefully be her last attempt at the potion.

She was so close now that she could taste it. She spent a couple of hours preparing ingredients and creating her timeline for this batch, pleased that she told Draco the correct thing and wouldn't have to work on it for the rest of Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. She had to admit she was tempted to get to work on her backlog of dark artifacts she needed to curse-break, but for once she listened to Draco and decided to take a real break. She had earned it, and in five days the potion should be complete. Once she was back at work on Boxing Day she could begin to get caught up. Mercifully, this was

the slowest time of year for the Ministry so nothing new had arrived in her inbox while she was in Germany.

She was finished with everything she needed to do by lunch, and she arrived back at Malfoy Manor to find Rosie hopping up and down with excitement.

“Miss Hermy is needing to get ready! Master Draco is having a surprise!”

“Ready how?” asked Hermione, though she was already changing into the thick jumper, jeans, and boots Rosie had laid out for her.

“He is whisking you away tonight!”

Hermione looked at Rosie curiously. “But we just got back from Germany!”

“Yes, Miss, but Master Draco is saying he is wanting to spend one more night with you in a special place. He is saying you is taking the rest of today and tomorrow off.”

“Well I suppose that’s true,” said Hermione.

“Master Draco is saying you is coming back for Christmas dinner tomorrow. He is wanting you to meet him in the Dining Room when you is ready.”

“Alright then Rosie, lead the way.”

Draco’s eyes were sparkling when she entered the Dining Room, and despite her best efforts he refused to disclose the surprise.

“Always so impatient, princess. You’ll know soon enough.”

Hermione ate lunch quickly before picking up the small overnight bag Rosie had packed for her and following Draco to the foot of the lane so they could apparate.

“Ready?” he asked.

She nodded, and he grabbed her hand, pulling her through the darkness. A moment later she landed on grass and gasped as she looked around her. They were on a tall hill, almost a cliff, at the edge of the sea. The wind was brisk and the air salty. Hermione shivered a little, grateful for the thick wool jumper Rosie had insisted she wear under her coat.

The scenery was stunning, but there was nothing else around them except for some crumbling ruins nearby.

“Where are we Draco?”

He looked at her and said, “Jeanine’s Safehouse is located at Driftwood Point, Somerset.”

Hermione’s eyes widened as a large stone farmhouse materialized before her very eyes. It was old and handsome, with a slate roof and window boxes that somehow had flowers spilling out of them, despite the fact that it was December.

Magic of course.

Hermione looked at Draco in amazement, but he just nodded encouragingly, as she approached the house cautiously. The path to the door was gravel, and as soon as Hermione crossed the wards she felt warmth as though it was early summer.

“There are seventeen and up wards on the outer boundaries of the property,” said Draco casually. “The house has some amazing views, but of course it’s on this cliff. The wards will keep any children inside of its boundaries so they can play outside safely. They won’t be able to cross without an adult escort.”

Hermione found herself smiling at this, remembering that Draco intended this to be a house that was safe enough for his children. Of course he would think of something like that.

They entered through a blue wooden door, and Hermione couldn't help but smile broadly when she saw the interior. It was rustic, with a wide plank wood floor and beams on the ceiling, but it was very clean and comfortable. There was a fire roaring in the fireplace, and she saw a large wooden table and kitchen through an archway ahead of her.

Draco said nothing as Hermione walked around slowly, taking it all in. She walked through the archway to the kitchen and found something surprisingly muggle, though the wall nearest the sea was mostly windows for the view.

"Oh it's beautiful," she sighed.

Draco came up behind her and slipped an arm around her waist. "I only knew you for a couple hours that night, but it reminded me of you."

Hermione just nodded, a bit too emotional to speak.

"Come along, let me show you something," he said, tugging on her hand and pulling her toward a small room on the other side of the foyer. Hermione opened the door to find a study, filled to the brim with books.

"They're all muggle!" she said with delight, as she started scanning the titles.

"I actually have a confession about that," said Draco, rubbing the back of his neck a bit awkwardly.

"Oh?"

"Yes... I stole many of these from your parents' house after that night I met you. I had no idea how to start building a muggle library, but your shelf was filled with books that I assumed Jeanine would enjoy. I bought this house within a few weeks of meeting you, and I brought Florrie with me one day to help move the books from their house to

live here instead. I tried my best to make copies to leave behind on your bookshelf, but I'm not sure how accurate they were. I know I should have returned these to you after the war, but it would have meant confessing I had tried to kidnap your parents, and I told myself the copies were probably good enough that we would never have to have that conversation. Then once I realized Jeanine was you, I knew I would finally have a chance to explain myself and give them back to you someday."

Hermione felt a lump rising in her throat.

"I ended up selling their house for them without ever going back inside of it," she said quietly. "I just couldn't bring myself to return after what I did. I abandoned everything, and I assumed all of my books were lost during the sale, but you saved them."

"I *stole* them, but yes... they've been safe all this time."

Hermione slipped her arms around his shoulders. "Thank you for stealing my books, Draco."

He gave her a soft smile. "You're welcome sweetheart. I think some part of me always knew this house was supposed to be yours."

He kissed her for several long moments before breaking away and tugging on her hand. "Come one, let me show you the bedrooms."

He led her out of the study into a small hall that had two bedrooms and a moderately-sized hall bath at the very end to share. They were both well proportioned and decorated in blue and white.

"I chose this place for a lot of reasons," said Draco. "The privacy, the view, the space. But I also knew Mother might be living here with us, and I wanted as much separation as I could give us. She would have been down here."

He tugged on her hand and then led her to a small staircase to the upper level. There was a surprisingly large landing at the top with

something that looked like a den and then another hallway with two bedrooms, a bathroom, and a door at the very end, which Draco opened to reveal the master suite.

“This would have been for us,” he said simply.

Hermione looked around and smiled at what she could see. There was a whole wall of windows with a spectacular view over the sea, and an attached bathroom that was moderately sized and surprisingly modern. The room wasn't nearly as big as what Draco occupied at Malfoy Manor, but it was cozy, charming, and more than enough for two people.

Hermione opened one door to find a closet and another door that led directly to one of the other bedrooms on that floor.

“What's this?” she asked curiously, as she walked in. She came to a halt as she stared at the cot that was obviously intended for a baby. There was a double bed in the room too, and she hadn't noticed the cot when passing by from the hallway.

She spun around and looked at Draco, who was reddening slightly. “It's been here for years. I didn't change very much after I discovered who you were.”

“You would have...” she started a bit faintly.

Draco sighed and sank down on the bed, patting it for Hermione to join him.

“I was afraid Potter would lose the war, and we would be in hiding for years, possibly decades,” he said quietly. “After I bought this house, I convinced Rosie to go to the Furniture Vault for me and keep it quiet from Father. Florrie and I moved everything in one night when the Dark Lord was traveling. I knew that if I fled it would be difficult to access the vaults or return to the magical world without Father or the Dark Lord finding out about it, so I did everything I could to prepare in advance. I even converted much of the gold in the Heir's Vault to

pounds and stashed it here so we would never have to enter the magical world again. There's a small muggle village nearby I intended to use for provisions. I'll admit that there was a tiny part of me that wanted the Dark Lord to win just so I would have the excuse to flee here with Mother and hopefully you. At the time my prejudices made me believe I wouldn't be able to marry you, but I was still prepared to be with you for the long haul. I thought we might want a family together someday, especially if we were in hiding for a long time. I prepared a nursery for us that summer because I thought it might be my only chance to do it without raising suspicion. The Manor is my legacy, and I've always known that. But *this* is the house that I picked for you and for any children we might have together. I fell in love with you that night. I've been in love with you for years, Hermione."

Hermione nestled in. "And now? What do you think of this place now?"

"It's yours," he said simply. "I grew up, the Dark Lord lost, and I almost sold this place a few times, but something told me to hang onto it. Now that you're in my life, I want the Manor to be where we live. I've realized that home for me is wherever you are, and the Manor is still my ancestral birthright. It's where Mother lives, and it's the place our children should know as theirs. But we can keep visiting here. It's beautiful and private, and it will be yours if you marry me. I originally bought it for you and our children, so it's only right that you have it."

Hermione looked around and realized with a jolt that she *could* see herself living here. But he was also right that home was wherever Draco was. They were in this place together, so right now the Safehouse was home. But when they returned to the Manor tomorrow their home would move too. It wasn't a place, it was a person.

"I love it, Draco. And I know I've been fighting you about putting this in the engagement contract, but you've convinced me. I'm still going to fight you about the gold, but I'll accept this place. You're right that

if anything ever happens between us, it's perfect. And I do want to keep visiting. The views up here are stunning."

Draco smiled broadly. "The views are extraordinary, you're right. But I'll confess, there's another reason I brought you here."

"Oh?"

Draco pointed to the ceiling, and Hermione looked up to find something that looked like a pipe attached to one of the beams, suspended over the floor.

She furrowed her brow.

"What's that for?"

"For this," and Draco pulled out his wand and waved it. Some thin ropes came soaring into the room, and Hermione stared at them.

"Draco, is that..."

"The Weasley's interpretation of shibari ropes, yes," he said.

Hermione's heart started pounding, but she glanced at Draco and saw his eyes were nearly black as he watched her contemplate them.

"Tell me," she said.

Draco exhaled. "It took them some time to work out the magic. This is a prototype that needs some testing. The critical difference between this and regular ropes is that the patterns tie for me. You know shibari is a lot more complicated than a basic *incarcerous* like we can use for standard bondage. Even wizards have to do shibari manually, and it takes time and a lot of practice to get it right. The Weasley's version, however, is preprogrammed for... *several* different levels of play. The basic single and double column ties are part of it of course, but they also have embedded various aerial ties for suspension."

“You said it needs testing.”

“I did.”

“And I take it you want to test it on me?”

He looked at her seriously. “You know I’ll never ask you to do something that makes you uncomfortable. But I did get the impression that you were interested in shibari, and that pipe is perfect for aerial ties if we want to try them. It’s always been here, I just reinforced it. I didn’t promise the Weasleys anything other than a conversation with you about it. It’s up to you.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “So shibari tonight and time-turning tomorrow?”

He smirked. “This place is completely private. The only other person who can get in here is Florrie because she’s bound to me, but she knows not to disturb us. Maybe this can be our kinky sex playground.”

“I thought the second room in the Master Suite is supposed to be for kinky sex,” Hermione quipped.

“Hmmm I’m not opposed to having one there too, but maybe we should take some inspiration from this place and set it aside to be a nursery instead. Having it next door to our room would be convenient, yes? Then we can come here for kinky sex in private or The Ruby Slipper when you want an audience. I could have you screaming for me in here, and nobody would ever hear us.”

Hermione was feeling so many things right now she could hardly name them all: desire, need, love, humor. Finally the word she was looking for crossed her mind.

Perfection

“That’s perfect,” she whispered.

A familiar, possessive look flashed across Draco's face before he lowered it to catch her lips. It started light but Hermione knew it would turn heated in a moment, and sure enough she was right. Draco slipped his hands to the bottom of her jumper and tugged on it. It came off easily, and soon her bra, pants, and knickers followed, and Hermione found herself being pushed back down on the bed, with Draco rolling on top of her.

"Nervous?" he whispered.

"A little," she acknowledged. "You've never done this before."

"Sweetheart, we passed things I haven't done before a while ago."

"Oh?"

"Pensieve sex, public orgasms, anal play..."

Her eyes widened. "You had never done that before?"

He just shook his head.

"Then why...?"

"I've always wanted to. I fantasized about it for years, but it takes both parties being interested in it, along with trust and preparation. I usually only repeated partners a few times at The Ruby Slipper before one of us moved on, and it never felt right. You were my first."

"I had no idea," she whispered.

He just smiled. "Well you were. And you're about to give me another new fantasy tonight aren't you? I can't believe I'm this lucky."

"You can release me if it's too much?"

"Immediately. George knows to embed safewords into all of his products like this."

Hermione assumed as much, but it was a relief to hear it.

“Alright then. Let’s try this prototype.”

“We’ll start easy,” he said, as he grabbed the ropes and placed them on her body. “Put your hands behind your back.”

Draco helped her adjust to the right position, and then he muttered a few words under his breath. The ropes began to lace themselves all around her, crossing her shoulders and back and stomach, outlining her breasts and core. She was both more covered and more exposed this way, and it took only moments before the bindings tightened, and Hermione felt her heart start to pound. The ropes weren’t cutting off her circulation, but she felt her blood flow coalescing in her most sensitive areas.

“Fuck,” Draco muttered, as he stepped back to stare at her with wide eyes.

Hermione looked at him, but he wasn’t staring at her face as he quickly disrobed, stripping down until he was fully naked too. He stroked himself slowly as he walked around the bed, looking at her from every angle.

“You’re stunning,” he said.

Hermione felt that familiar flush of pleasure at his praise, and she instinctively tried to wriggle toward him a little, but the ropes sensed it and tightened ever so slightly to redirect her back to her supine position.

“Oh my God, they’re responsive...” she said, as her eyes closed for a moment.

“Mmmm, yes. That was another one of my ideas. They’ll keep you precisely where I want you. They will... *train you* to stay just as you are. They’re gentle, but they won’t let you move until I allow it.”

Hermione groaned and her pulse spiked at this. She was both very nervous and even more turned on. She had no control whatsoever like this.

Draco's keen eyes missed nothing.

"You're halfway to an orgasm already aren't you? The ropes are making you more sensitive, and now that you know you aren't escaping it's getting into your head isn't it? Just being tied up like this and bare for me is all it takes."

Hermione swallowed, but nodded slowly.

Draco leaned forward and breathed on her breasts. The hot air made Hermione groan and wriggle again, before the ropes corrected her. He flicked his tongue out, and again she found herself being repositioned by the ropes that held her in place. Heat was flooding her now, as she began to appreciate just how vulnerable she was like this, just how much control Draco could exert over her.

Her heart rate sped up, and her breathing grew shallow. This was more intense than any type of bondage they had done before, and all she could feel was the blood thudding in her most sensitive areas. Draco pulled back for a moment and gave her a piercing look.

"Alright?" he asked.

She had no words, but just closed her eyes and nodded.

"Use your word if you need it," he reminded her.

Hermione had no intention of doing this, but she appreciated the check-in. The sensations were stronger, the corrective ropes more restrictive than she had ever experienced, and the word 'prototype' made her more nervous than she cared to admit. She knew how brilliant George Weasley was, but it still took all of her Gryffindor courage to be the first person to field test this. It wasn't like the wax, which was ready for sale the first time they used it.

Hermione exhaled and forced her heart rate to slow just a little. She opened her eyes to find Draco staring at her intently, and he gave a little nod to himself.

“Good girl.”

His fingers began to outline the patterns of the rope, and only now did Hermione appreciate just how prominent it made her intimate parts. It was like she was on display for him, and the look on his face was nearly transcendent as he slowly opened her legs and settled himself between them.

“You’re exquisite,” he whispered, as he lowered his head and breathed on her core. Instinctively, Hermione flexed, and then the ropes did too, and she heard herself make an indistinct noise as she was pulled back into place.

“I’m going to give you one like this,” he said. “You’ve earned it for doing this with me. But tell me – are you willing to try a suspension too?”

“I –”

Hermione’s breathe caught in her throat. She was already terribly overstimulated, and he had barely touched her. The ropes were doing his job for him.

She couldn’t find her words, so she just nodded, and Draco shuddered in return.

“You’re so good for me. We’ll do an easy one. You’ll be beautifully open for me, but the ropes won’t have to carry all of your weight unless you want them to. It will help you stay a bit grounded this first time.”

“Alright,” she whispered.

“Perfect girl,” he murmured, and then he lowered his head between her thighs and began to lick.

Immediately Hermione squirmed, and again the ropes corrected her. It was maddening, delicious, terrible, and wonderful all at once. Even when her wrists and ankles were bound, she could still move her hips, but with this she couldn't. The ropes served to hold her still, and all she could do was take it.

That familiar pressure was building, and she knew she had to have something inside of her – she had never once come with external stimulation only. But something about the ropes were making that stimulation stronger, harder, and she began to shake as the ropes began to tighten.

“Draco...” she gasped. “I might... I'm gonna...”

He lifted his head to look at her a bit incredulously, but whatever he saw on her face made him immediately lower his head again.

“Come for me like this,” he demanded. “Do it angel, show me how good you are...”

She felt him give a great suck on her clit, and then to her shock the counterpressure from the ropes finally pushed her over, and she broke with a cry. Draco immediately dipped his head to capture the wetness that came out of her, and he groaned in delight at the taste.

Hermione was trembling, both broken and yet unsatisfied. She had orgasmed, but it hadn't been hard enough, not nearly hard enough for how stimulated she was feeling.

“I need you in,” she groaned. “Please Draco, get in me...”

“I will in a moment, I promise,” he said, as he touched the ropes and muttered something under his breath. Immediately they fell away.

“Stand for me sweet girl,” he said, and he pulled her to her feet and grabbed the ropes. Hermione was shaking, and her knees buckled a bit. Draco half led, half carried her to the middle of the room, and then directed the ropes to suspend her.

He stepped back to watch, and soon Hermione found herself tied up again, her arms snug against her sides. The ropes looped around the pipe on the ceiling and then all the way down one leg and halfway down the other. She felt them tilting her sideways, forcing her legs wide open. They raised her just a bit so that her toes on her half-bound leg barely skimmed the floor, while the other was held fully in the air. Much of her weight was being borne by the ropes, but she could touch with that one foot. It grounded her a little, just like Draco said. It gave her a little security. And the ropes had stopped above her knee. If she wanted to bend her leg at the knee to be fully aerial, she could do it.

It was the tiniest bit of control that he had afforded her, but she was grateful for it. She exhaled and forced herself to relax.

“Fuck, just look at you,” whispered Draco in amazement.

Again, he didn’t touch her right away, but he walked a full circle around her, his keen eyes taking in every part of her and stroking himself while he did it.

“This is all mine, Granger,” he said, his eyes now glued to her core. “That cunt of yours is throbbing for me, isn’t it?”

Hermione just groaned. He was right of course. Again, the ropes were overstimulating her, and this time she truly couldn’t begin to move. She was being held in such an odd position that she didn’t have the capacity to fight the ropes, not even a little bit.

Draco approached her now and squeezed her arse firmly before tweaking one of her nipples. Hermione shuddered.

“You’ve always been mine,” he said, “but when I have you like this... fucktoy doesn’t even come close to describing it.”

Hermione felt herself blush with both longing and a little shame. Six months ago she never would have believed that she would allow somebody to do this to her, let alone a former Death Eater. And yet here she was, entirely at his mercy, trussed up and spread wide for him to do whatever he wanted. She knew he was right, and the term ‘fucktoy,’ didn’t do it justice.

“Draco...”

“Beg, angel,” he said. “Beg me to fuck you just like this. Beg me to fill your cunt.”

She was shaking from both anticipation and a little discomfort as the ropes dug into her to support her weight. She was still dissatisfied from the tiny orgasm she had had previously, and she needed it. She needed it so badly.

“Please Draco... please do it.”

“Do what?” and he gently swiped at her core, which caused another tremor to go through her

“Fuck me,” she groaned. “Fuck me just like this. Inside of me, *please*.”

“You’re so needy. I can do whatever the fuck I want with you.”

“Yes, *please*...”

“As much as I want, as hard as I want, as long as I want...”

“Yes...”

He made a positively animalistic sound, as he suddenly grabbed her body to steady her and then thrust into her without further ado. Hermione groaned in relief as she felt him start to pummel her. It was

a bit different like this, being suspended in the air and sideways while he was standing upright, but it was no less filling. It felt like no time at all that she was shaking hard, the ropes tightening to hold her still for Draco's exclusive use.

"*Fuck!*" she cried, as she shattered once, this time much harder than she had before, but Draco didn't let up.

"Again..." he said, maintaining the same pace without any pause whatsoever.

Hermione groaned, but her body was out of control now, as she was rapidly approaching another. She had a feeling she knew where he was going to send her with this. It was almost inevitable really, with the intensity of the bindings and the urgency with which Draco was pumping into her. Sure enough, a moment later she crested again, and now she started to feel that odd, out-of-body experience begin.

She was muttering incoherently, but she could still hear Draco, who was talking to her, commanding her, degrading her.

"Fucking take it, Granger. That cunt is so greedy isn't it? You're gonna take my cum so good, and I'm gonna make you keep it in there all night... *fuck...*"

It was so filthy, but his words penetrated her brain while her own responses couldn't. Before she knew it that pressure built for what she was sure would be the final time, and then the world felt like it wrenched in two, as he pushed her into that odd place harder than he had ever done it before.

Hermione was barely conscious. She didn't notice Draco coming a moment later with stuttering gasps or when he gathered her to him and released the bindings to lower her. She didn't feel herself curling into him as he murmured words of praise, adoration, and awe at how well she had done, how beautifully she had performed for him.

Hermione was in that strange space where there was no time and no words and no meaning. All she could feel was a tingling of her skin, and the warmth of Draco's as she nestled him with her eyes closed.

Hermione didn't know if it was a few minutes later or hours when Draco's voice finally penetrated the stillness in her brain.

"...so beautiful like that. How did I get so lucky? What did I do to deserve you?"

He was rubbing soothing patterns on her back, and after a long while she realized he was rubbing something into her skin. It felt like some sort of lotion or salve. Hermione gave a deep sigh and settled in a bit more.

"Draco?"

"Shhh. Take all the time you need."

Hermione allowed herself to relax into him, and it was only now that she realized they were on the floor, he had pulled her into his lap, and he was rocking her a little bit as he massaged the salve into her. She felt an odd dampness between her legs.

"You weren't serious, were you?"

"Hmmm?"

"About keeping it in me all night?"

She felt, rather than saw him grin. "What do you think?"

"It's very messy. I don't think I can sleep like this."

"Well humor me through dinner then. I'll draw you a bath before bed."

"Alright," she said. She was really in no state to argue because she felt an odd lump in her throat rise. She tried to suppress the small

sob that escaped her, but she couldn't quite do it.

"Sorry," she said in a shaky voice.

"Don't ever be sorry," he said firmly. "You were an absolute dream just now. I'm not surprised this crash is intense."

Hermione nodded a little and just let herself feel it: the emotions, the highs, the lows, the incredible sensations Draco had drawn out of her this evening. The tears tracked down her cheeks until finally, at long last, she the urge to cry passed, and her body slumped against him.

"Draco?"

"Hmmm?"

"Thank you for loving me."

She felt him tense just a little, and she instinctively knew that he was struggling not to get emotional too.

"I'll always love you, Hermione."

Observations of the Space-Time Continuum

Chapter 46: Observations of the Space-Time Continuum

AN: My brain melted while writing this chapter.

You know what's coming next. If that's not your thing, skip Draco's section and start with Hermione's.

Draco

The rest of Christmas Eve passed in a haze of cuddles by the roaring fire downstairs; a hearty dinner of roast chicken and root vegetables with one of the nicer bottles of wine from Draco's cellar; and finally a lazy bath filled with potions to reduce the soreness between Hermione's legs. Draco had pushed Hermione harder than ever, and he knew Christmas morning would take her even further than that. He could tell she was nervous but also excited about what was to come, and so was he.

Draco hadn't been exaggerating when he told Hermione he had barely stopped thinking about the time-turner ever since she gave him the report to read. For the next several nights he had stayed awake much later than her, turning the things he had learned about time over in his head and considering the best and safest way to do it. He had also spent the morning Hermione was back in her lab studying up on positions they could use and coming up with the best way to enjoy this without injuring her or forcing himself remember too many things when he turned time and did it all over again.

It took hours of planning, but he finally settled on what he wanted to do, and he eagerly nudged her awake Christmas morning.

“Rise and shine sweetheart. Happy Christmas!”

“Happy Christmas Draco,” she said, with a yawn and sleepy smile.

Draco explained that they would be opening gifts from other people once they returned to the Manor.

“This morning though, it’s *my* Christmas gift.”

Hermione gave him a shy smile, but nodded. He could tell she was nervous, and he was too – but he decided to ease them both into it with something light and sweet before they really got started.

“I’m going to grab our breakfast tray from downstairs,” he said.

“Florrie was supposed to leave something out for us.”

She nodded, and he gave her a kiss on the nose as he rolled out of bed and grabbed his overnight bag to take with him. He dropped it in the connecting room next door before heading downstairs to find a large tray loaded down with food from the Manor.

He carefully levitated it back up the stairs and opened the door to their room to find Hermione sitting up in bed, her Christmas-patterned pajamas peeking out from the covers.

“You’re in theme,” he teased, as he settled the tray in front of her and poured some tea.

She just grinned. “I match you.”

“It’s true,” he acknowledge. “Florrie and Rosie are in cahoots with each other.”

Hermione and Draco had unpacked their bags the previous night to find matching holiday pajamas with tiny father Christmases all over them. Each bore a note saying it was a Christmas gift from their respective elf. Draco had looked at them askance and proposed they just sleep naked instead, but Hermione burst out into peals of laughter and overruled him. So here they were, in bed together on

Christmas morning wearing some of the least sexy pajamas Draco could possibly imagine.

As he watched his girlfriend nibble on her scone, however, Draco knew he wouldn't change a single thing.

Draco glanced at the watch he had strapped onto his wrist as soon as he was out of bed, and he started. They had taken longer to eat than he expected.

The moment Hermione set her teacup down for the final time, Draco banished the tray and pulled her close to him.

"We have fifteen minutes," he murmured, as he ran his hands under her top to palm her bare breasts underneath.

"Until what?" she breathed.

"You know," he said. "Let me get you ready, sweetheart."

She pulled back and worried her lip a little. "You're *sure* about this, Draco?"

He nodded firmly. "I have a plan."

"What is it?"

"I think it's best if you don't know," he said. "One of us will talk you through it as we go along."

He tilted his head to watch her face carefully as he said these words, and her pupils expanded as a flush bloomed on her cheeks.

"Oh I see how it is," he said softly.

"Hmmm?" she asked, trying to play it cool.

"You gave this to me for Christmas because you knew I was curious about it. But you want it just as much as I do, don't you?"

She bit her lip and said nothing.

"Don't you?" he insisted.

Slowly, she nodded her head, and he smirked.

"Good girl. Then let's get ready and see just how well you can take two of me."

She exhaled and closed her eyes for a moment to center herself, but when she opened them, he could see a determined glint on her face. Draco checked his watch one more time before pulling her in close for a deep kiss as he tugged on the edge of her pajama top.

She lifted her arms, and he swiftly pulled it off over her head as he pushed her back onto the bed and then pulled the covers off completely.

"Need some space," he said, as he moved back toward her to tease her pants off. Draco stripped unceremoniously as well, and soon he was on top of her, snogging her senseless.

"We're going to take such good care of you..." he murmured, as he moved down to suck on her throat, and again the use of the plural seemed to turn her on. She gasped a little and arched into him, wriggling her hips eagerly.

Draco trailed a finger down to take an exploratory swipe, and he found she was ready for him. He glanced at his watch and saw they had one minute, so he flipped her over and pulled her back down on top of him, as his hands continued to skate over her bare body.

This was perfect. He had followed his plan exactly as he conceived it so far. After much consideration he decided his past self would take the reins in getting Hermione warmed up with foreplay. He would make sure she was prepared and ready so that when all three of them were together they wouldn't have to waste any time. Draco fully intended to enjoy this, but there was no question that spending

ample amounts of time together as a threesome was risky. Anything that could reasonably be done by just one of him should be done that way to stay safe.

Draco suddenly heard a click, and the door to the adjoining bedroom opened.

"I solemnly swear I'm here for a fuck."

Hermione sat up and gasped, and Draco couldn't help but turn to look at himself too. He knew he shouldn't. Every moment of eye contact and word spoken had to be remembered. But he allowed himself this, as he saw his own large, hardened body approach the bed and sweep his eyes over Draco and Hermione naked and together.

He locked eyes with himself, and he was sure his expression was mirrored. It was the oddest thing, because he knew it was himself. And yet, it was himself as another person. Draco was surprised to feel a surge of possessive jealousy rise up for a moment, before he forced it back down.

It's just me. She's only going to be touched by me.

He knew this. He *knew* this. But fuck, he was a jealous bastard and always had been. This was his first foray into turning time, and Draco could scarcely believe he was doing it like this.

He forced his mind to still as Future Draco ran one hand over Hermione's back before settling onto the bed behind her. Draco made himself wrench his eyes to Hermione's face instead of staring at his future self over her shoulder.

"Are you ready for us?" he asked.

"Oh my God, yes ..."

Draco pulled her down for a searing kiss before releasing her and staring at her intently.

“Then let’s proceed. First, you’re going to suck me off, angel. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

Hermione took a shuddering breath, but nodded and scooted back, as Draco sat up a little.

“Take me all in,” he said. “Get on your knees and put your arse in the air while you do it so I can get that perfect view from behind.”

She adjusted herself and did as he said, leaning forward to lick his cock while presenting to Future Draco behind her.

Draco groaned as he felt her lips close around him, and he allowed his eyes to shutter closed, while he leaned back against the headboard.

This was fucking bliss, and this was exactly what he should be doing. He couldn’t see his past self this way. He could only hear a surprising smack of skin and then another as Hermione gasped before groaning.

Draco wasn’t exactly sure what his future self was doing to her, but he had an idea. Still, he refused to look as he focused on the feeling of Hermione’s small hot mouth all around him, until he heard Future Draco say, “Open that pretty throat, angel.”

Draco’s eyes flew open as he felt Hermione do it, and he couldn’t help but make eye contact with Future Draco over Hermione’s head. He watched as Future Draco’s face scrunched just a bit, as he shoved himself into her from behind. Hermione let out a deep moan, and then he began to rock.

Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck...

This was a bit different than his meticulous plan, but holy *Gods* was this incredible. Hermione did as instructed, and Future Draco's thrusting was causing Draco's cock to go down her open throat.

Draco wrenched his eyes away from his past self's face and stared down at his girlfriend between his legs.

"You like that don't you? You like being fucked into my cock just like this?" he groaned.

She made an indistinct noise, and Draco gritted his teeth.

"Come for us just like this. Do it, angel..." he said.

Draco felt a deep moan erupt from her and she shuddered, and the thrusting became a bit more erratic. Draco was barely hanging on, and he hissed as he pulled out from her mouth to give himself a moment while Past Draco fucked her through her orgasm.

"Gods," he muttered, as he stared down at her. He had never seen her face from this angle before, and it was nothing short of glorious.

"You're going to give us another," he said, as Future Draco pulled out, and then physically pulled her back a bit.

Draco slid down onto his back again, and then grabbed her hips to pull her on top of him.

"Right on my cock, sweetheart, and then lean forward for me. We're going to fill you right up."

She groaned, but did as he said, and Draco bit his lip to feel her hot, tight channel sink down onto him. It had already been in use just moments earlier. He, *Draco* had been inside of her, but not *this* Draco. Fuck it was confusing and hot and made him oddly jealous all at the same time.

He pulled her forward to expose her arse, and he saw his future self opening a jar of something and preparing his own cock.

Draco gripped her face and made her look at him as Future Draco scooted forward and then slowly breached her.

All three of them gasped at the same time. She was so tight like this, *so fucking tight*, and her eyes rolled back as she felt it too. Just as Draco had planned, his future self was the one who started to move, and Draco felt his moment approaching.

“Fuck I’m not going to last...” he muttered.

He glanced at his future self, who made eye contact and just nodded firmly. That was the signal that Draco didn’t have to last. They just needed Hermione to come, and then they could too.

She was moaning, gasping, and Draco pulled her down to kiss her while they did it. To his surprise, he heard Future Draco snarl just a little, and he grinned into Hermione’s mouth. He was jealous of himself in both timelines then. He felt her moment approaching, and he gripped her hair and pulled her face to the side, as he latched down on her neck.

Again, his eyes flicked to his future self, though he knew he shouldn’t. He couldn’t help it though, this was one of the hottest things he had ever done, and he was laying claim to Hermione in *this* timeline as he sucked her neck hard and marked her.

Future Draco looked practically feral as he watched his girl get marked by his past self.

“Come for us Granger,” said Future Draco.

Draco raised an eyebrow at this, but he let it pass without comment, especially as he felt her release begin, as she started to shake. His eyes were glued to himself, and Draco knew the moment Future Draco started to come because the jerks were unsteady. It was so much, *too much*, and Draco started to come too.

Hermione let out a great cry as they filled her at exactly the same time, just as Draco had hoped.

When both his past and future self were sated, Draco felt Future Draco pull Hermione off and gather her into his arms. Draco sat up and swung his legs over the bed as he stared at his witch with himself for a moment. He made eye contact one last time before standing up and striding into the adjoining bedroom, shutting the door behind him and collapsing on the small bed near the cot.

He stared up at the ceiling, in slight disbelief that they had just done that, but now it was time to do it again.

Draco checked his watch and saw they had been tripled up for nearly a half hour. He decided to go back into time forty-five minutes. That would be enough time for his body to recover so he could come again. He reached for his bag on the floor near the bed and pulled the small time-turner out of it. Hermione explained it turned in fifteen minute increments, so Draco placed it around his neck and turned it three times.

Draco felt the world around him dissolve for a moment, and then reform. He checked his watch and saw it was exactly forty-five minutes ago, and he knew he and Hermione were in the next room.

He allowed himself to relax and breathe, still marveling over everything he had just done and going over the scene so he could repeat it as closely as possible.

Finally, he checked his watch and knew it was time. He removed the time-turner from around his neck, stood up, and opened the door. He found Hermione on top of Past Draco, kissing him, writhing on him, and again Draco felt that odd combination of jealousy, lust, and even a bit of pride as he watched.

“I solemnly swear I’m here for a fuck.”

Once again Hermione sat up and gasped, and this time Draco could see her face. He gave her a smirk before looking at Past Draco and walking toward them and lowering himself behind her, running a hand behind her back as he settled in.

“Are you ready for us?” asked Past Draco

“Oh my God, yes...”

Past Draco pulled her down for a kiss, and again Draco felt that twinge of envy as he watched.

“Then let’s proceed,” said Past Draco. “First, you’re going to suck me off, angel. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

They rearranged themselves just as they had done previously.

“Take me all in,” said Past Draco. “Get on your knees and put your arse in the air while you do it so I can get that perfect view from behind.”

Draco watched her present to him while she did it, and it was incredible. He glanced at Past Draco and saw that Hermione’s lips were around him now, and his eyes were closed as he leaned back to enjoy it. It was odd seeing himself like that, his fingers tangled in her hair, coaxing her, directing her. Draco unconsciously placed a firm hand on her arse as he watched intently. He gave it a quick squeeze, and then he couldn’t help himself. She was pleasuring him, but also *not him*, and something in Draco snapped just a little at the sight.

He gave one arse cheek a spank, and Hermione groaned.

He gave the matching spank to the other side, and now Draco felt his temper cooling as he studied the reddened globes. Hermione’s

own want was clearly glistening between her legs, ready for him – ready for *this* Draco.

Draco remembered what came next.

“Open that pretty throat, princess.”

Draco froze for a split second.

Fuck.

That wasn't what he had said. He had called her 'angel' the first time, he was almost sure of it. He found himself staring at Past Draco, who was now giving him a slightly odd look, but Draco made himself ignore it as he quickly sheathed himself into her and began to thrust.

This sufficiently distracted Past Draco just as Draco remembered it would. Despite the incredible thing they were doing, Draco's error was something he had to think about and quickly.

Nothing happened. I screwed up – I'm almost positive I did – and nothing happened.

Did this mean Hermione was right all along? Was the space-time continuum really *not* that delicate? Evidently very small changes like a different word here or there didn't cause the world to end. Presumably that change was captured in some kind of closed time loop, known only to Draco himself. Or perhaps, it wasn't a loop at all, but still a continuous line since it was *Draco* who made the change. Hermione was very sure that time still passed linearly for the time-turned individual, which meant that Past Draco could hear something with his ears and Future Draco could say something different with his mouth.

Draco wondered which version of events Hermione would remember.

Draco vaguely heard his past self say some familiar words, which caused him to snap out of it and focus again on what they were doing.

"You like that don't you? You like being fucked into my cock just like this?" said Past Draco.

Hermione groaned a little, and then his past self was talking again.

"Come for us just like this. Do it, angel..."

Draco picked up the pace to force her over the precipice, and soon he felt her shattering all over his cock.

"Good," said Past Draco. "You're going to give us another."

At this, Draco pulled out and he manhandled her a bit to get her into the appropriate position.

"Right on my cock, sweetheart, and then lean forward for me," said Past Draco. "We're going to fill you right up."

While Past Draco was talking, Draco opened the jar of lube he had brought into the room with them and prepared himself. Fuck he was looking forward to this part, and it was a major reason he had done it in this order: he wanted to save the best for last.

Once she was settled into place with his past self, Draco brushed the pucker on her arse and carefully slid himself in and started to move slowly, setting the pace for the group.

"Fuck I'm not going to last..." muttered Past Draco, and Draco made eye contact with his past self to let him know it was alright. They hadn't lasted very long the first time they did this, and even though Draco had already come once this morning, this position was so tight for him he was on the very brink of his control.

Past Draco was a cocky bastard and pulled Hermione down for a deep kiss. Without even thinking about it, Draco growled a little at

the sight of his witch kissing another bloke – even though it was himself – and he pressed his ring into the flesh of her arse to try to draw her attention back to him.

Yes, Draco knew he was ridiculous. No, he didn't care. It was both incredible and maddening all at the same time, and Draco was more certain than ever he could have *never* done this any other way. He was jealous of himself for fuck's sake.

Finally, Past Draco pulled Hermione's head to the side and watched Draco as he marked her neck. Draco's nostrils flared as they made eye contact again, both unbearably turned on and slightly enraged by what Past Draco was doing.

Draco decided to retaliate by potentially ripping the space-time continuum right in two. This time he remembered exactly what he had said, and he intentionally disregarded it.

"Come for me angel so I can fill you up all over again," said Draco. His past self's eyes darkened dangerously at being cut out of the conversation, and Draco just smirked.

Draco briefly waited for the universe to end, but once again it didn't, and he felt oddly powerful that he had manipulated time this way.

But then he was pulled out of his thoughts by Hermione's orgasm beginning, and then Draco's did too, with Past Draco's following immediately behind. It wasn't long before Draco pulled her off of his past self and then wrapped her protectively into his arms. She snuggled in, and Draco gave a contented sigh that he got to have her all to himself now.

Past Draco may have gotten the foreplay, but *he* got to perform the aftercare. That was his favorite part, and he gave Past Draco a superior look as he slunk off to the adjoining room to time-turn.

Hermione finally stirred, and he leaned down to drop a kiss on her head.

“Well?” she said.

Draco grinned. “I didn’t know it was possible to be jealous of myself.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him. “Surely not.”

“Believe it, sweetheart. It was insanely hot. I’m into doing it over and over again. But yeah, I was also incredibly jealous of myself. That past bastard taunted me, you know. He marked you right in front of me.”

“Draco, *you* marked me.”

“Hmmm, true.”

She chuckled and settled in, as Draco bit his lip.

“Hermione...” he started.

“Yes?”

“We’re not keeping secrets from each other anymore, right?”

“That’s right,” she said, now pulling back to look at him a bit warily.

He exhaled. “Alright then. In that case, there’s something I need to tell you about the space-time continuum.”

Hermione

Hermione didn’t know how to feel about the fact that Draco had intentionally disregarded the time-turner rules.

On the one hand, it was incredibly idiotic.

On the other hand, it was highly satisfying to learn that she was right: very small changes known only to the person turning time did nothing meaningful to wreck the space-time continuum.

Hermione had suspected it of course, but she had always been too afraid to test it. The prevailing theory from the Unspeakables who studied it in the Department of Mysteries came to the opposite conclusion. Hermione could never be certain she was *that* much smarter than others who had studied it.

Then again, there was something to be said for experience over theory.

The more interesting phenomenon was what *Hermione* remembered. Thinking back to it, she was sure she only remembered the things Future Draco had changed. She didn't remember the events the way Past Draco did. That had all sorts of implications for modifying entire timelines of course, but Hermione swore to herself she would never really push the boundaries of it. Changing the innocuous things said during a sexual encounter was one thing. Even changing the sexual encounter itself was probably not *that* risky. But going back in time to destroy horcruxes before Voldemort ever rose again was something else entirely. As tempted as Hermione was to do it in order to save the lives of people she loved, she knew that was a step too far. There was no way to anticipate what sort of ripple effect she would create if she did something like that – Harry might even lose the war.

Still, the thing Draco had so recklessly done during their first two-person threesome opened up a whole new avenue for research once her most urgent project at the Ministry was complete. She had the urge to test it in a few hour-long increments to have entire conversations with herself. She knew it might be a bit awkward, but it would also be refreshing to talk to somebody as bright as her for once.

Besides, she couldn't very well write a report about it for the Ministry if her only experience with it was during a *threesome* for heaven's sake.

After Draco's discovery, Hermione was willing to try it herself. And so they spent the last hour at the Safehouse in another threesome, but

this time with Hermione time-turned.

Hermione had never seen Draco's eyes so large as when he sat back and watched Hermione kiss herself and touch herself as Draco coached her through it both times.

As for Hermione, it felt a bit odd kissing another woman for the first time – especially when that woman was herself – but it was also rather pleasant. She was a softer, gentler kisser than Draco was, and there was something distinctly sensual about it. Knowing that she didn't have to worry about doing it perfectly twice gave her the confidence to relax into it, and she enjoyed it far more than she thought she would.

Kissing her own breasts and touching herself for Draco was even more exceptional. By the end of it he was so overcome that he laid down on his back for Past Hermione to ride his cock while Future Hermione rode his face. He turned control over to both of them that way, and it was a truly singular experience.

"This is the best fucking Christmas present I have ever received," he said fervently, kissing one Hermione right after the other.

When Hermione had moved from two back to one, Draco pulled out another small box with a charm for her bracelet to commemorate the occasion. It was a tiny Christmas tree, decorated with a variety of colored stones to look like ornaments.

"It's for our first Christmas together and all the new things we did for it this year. It represents several firsts, but also the traditions we're going to make together."

Hermione smiled broadly as she added it to her bracelet.

When they finally arrived back at the Manor, Draco handled the time-turner with reverence, like it was one of the most valuable things he owned. She raised an eyebrow as he placed it in her jewelry box,

which he had recently moved into the Manor. She was spending more nights at the Manor than not these days.

“Draco, that’s supposed to stay in the Magical Objects Vault if we aren’t keeping it at the Ministry,” she chided.

“Fuck no,” he said. “It’s staying close to us in case we want to use it again. Besides, your jewelry box is secure. We blood warding it, remember?”

Hermione rolled her eyes, but she couldn’t deny that she was pleased. It really *had* been incredibly hot, both ways they did it.

“If I die like five years early because I’ve spent that many years in the past time-turning threesomes with you, I will consider it a life very well lived,” he declared.

Hermione just shook her head, as she followed him down to the Witches’ Parlor where the Manor tree had been set up. They settled in with Narcissa to open gifts from their friends, while Rosie and Florrie looked on, until finally there was only one thing left to do before Christmas dinner was served. Hermione exchanged a look and smile with Draco.

“Rosie,” she said.

“Yes Miss Hermy?”

“Rosie, I was wondering if you wanted to bond with me... the way Draco told you about. The modified version, I mean.”

Rosie’s eyes were huge, and her lip trembled a little, as she nodded very quickly.

“Rosie would like that very much Miss! Erm, will Master Draco bind Rosie again if it is not working?”

“If that’s what you want, Rosie,” said Draco gently, “though you’re also welcome to work for me as a free elf.”

Rosie shook her head firmly. “No, Master. I is wanting all my magic more than I is wanting to tell Master Draco no.”

Hermione was struck by this, and not for the first time she felt a bit chagrined about how she had viewed house elves until very recently. Her heart had been in the right place, but she had never taken the time to get to know a house elf as well as Rosie. She had never understood *why* the elves were so sincere in their desire to be bound.

Hermione suspected that the full binding ritual had become popular because of the enslavement elements of it. The fact that there might be an alternative had been lost to a few very old books that discussed it at a high level, because it wasn’t as favorable to wizards as a fully bound elf. Still, the entire issue was more nuanced than she had ever realized.

Hopefully Draco had found the way to thread the needle so Rosie could have it all: her full range of magic *and* the ability to tell Hermione no.

“In that case, Rosie,” said Draco, “please open this last gift from me.”

Rosie took the small package with shaking hands and opened it to find an elf-sized dress. The moment she touched it, she shuddered.

“I is free,” she whispered nervously.

“You are,” said Draco. “Now then, turn to Hermione and clasp hands.”

Hermione held her hands out and Rosie grabbed them. Hermione smiled at her encouragingly as Draco held a small book in front of them to read. The ritual was simple and was very much like wizarding wedding vows, which bound a couple magically. The words Draco had found, however, were a bit different because it incorporated elements of free will.

“I, Hermione Granger, hereby tie you, Rosie, to my call and my magic, wherever it may be, voluntarily and freely, to serve me as you wish until we are unbound.”

Rosie now looked at the small book, her lip quivering a bit as she whispered, “I, Rosie, hereby accept the tie to be your bonded elf.”

Hermione felt warmth, as something that looked like golden thread encircled their hands, and then Rosie’s eyes started to shine.

“I is feeling my magic again!” she said.

Hermione smiled softly. “Good. Let’s test it, shall we?”

Rosie nodded eagerly.

“Why don’t you go to my flat and see if you can hear my call. If you don’t hear it in three minutes come back to the Manor.”

Rosie nodded and left with a *CRACK!*

Hermione counted to thirty in her head and then called, “Rosie!”

Rosie immediately appeared with a *CRACK!* and squealed a little bit.

Hermione smiled broadly. “Alright, how about another test? Florrie, can you take me to the Playground?”

Florrie looked at her curiously, but nodded and grabbed Hermione’s hand. A moment later Hermione felt herself being squeezed through space before reappearing in her curse-breaking room.

Florrie let go of Hermione’s hand, and then Hermione called, “Rosie!”

Rosie appeared with another *CRACK!* and Hermione smiled again as Rosie started to hop around with excitement.

“It is working Mistress Hermy! I is hearing you outside of the Manor too!”

“That’s fantastic, Rosie. Now please take me back to the Manor, and let’s try one last thing.”

Rosie nodded eagerly and grabbed Hermione’s hand. She brought Hermione back to the Witches’ Parlor, with Florrie following behind a moment later.

“It worked then?” asked Draco eagerly.

Hermione nodded a bit distractedly as she thought hard about this last thing. It was a little risky, but house elves were so accommodating that there were only a few things Hermione knew that Rosie would truly resist.

“Last thing, then. Rosie, go get a knife from the kitchen.”

Rosie looked at her questioningly, but disappeared and then reappeared a moment later with a knife. Draco was watching her warily, but Hermione forced herself to ignore him.

“Rosie, stab me with the knife.”

Draco made a sound of protest and started to move toward Hermione, but she held out a hand to stop him as she stared intently at Rosie.

Rosie’s eyes were huge, but then she furrowed her brow.

“I... No. No, Mistress Hermy. Rosie is not wanting to stab you.”

Hermione whooped and punched the air, and Rosie did a little twirl in excitement as she realized what Hermione had done. Then she threw the knife aside and flung herself into Hermione’s arms.

“I is not needing to punish myself, Mistress Hermy! I is telling you no!”

“Rosie, I’m so pleased!”

She cast a glance at Draco, who was shaking his head at her in a way that told Hermione he was both very annoyed but begrudgingly impressed. She just lifted an eyebrow before turning back to Rosie.

“I am Mistress Hermy’s real elf now!”

“Yes you are, Rosie. Yes you are.”

Maledicere et Crescere

Chapter 47: Maledicere et Crescere

AN: All signs point to the Alpha.

Draco

Christmas dinner brought with it the surprising news that Narcissa was moving into the Dower House the following day, despite the fact that Draco and Hermione weren't married yet.

"I thought you were going to wait Mother?"

"Nonsense. Now that Hermione is able to move into the Manor the *proper* way my presence is no longer needed here. Rosie is a perfectly adequate chaperone for her reputation."

Hermione gave his mother such an incredulous look at this that Draco struggled not to laugh, but he forced himself to maintain a straight face.

"Alright then, that's fine. When are you moving in?"

"Tomorrow, dear. And I'll be taking my favorite pieces of furniture with me of course. You may need to make a visit to the Furniture Vault to fill in some holes until the Manor settlements are in place."

Draco raised one eyebrow at this as Hermione turned a spectacular shade of red.

"No matter," he said lightly. "I'm sure the Manor elves can manage the move for us over the next several days."

That evening he pulled Florrie aside and explained their system for marking pieces in the Furniture Vault. To Florrie's credit, she just listened impassively and told Draco that the elves would be moving Narcissa in first, and then they would work to fill in the gaps with the items Hermione had previously selected.

"Might as well replace everything on the main level to start," said Draco. "Those are the public spaces, and they should look consistent."

And so while Hermione was back on the Playground on Boxing Day, Draco watched with some curiosity as Narcissa was moved into the Dower House and the first floor and Master Suite were rearranged to suit Hermione's preferences. There were innumerable other bedrooms and small alcoves and secondary rooms they could decorate later, but for now the public spaces were refreshed. Draco and Hermione were both stunned by the transformation.

"It fits the wildflowers now, doesn't it?" she asked.

Draco had to acknowledge that it certainly did.

The following day their friends got to see the transformation too. The Ministry gala was that evening, and Harry had owed to say he wanted to arrange a meeting to discuss the situation with the werewolves. They decided to make an evening out of it and invited everyone over to the Manor for dinner and a meeting before heading to the gala as a group.

"Oh this is much better!" said Pansy with approval, as they walked into the Dining Room and caught their first glimpse of the new table.

The group settled in for dinner and conversation when Blaise said, "Hey Draco, did you know this table is nicked? You might want to see if the elves can repair it."

Blaise was pointing to a small dent on one side of the table, near the very center.

Draco cleared his throat. "Ah. Yes. Thanks for letting me know Blaise."

Something about the tone of his voice made the rest of the table fall silent, as his friends stared at him suspiciously.

"What?" he said innocently.

"Spill," said Theo. "You're hiding something."

"Blaise just said the table is nicked is all. I'll get the elves to fix it."

"But *why* is it nicked?" pressed Pansy. "I know you, Draco. It's an obvious dent. You left it there for a reason."

Draco's eyes flicked to Hermione, who was looking at him with a mixture of mortification and inevitability. Draco huffed an exhale.

"Fucking fine. It's from my signet ring, alright? I banged it on the table a couple weeks ago."

Pansy's eyes were slits. "How? Didn't you just move this to the Manor yesterday?"

Shit.

"Look, can you drop it? It's just a dent. We'll fix it."

"No can do," said Blaise. "You might as well tell us or we'll –"

"Oh fine!" cried Hermione. "I shagged him on this table when we picked it out at Gringotts alright?"

There was a split second of silence before Harry started to choke on whatever food he had just eaten and Ginny was thumping him on the back distractedly as she looked at Hermione in amazement.

"You two *shagged*...."

“In Gringotts, yes,” said Hermione briskly, though her cheeks were as red as Draco had ever seen them. He couldn’t help his lips twitch as his wizarding friends sent impressed looks his way.

Then, as though they all had the same thought at once, Blaise, Theo, and Ben’s eyes all widened.

“Wait a minute, which one of you was on the bottom?” demanded Theo.

Draco cleared his throat. “Me.”

“Oh gross,” said Blaise, scooting his chair back. “No. *Fuck no*. I’m not eating where Draco’s pasty arse has been...”

Draco cast him an offended look. “*Excuse me*, what if I had said Hermione then?”

“That’s different,” said Blaise. “I haven’t known her for most of my life.”

“Speak for yourself,” muttered Harry with a pained look.

Draco rolled his eyes and huffed. “For fuck’s sake, it’s *clean* alright?”

“Calm yourself, Draco,” said Luna, reaching across the table to give his hand a pat. “I can sense that this table provided a turning point. There was a moment of catharsis that took place here. There is a near-sacred quality to it, and in fact I think it would do us all some good to use the table in turn for mutual release. We could imbibe each other’s power that way.”

“Erm...” stated Draco eloquently.

Mercifully Hermione jumped in.

“Yes, thank you Luna. We will certainly take that under advisement.”

Dinner had a slightly stilted quality to it after that revelation, though when Pansy stood and herded the women upstairs to get dressed, Draco heard some shrill giggles that made his mouth twitch. He knew they were getting all the details out of Hermione.

“Smoking Room then?” asked Draco as the wizards followed him out of the Dining Room, with Blaise still muttering about unsanitary conditions.

The six wizards settled around a smaller table, and Draco passed out drinks as Harry seemed to steel himself.

“Alright,” he said, “for my update let’s just say that we’re still rooting out the group of rogue werewolves. I can’t give too many details since it’s an active investigation, but we’re getting closer to the Alpha. We haven’t found him yet though, and I’m hoping that one of your updates will help us.”

Draco chimed in. “Hermione’s very close to a cure. She thinks this round of experiments is going to do it. She has another day to go before this batch is complete and then five more days after that before it can be produced in bulk, but the threat of that curse should be neutralized soon, provided the victims can get to St. Mungo’s in time. She told me St. Mungo’s is waiving the normal rules for clinical trials in this case because it’s an emergency, and she’s developing the only possible cure.”

Harry nearly sagged with relief. “Good,” he said. “That’s good.”

“Theo?” asked Draco.

Theo swallowed and looked uncharacteristically grim. “Estes’ approval for the land deal was bullshit. It never should have passed muster.”

The others were staring at Theo hard, and Ben in particular was looking perturbed.

“Explain,” said Ben.

Theo sighed. “There are protected magical creatures there. In fact, there are a great number of magical creatures, including the two largest centaur herds in England. There are still large herds in Scotland, including the one in the Forbidden Forest next to Hogwarts, but the English centaur population has been slowly decimated over the last five or six years. Habitat loss was part of it of course, but there have been several werewolf attacks that have been covered up too.”

Draco realized his mouth was hanging open.

“How?” asked Harry suddenly. “How do you know?”

Theo shrugged. “I went there and talked to them about it. According to one of their leaders the herds moved in during the war as a protective measure. The herds who stayed away have been picked off slowly by transformed werewolves. He said that usually it’s just two or three centaurs at a time. That’s not enough to attract the Ministry’s attention, and of course the centaurs don’t like to involve humans in any event. But recently the violence has increased, and the werewolves have been going after entire herds. I suspect Estes knows and has been covering it up.”

“Christ,” muttered Harry, who now looked lost in thought.

“Have the centaurs been safe on my land?” asked Draco curiously.

Theo nodded. “Yes. Apparently they were given safe passage. It’s a sanctuary of sorts for them.”

Draco leaned back and exhaled. “Father,” he said heavily.

“What?” asked Blaise.

“It was Father,” said Draco. “I can confirm with Firenze’s portrait, but I bet that was the other thing he gave to the centaurs for their help.

He guaranteed their safety from the werewolves by giving them a sanctuary. It's brilliant, really. We don't need that land, and it probably made Father one of the few humans the centaurs would deal with in blood..."

"Wait, what are you talking about?" demanded Ben.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "Didn't I tell you? Fenrir Grayback used the curse against me during the war. I only survived it because Father figured out the formula to a potion that reverses it, and Hermione is using his notes to recreate it. He got the information he needed to develop it from the centaurs. Knowing the way Father's mind worked, I'm sure he believed that the entire Malfoy dynasty owes the centaurs a life debt. I'm certain that's how he decided to repay it."

Blaise, Ben, and Patrick all stared at Draco in amazement. He saw Theo and Harry nodding out of the corner of his eye.

"You're right, mate," said Theo quietly. "That's exactly like Lucius. He was a severe bastard, but after what happened to you? Of course he would align himself with the centaurs. And he would do it in a way to make sure they were allies even after he died."

"So this land is some sort of centaur safe haven," said Harry slowly. "But if the werewolves know about it, why not just go there themselves?"

"They can't," said Ben simply. "It's warded."

Harry raised an eyebrow. "The vacant land is warded?"

Ben nodded. "Yes. It's not *that* unusual. I've seen it a few times before. Granted, this land was more heavily warded than you normally see, but I assumed it was just a Malfoy thing. Many of Draco's properties contain advanced wards."

"That list of spells..." said Draco quietly.

Harry was looking at him intently. “What about it?”

“Well remember what Hermione said? There were centaur and werewolf tracking spells on it. There were some other dark curses on it too. But quite a few of the spells I found were ward reversal spells. They were all linked to blood wards, so they were also fairly dark. Warding is a Malfoy art. It wouldn’t surprise me at all if they needed Father’s blood to reverse the wards, but he was in Azkaban ever since the war ended and then he was dead and buried in the Mausoleum behind a whole host of *other* wards... I bet they did try to breach the wards and failed because his blood was unavailable.”

“And one of the fundamental principles of Magical Property Law says that if you can’t breach it...” started Patrick.

“Then you buy it,” finished Ben, as his eyes closed. “Fuck...” he said softly.

“I don’t follow,” said Harry.

Ben opened his eyes and looked at Harry with a defeated expression. “Magical property sales override blood wards. It’s the only thing that can break all types of blood wards without the caster’s own blood. Death will break some blood wards, but not all. Property sales are the ultimate escape hatch, and that’s how a lot of families break old blood wards that make a property unusable – they can sell the property to each other or to a third party to hit the reset button on the wards. That loophole is one of the reasons large properties like Malfoy Manor contain entails – an entail makes it very difficult if not impossible to sell a piece of property. It’s a way of enhancing the blood wards so those properties stay secure and the wards grow stronger with each passing generation. Entails consolidate assets in a single family line too, but for magical properties the blood wards are a big reason entails exist. Even inheritance doesn’t break blood wards – it simply allows them to transition to a new master. You have to have a magically binding contract for sale with a ward release clause to do it. There are a few wards on Draco’s land that were tied

to Lucius directly, and we put a ward release clause in the contract we're kicking back and forth."

"But if it's warded so well, then how did I get in?" asked Theo in confusion.

"You aren't a werewolf," said Ben simply.

"Of course," said Harry softly. "It all fits, doesn't it?"

"So Lucius added a personal blood ward to keep the werewolves out. They couldn't break it so they had to buy it," said Blaise snorting in disgust. "That's why they came in with an offer that we couldn't refuse."

"And they used Tobias Raine to skim the money to do it," said Harry, closing his eyes as the full picture sunk in for them. "They killed him when he fucked up and the skimming was noticed."

"One thing I don't understand," started Patrick, "is why this land specifically?"

They were quiet for a moment as they contemplated this, until the truth sunk in for Draco.

"It's because of the centaurs," he said quietly. "Their blood is required to produce the potion that reverses the curse. We all know what they want – rights, land, a new government – and they are using terror to do it. They're killing centaurs so that the potion can't be produced, and they're trying to acquire enough land to give them their *own* sanctuary outside of the Ministry's purview."

"And they found out about the potion..." started Theo.

"Because I didn't die," said Draco dully. "I didn't die when Fenrir Grayback cast the curse against me. He must have known that Father figured out how to reverse it and needed the centaurs to do it."

“Damn,” muttered Blaise, and the others nodded in agreement.

Harry took a deep breath and then looked at Ben and Patrick.

“Alright, you know what I’m going to ask you. Have you figured out who the ultimate buyer is for this land deal?”

They exchanged glances and nodded.

“Yes, and it took us quite some time to figure it out. The shell companies turned muggle about halfway up the chain and finally ended with a Cayman company wholly owned by a D. Wilson. It’s such a common name though, we haven’t been able to track him further.”

Draco narrowed his eyes.

Wilson.

The name was niggling something in the back of Draco’s mind. He had heard it somewhere before, he was sure of it. He just couldn’t pinpoint *where*.

Almost unconsciously Draco’s eyes lifted to meet Theo’s, and they stared at each other across the table.

“Don’t you remember, Draco?” said Theo softly, with a look on his face that was slowly turning triumphant.

“Tell us,” said Harry eagerly, noticing the look on Theo’s face too.

“D. Wilson,” said Theo quietly. “D. stands for Douglas. Douglas Wilson is Alan Estes’s nephew. He went to Durmstrang, and Draco and I met him at the Hogwarts fundraiser. He works in potions. He’s the one trying to buy the land from Draco, and Estes has been helping him do it by greasing the wheels behind the scenes.”

Draco inhaled with excitement, as he now remembered the curt young man who melted into the background of Estes.

“Yes,” said Draco softly. “And they were asking me about real estate that night before Ella intervened.”

Draco turned to look at Harry, and his green eyes were shining with something Draco had never seen before: it spoke of the dark satisfaction of a problem that had been solved or would be solved shortly, possibly with violence. All that was left to do was finish it.

Draco shivered a bit, but he was also elated. Based on Harry's expression, Douglas Wilson and Alan Estes were both *fucked*.

“That's it then,” said Harry simply. “As soon as the gala is done, I'll find him. I'll bet you every galleon in my vault that Douglas Wilson is the Alpha.”

The feeling of quiet elation had not worn off by the time the group was ready to go to the gala. In fact, Draco pulled Hermione aside before they left and for once he was so distracted by the news he had to tell her he barely noticed her gown. She listened with wide eyes, nodding along carefully as he explained how all of the pieces fit together.

“It's brilliant,” she breathed. “That's brilliant. And it even fits with the thing Firenze saw in the stars, didn't it? You really *were* the link to prevent an uprising. You linked me and your father to figure out the cure. Your land is the thing they're trying to acquire. Your home and vault contained the answers. God Draco, I'm so glad Firenze cooperated and that curse didn't kill you.”

It wasn't long after that they floo'd to the Ministry of Magic, and Draco looked around in some surprise. He knew his father used to attend this event, and then his mother took over when Lucius went to prison. It was Draco's first time though. He had never seen the Ministry atrium looking so festive, still bedecked with holiday decorations with small high-top tables scattered about and tastefully draped in gold.

The moment they arrived, several people noticed them and began to converge on them. Only now did Draco really take in the full picture of his girlfriend, this time in a surprisingly conservative gown in royal blue.

“Before I lose the opportunity to tell you this, let me say that you are stunning tonight,” he said, leaning down to give her a very public kiss, which made several wizards in the nearby vicinity wince a little.

He pulled back to find Hermione smiling at him. “I’ve been waiting for Pansy to let me wear blue for *ages!*” she said enthusiastically.

Draco had to admit it was fitting for her, and once again she stood out. Soon, however, she wasn’t the center of attention. It was Pansy who found herself in the middle of a crowd of gossiping socialites.

“Yes, he gave me a Lover’s Box for Christmas!” said Pansy excitedly, clutching the arm of a smug-looking Blaise. “And we’re here at the Minister’s own invitation, of course. Neither one of us works at the Ministry.”

This, Draco knew, was a bit of an overstatement. The truth was Kingsley had invited Hermione to bring along as many people as she wished, so she invited everyone in their group who did not have a direct invitation from the Ministry itself. Still, the crowd around Pansy and Blaise appeared suitably impressed, and Draco suspected Lorna Parkinson was planning their wedding already.

Draco sipped on a drink as he surveyed the crowd. The Ministry gala was less about fundraising and more about political connections and scheming. The Malfoys had always wrangled an invitation to it through their contacts, with some years being easier than others. Draco knew that *his* contact meant he would have a permanent spot on the guest list with no need for subterfuge or false promises of support going forward.

He watched passively for a time as Hermione chatted with several people he didn’t know well, and he noticed Harry slowly making the

rounds through the crowd, stopping only to speak to several aurors. All of them assumed identical looks of excitement before swiftly arranging their faces into masks of indifference.

He's telling them the news, Draco thought excitedly.

Then he watched Harry approach Shacklebolt and pull him aside into an alcove, speaking to him quickly. Just then, Ben sidled up to him.

"What do you reckon?" asked Draco, giving a discrete nod toward Harry and Shacklebolt.

"Permission to arrest," said Ben quietly. "Normally you have to go through the Wizengamot to get a warrant, but the Minister of Magic can also authorize it."

Draco narrowed his eyes as he thought about this. It certainly explained why Harry Potter's career had been so meteoric, outside of the fact that he was the Boy Who Lived Twice and popular with the media. He had an inside track to make arrests because he had the Minister of Magic firmly on his side.

As Draco watched, Shacklebolt's face turned serious at first and then excited. He nodded, as Harry pulled something out of his pocket, and Shacklebolt signed it before splitting off and heading in the opposite direction.

"Yes," whispered Draco.

Harry was going after the bastard tonight, that much was very obvious to Draco, and no doubt he would be seeking out Alan Estes too. Speaking of Estes, Draco looked around and didn't see him. Draco wondered if he had gone into hiding or if he was simply late to the party.

He was pulled out of his reverie by the sound of Hermione's voice.

“Draco, I’m going to slip away to the Playground for a bit,” she said. “I have a step I need to complete for the potion. It shouldn’t take more than fifteen minutes.”

“Do you want me to come with you?” he asked, but she just shook her head.

“No need. Just stay here and distract the crowd for me. Tell them I went to the loo if anybody asks where I am. Kingsley has kept the potion on a need-to-know basis. I’ll be back shortly.”

Draco narrowed his eyes, but nodded. He knew that the potion needed to be kept secret, and she was right that he could make her excuses while she snuck away for a few minutes.

He kept an eye on her as she retreated down a side hall and then she looked around quickly before turning the corner and disappearing. He knew she must be taking the stairs to avoid using the lifts in front of the crowd.

Draco waited impatiently as the minutes ticked by. He told himself he was being ridiculous, but something felt off. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it.

He glanced toward the hallway where she had disappeared and then froze. Two men had just disappeared around the same corner Hermione had left minutes ago. He only caught a glimpse of them and didn’t recognize them from behind, but something about it felt so wrong that alarm bells started going off in his mind.

Draco felt adrenaline start to course through him as he scanned the crowd for the dark head of Harry Potter. He noticed him leaving another small group from the DMLE, and Draco strode over to him.

Harry turned and came to an immediate halt when he saw Draco’s face. Then he reached out and grabbed Draco’s arm and pulled him to the side before casting a privacy charm.

“What is it?” he asked without any preamble.

“Hermione just left to do a step for the potion,” Draco whispered, “and I saw a couple men follow her a few minutes later. They went down that hallway over there.”

“Damn,” muttered Harry.

He released Draco as he started to head for the same hallway, Draco close on his heels.

“Grab another auror, don’t follow me,” hissed Harry.

“Fuck that!” whispered Draco.

Harry sighed, but didn’t object further and instead grabbed two more aurors who were mingling near the hallway.

“Come on you two, I need you,” he said.

The aurors looked at him curiously, but said nothing as they turned to follow Harry.

“This is Proudfoot and Mulligan,” said Harry quickly. “And this is Draco Malfoy. He’s Hermione’s boyfriend.”

“We know,” said Proudfoot, as Harry apprised them of the situation en route.

They hurried toward the same stairwell Hermione and the other two men had used to disappear and began to make their way down to the level with the Playground.

“It’s well-warded,” said Harry. “If Hermione got inside of it first, she’ll be just fine. They can’t get in.”

This was little comfort to Draco, whose stomach was in knots now.

It's probably just a coincidence. Surely it's nothing. They could have been going anywhere else in the Ministry.

But he couldn't shake the feeling that Hermione was in danger, and he knew Harry couldn't either. They reached the level with the Playground, and Harry paused before turning to the three others.

"It's probably nothing at all, but if these are werewolves we need to try to capture them and not kill them. That being said, Hermione is..."

"...Shacklebolt's favorite. We know," said Mulligan. "He would authorize any force necessary."

"Yes," said Harry. Then he glanced at Draco. "Draco, don't take this personally, but hang back please and don't interfere unless you have no choice. We're trained for this."

Draco pushed back a rush of displeasure at these words, but he nodded. He knew Harry was right about that.

Harry exhaled. "Alright then, let's see what we have."

He cracked the door, and immediately swore under his breath before shutting it again. "There are a dozen. Hermione must be inside the Playground. They're trying to break in."

He whispered a spell, and Draco saw a silver stag emerge from Harry's wand and race back up the stairwell to the party on several levels above them.

Draco thought quickly and whispered, "Florrie!"

Florrie appeared with a quiet *POP!*

"Yes, Master?"

"Florrie, go to the Playground and tell Hermione to stay inside. There are werewolves trying to break in, but the aurors are on their way. She is not to emerge until one of the aurors or I come in there to get

her. Restrain her if you have to so she stays put until one of us comes to tell you all is clear.”

Florrie's eyes were huge.

“Does Master want Florrie to take Mistress Hermy to the Manor?”

Draco hesitated. It was tempting, but he knew they may need her.

“No. She's a trauma healer, and there are bound to be some injuries. Stay with her and evacuate her if the wards break, but otherwise keep her on the Playground.”

Florrie nodded and disappeared a moment later.

“Brilliant,” said Harry fervently, and the other two aurors gave him impressed looks too.

“Your elf can cross her wards?” asked Proudfoot curiously.

Draco shrugged. “It's a loophole. Florrie is bound to me, and I'm allowed in. That means she is too.”

“Damn lucky,” said Mulligan.

They waited a couple more minutes, and then another six aurors arrived, rolling up their sleeves and looking at Harry for guidance.

“Alright,” said Harry. “We have a dozen werewolves outside of Hermione's Playground. You may not be aware, but she is developing a potion that should reverse the curse they have been using to cause terror in the wizarding community. She's very close to finishing it, and no doubt they are trying to stop her before she's done. I'm not sure how they found out she was the one in charge of it, but perhaps it was leaked by St. Mungo's. In any event, we're pretty sure she's inside the Playground, but she's warded in and has been warned to stay there. Try to capture, not kill, but since this is Hermione and the cure to this curse...”

“Any force necessary,” said one of the aurors Draco didn’t know.

“Right,” agreed Harry. “Especially if they start throwing unforgiveables.”

They all nodded as one, and Draco watched with wide eyes, both slightly intimidated and incredibly relieved that his girlfriend was so valued by the auror department. He could see that every single one of them was prepared to kill for her.

I am too, thought Draco. He had done it before, and he wouldn’t hesitate to do it again. Despite his criminal history, he thought Shacklebolt would be on his side this time, and there was no way he was going to leave it up to the aurors. Draco might not be as elite as they were, but he *had* been a Death Eater. He probably had just as much practice as many of the aurors did with the unforgiveables.

Still, Draco was no fool. He made his way to the very back, allowing the nine aurors in front of him to go first since they were trained for scenarios like this. Harry took a deep breath and then flung the door to the hallway open with a great *BANG!* and then Draco heard screaming as the aurors poured into the hallway.

“STUPEFY! INCARCEROUS! BOMBARDA!”

Spells were flying, and the air was crackling with violent magic as Draco rushed out with his head down. He could scarcely see what he was doing as he instinctively ducked and dodged and made his way as close to the door to the Playground as he could. He *had* to get inside to make sure Hermione was secure, but the door was blocked by two werewolves, trading spells with a large auror Draco didn’t know.

“AVADA KEDAVRA!” one of the werewolves cried, and Draco dropped to the floor as it flew just inches over his head, cracking the plaster in the wall behind him.

“Shit,” he muttered, as he sent a stunner back. His aim was poor from this angle, and he scrambled to his feet, trying to use the auror in front of him as a shield to get as close to the door as he could.

He was nearly there, when something caught his eye. “HARRY, BEHIND YOU!” he bellowed, and Harry spun around and twisted out of the way as another killing curse came within inches of him. Draco was nearly breathless as he recognized the werewolf who had sent the spell.

“THAT’S WILSON!” he shouted, and Harry’s eyes widened in recognition, as he turned his attention to Douglas Wilson.

Wilson snarled and flung himself to the side, to get away from Harry, before barreling into the auror nearest to Draco and clawing him.

“Maledicere et crescere!” he shouted, and to Draco’s horror the auror’s wounds began to bleed profusely, as he staggered and fell.

Shit, that’s the spell!

Draco raised his wand, but before he could speak, Wilson turned on Draco and shoved him against the door to the Playground, choking him to hold him still.

“Malfoy,” he snarled.

“Wilson,” Draco gasped. “You should know... not signing... that *fucking* deal...”

Wilson’s eyes darkened and turned nearly black, and now Draco was certain he was dealing with a werewolf and a powerful one.

“In that case, you’re now expendable,” he growled.

Draco’s vision was starting to pop from the chokehold, but he was still conscious enough to register a deep, familiar pain of werewolf nails digging into his abdomen, just to the right of where Fenrir Grayback had injured him all those years ago.

“Maledicere et crescere,” hissed Wilson, and Draco winced as the pain bloomed and the wounds deepened and began to creep.

“DRACO!” shouted Harry, and a moment later Wilson’s eyes bulged, before rolling back into his head as Harry’s spell hit him from behind.

Draco felt himself sliding down the door to the Playground, clutching his stomach that was bleeding profusely. Between his injury and the choking he had just endured, he was rapidly becoming lightheaded.

This is it, he thought. I’m so sorry, Hermione.

Draco was only barely aware of the skirmish coming to an end as the last of the werewolves were bound or stunned by the remaining aurors. His vision was swimming now, but he forced himself to look at Harry, who was staring down at him in dismay.

“Tell her I love her. Tell her to sign it as fast as possible...”

“Sign what?” asked Harry frantically.

“Our contract,” whispered Draco. “She just has to sign... Still be valid if she does it right away... Need to take care of her... *Promise me, Harry... Make her sign it as soon as you see her...*”

“I will,” said Harry quickly. “I’ll find her right now.”

“Good,” said Draco, as darkness began to creep over him. “That’s good.”

And then the world started to slide out of focus, and Draco knew no more.

The Mistress of Malfoy Manor

Chapter 48: The Mistress of Malfoy Manor

AN: One of Hermione's greatest strengths is working under pressure.

Hermione

Hermione was holed up in her lab, adding the last ingredients to the potion. She had just finished sprinkling in autumn moor grass, and she felt a surge of excitement as she watched the potion turn blue. It was darker than any of her previous attempts, and she knew it would continue to get darker still as it stewed for another eighteen hours. By the time the stew period was complete the following day, it should be the same shade of blue as the dress she was wearing: a royal blue, almost the color of sapphires. Lucius's notes had made *that* clear enough, but Hermione had never achieved that precise color in her previous three attempts.

This time, however, the potion was already closer to the finished color than she had ever seen before. It was tempting to take it off the heat and call it complete, but she forced herself to be patient. The final stew period broke down some toxins in the ingredients she just added, so she had to wait. In eighteen more hours it would be done.

Hermione smiled broadly and then moved to her sink to wash up. It was time to head back to the gala. She was sure Draco was getting antsy while he waited for her.

Hermione opened the door to her lab and stepped out into her curse-breaking room and came to an abrupt halt. She heard faint voices

out in the hallway. Then she heard a sizzle of magic, and she gasped. Somebody was trying to break her wards.

Hermione's heart started to race, and she was frozen on the spot as she tried to decide what to do, but before she could make up her mind, Florrie appeared with a great *CRACK!*

Hermione jumped violently with surprise, but she tried to calm her nerves as Florrie looked at her with wide, worried eyes.

"Mistress Hermy must stay inside! There is werewolves trying to break the wards! The aurors is coming!"

Hermione was seized with fear.

"How do you know?" she asked hurriedly.

Florrie wrung her hands. "Master Draco is telling me, Mistress. He is saying Mistress Hermy is needing to stay inside the Playground until Master Draco or an auror tells her it is safe."

"Please tell me Draco isn't going to..."

"I is not knowing, Mistress!" said Florrie quickly. "But Mr. Harry Potter is with my master and two more aurors. Florrie is thinking more aurors is coming too."

Hermione swallowed, torn between an urge to hide and a need to make sure Draco wasn't about to do something very stupid.

The latter feeling won.

Hermione made a move to stride toward the door and then involuntarily stilled as something nearly froze her in place. She could barely move.

"What on earth...?" she asked, as she turned her head to find Florrie holding her hand out toward her.

“Florrie!” she hissed. “Let me go!”

“I is ordered not to, Mistress Hermy,” said Florrie simply. “My master is ordering it.”

“For heaven’s sake! He could be in danger!”

Florrie swallowed, but looked determined. “My master is ordering it, and I is following his orders.”

Hermione was frustrated. She knew Draco had offered Florrie her freedom too, but she hadn’t made up her mind yet. Evidently Draco was taking full advantage of the traditional bond to ensure Florrie cooperated.

Then again, even if she was free she would still listen to him instead of me.

Hermione thought quickly and arrived at the obvious solution.

“Rosie!” she called.

Rosie appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Yes, Mistress Hermy?”

“Rosie, I need you to free me. Florrie is holding me hostage.”

Rosie turned her confused gaze toward Florrie, who was looking mutinous.

“Master Draco ordered it!” insisted Florrie. “There is werewolves outside and Mistress Hermy is trying to go fight them!”

By now the sounds of a fight were indeed floating through the air, and Hermione was looking longingly toward the door.

“Please Rosie, help me!”

To Hermione's consternation, Rosie just shook her head slowly.

"No, Mistress Hermy. I is telling my Mistress no for this."

Oh bloody hell.

This wasn't at *all* what Hermione had envisioned when she wanted Rosie to be able to tell her no.

"But I have to! Draco could be hurt, he could be in trouble, he could be..."

Rosie and Florrie gave her identically stubborn looks that made Hermione slump as much as she could while nearly frozen in place. She was forced to listen to the sounds of a fight raging just outside of her door, and she gasped when she heard an unfamiliar voice shout, "*Maledicere et crescere!*"

"No!" she insisted, and then she looked at the elves again. "That's the curse! It could be Draco! He needs me... *please*..."

The elves glanced at each other, hesitating for a long while, and Hermione leveled them with pleading eyes. Hermione watched as they had a silent conversation with one another, but before they came to a decision, she heard the door to the Playground open, and all three of them tensed. Hermione felt the magic around her dissolve, and she pulled out her wand, aiming it at the door to the curse-breaking room. She felt one of the elves grip her robes from behind, as though readying them to flee.

The door to the curse-breaking room flew open, and Harry hurried through it, pale and terrified.

"What's the password to the Marauder's Map?" she asked quickly.

"I solemnly swear I'm up to no good," he answered without hesitating. "Hermione, come *on*, we need you. It's Draco!"

Hermione's stomach clenched, as she rushed through the door and followed Harry out, with Florrie and Rosie on her heels.

Not Draco. Not Draco. Please not Draco...

She burst through the door to the hallway and stared around at the carnage. Several people were groaning, and she saw three with gashes that were slowly spreading. One of them had blond hair and...

Oh God, no...

"Draco!" she cried, as she sank to her knees beside him. He was barely conscious, his head moving from side to side as he muttered incoherently.

She caught snatches of "Papers... tell her... sign now..." but she didn't take the time to try to understand what he was saying to her. She rose and turned around to race back to the Playground.

"Where are you going?" called Harry frantically from behind her.

"To buy us time!"

She ignored his shouting, as she sprinted into her muggle lab and pulled out that last version of the potion she had completed. It wasn't perfect, but it would slow the bleeding and might give her time to go to the Manor and... oh God, could she? Could she really do this if she had to?

Hermione bit her lip and shook herself out of it. She needed to slow the bleeding. That she *could* do, even if it was imperfect. And it wasn't just Draco who needed it.

Hermione grabbed some blood replenishing potion and the experimental potion and hurried out to the hallway, where she wrenched Draco's jaw open first.

“Drink...” she insisted, pouring a measure down his throat and massaging it to make him drink it. Then she turned to Harry, who was watching her with huge eyes. “Give him blood replenishing potion, Harry. I’m going to dose the others.”

Harry nodded quickly and took the blood replenishing potion from her and began to treat Draco while she moved to an auror next to him and then a second auror who was also cursed. She poured the potion down both of their throats too. As she watched, the spread of the curse slowed, though it didn’t stop completely.

Hermione forced herself to pull it together and sent a patronus to Padma to come treat the others who had injuries, while Hermione turned to her next task.

“Harry, where were you? Where was the last place he was safe?”

“The stairwell,” he said, with some confusion. “We all gathered there before coming in. Draco was in the very back. He must have been the last one to come through the door.”

Hermione swallowed, and nodded.

“Why?” asked Harry, but she shook her head.

“No reason. I just wanted to make sure I knew who could have seen you.”

Harry gave her an odd look at this, but changed the subject. “How much time do they have?”

“Maybe an hour...” she said. “I need to go, I need to find something... the only thing that might help...”

Harry gave her a helpless look. “The newest version of the potion won’t work?”

“No, it needs eighteen more hours before it’s done. It’s poisonous in its current state,” said Hermione, as tears pricked her eyes.

Eighteen hours. Was Draco going to die because of eighteen hours? She was cursing herself now. If only she hadn't gone to Germany, if only she hadn't taken time off, if only she had brewed multiple versions of the potion at once to speed it up, if only she had done *anything* differently...

If only, if only, if only...

She looked into Harry's green eyes, and she could tell that he knew exactly what she was thinking. There had been moments like this between them over the years when they could speak to each other without needing words, and this was one of them. Harry could tell she was racked with guilt, and he pulled her in for a brief, but firm, hug.

"Breathe, Hermione," he said. "We'll keep him stable for you. We won't move him. Go do what you need to do. And sign the papers while you are there."

"The papers?"

Harry nodded. "Draco said there's a contract he wants you to sign. He insisted I tell you about it."

Hermione's stomach turned over.

Their engagement contract.

Draco wanted to take care of her. He had probably told Harry about it in a moment of desperation and confusion. It wouldn't be valid without his signature too, and Hermione knew they weren't done negotiating it. Still, the gesture and the consideration made her heart break.

"I have no idea where he keeps it, Harry," she confessed.

He shrugged. "Then don't spend time looking for it, but if you happen across it, please sign it. It was his final wish, Hermione."

Hermione felt another lump rise in her throat, but she just swallowed it back and nodded.

“Alright. I’ll be back. I just have to... *God...*”

“I know,” said Harry. “Go do whatever you need to do. I’ll stay here with him.”

“Thank you.”

She gave Harry a brief kiss on the cheek before hurrying over to Draco and kissing him on the lips. He was still bleeding and unconscious now, but the spread of the curse had slowed. Florrie was there, tending his wounds as best she could.

“Florrie, stay with him. Rosie, take me to our bedroom at the Manor please.”

Rosie looked up at her with huge eyes but said nothing as she grabbed Hermione’s hand and pulled her through the darkness. A moment later Hermione found herself in the *Imperio* suite, which she had only moved into earlier that day. Her jewelry box was on the dresser set aside for her, and she ran to it and opened it, pulling out the small time-turner that Draco had left there a couple days earlier.

Could she do this? Could she really risk the space-time continuum like this? She thought through it as fast as she could: Harry said they were in the stairwell before the battle started, and Draco was the last one out. Perhaps if she made herself invisible then she could stun him before he ever left the stairwell, and he would be safe. But how could she do that and be certain she wouldn’t be seen? Draco had destroyed his invisibility cloak for her, and she couldn’t get another one in time. Both Harry and Ron would require explanations, and it would take far too long. Her disillusionment charms weren’t bad, but they weren’t perfect like invisibility cloaks were. And even if she *could* make herself invisible, how could she time it that closely? And what about the others who were injured? What if Draco’s

participation had been vital somehow? What if he had saved one of the others during the fight?

She was staring at the small device, knowing that she *had* to save him somehow. She couldn't live without him. But if there was any other way to do it – *any* other way – she had to figure it out and quickly. Changing the past a little bit for a threesome was one thing. Changing it to manipulate who could participate in a battle was entirely different. Perhaps the others would die without Draco there. Maybe *Harry* would die without Draco there. Or the werewolves might break her wards if he wasn't there to stop them. They had been cracking while the battle raged on, and Draco was found right next to her door. He was obviously trying to get to her.

Her head spun, and her heart ached. Hermione had no other solution, but there had to be something, *something* other than the wretched time-turner that could fix this.

Hermione's brain whirled, and she forced herself to think.

She needed time. She needed an answer. She needed *help*. She had always been bad at asking for help, but dammit she would ask for it a hundred times over if there was anybody *to* ask. If only Draco wasn't one of the injured. He would always try to help her, in any way he could. Even if he didn't have the answer himself he would be able to calm her, focus her, and *that* would help her.

She glanced down and saw Rosie watching her, and she wondered what she must look like. She had been staring at the time-turner for a full minute as her thoughts tumbled through her mind. Hermione's next words just slipped out, almost unconsciously.

"Rosie, I need help. But I don't know how to ask for it."

To Hermione's astonishment, Rosie didn't appear to be as overwhelmed as Hermione felt. She just gave Hermione a curious look. "But Mistress has asked before, has she not? Rosie has sensed it when she was tied to the Manor."

“Pardon?” asked Hermione, totally nonplussed.

“Mistress Hermy has asked for help before. Mistress Hermy has called the Manor.”

The Manor.

“Yes, of course,” she breathed.

The Manor might have answers for her. The Manor always seemed to have secrets it was willing to reveal with the right promises and some coaxing. Maybe, just *maybe* there would be a solution for this that wouldn’t involve time-turning. She glanced at the watch that was in her jewelry box and quickly strapped it on her wrist. She didn’t have a lot of time, but she had to *try*. The time-turner was truly a last resort.

Hermione took a deep breath and closed her eyes, as she reached out with her magic. To her utter relief, it connected.

Hello Hermione, said a voice that sounded like the Manor.

Hermione was a bit startled. It had never addressed her by name before.

Hello. I need your help. Draco has been injured with the werewolves’ curse, and he’s dying. Is there anything you can show me? Anything you can do to help?

Do you not have your own solution?

Hermione sighed. The Manor could be awfully stubborn, and now was *really* not the time.

I do, but it’s dangerous. It’s not guaranteed to work. It could still result in Draco’s death. It could also result in the death of many others who are innocent. It could even kill me.

Would you risk it for him if it was the only way?

Yes. I can't bear to live without him.

Her answer was instantaneous. Hermione *knew* she would risk it, even though it was very stupid.

Wrong answer, sweetheart.

Hermione started. Just like that day in the Wizards' Parlor, Draco's own voice was speaking to her now. She felt tears well up, and she choked back a sob.

Draco, please help me.

You should never risk your life for me. You know that's not what I want. Ever since meeting you again, I've known that I have to be the one who dies first. I couldn't live on this earth without you.

Tears were coursing down Hermione's cheeks now.

I know! I do know that, but I feel the same way! I can't live without you either. We've only just found each other, and I can't spend the rest of my life dreaming about what we could have had together. I can try to turn back time to save you, Draco, but I know it's very dangerous. If there is any other way, I will try that instead. I just can't think of what it might be!

You're finally asking for my help?

Yes, I am. I need your help Draco. I need YOU. If there are any alternative solutions, I need to know what they are and quickly. I love you too much to let you go.

Hermione wasn't terribly surprised to feel the Manor's magic washing over her, probing her heart to test her commitment to her own words. This time, however, it felt warm and inviting.

Very well, said the Manor's voice now. *Then perhaps it is time to claim me.*

Claim you?

Yes, you must claim me. Become my Mistress. Accept the things Draco and I can give to you.

Hermione was nearly breathless now. The Manor wanted to be *claimed*.

But how?

You already know how. You've always known how. You learned about it on your very first day here.

Hermione closed her eyes and forced herself to slow down long enough to think clearly. The Manor needed to be claimed. Draco had laid claim to it himself, but the transition ritual had never fully worked because he didn't have a second when he did it. He and Hermione weren't bound yet.

Hermione's eyes flew open, and she experienced one of those rare moments of clarity where the solution fell into place for her at precisely the right moment. She knew exactly what to do.

"Rosie!" she cried, as she looked down at the eager little elf. "Collect some sand from the grounds and four candles please! Meet me in the Study as soon as you have everything! Quickly!"

Rosie nodded and disappeared without a word. Hermione hastily shoved the time-turner into her cleavage, making a mental note to tell Pansy that she needed to start putting pockets in her dresses. Then Hermione raced out of the door and down the hall to the stairs, cursing the size of the Manor along her way. It took her a full minute before she was flinging open the door to the Study and approaching the trick bookcase, panting with the effort to get there so quickly.

She willed her heart to slow down as she opened the cabinet and fished around for the latch.

“Aha!” she whispered, as she felt it release, and the bookcase swung forward silently. Hermione pulled it all the way open and hurried inside before skidding to a halt.

There, in the very center of the floor, was the engagement contract with a quill and ink. Hermione stared at it for a moment before kneeling down to pull it aside. It didn’t budge.

SERIOUSLY?! she practically shouted to the Manor.

You know what you need to do, sweetheart, said Draco’s voice.

I need to claim the MANOR you idiot!

Ah yes, the Manor requires the ritual, that’s true. But I require the contract.

You ARE the bloody Manor!

Am I? Or is it just a part of me, and I’m a part of it?

What on earth are you talking about?

The Manor already told you, didn’t it? You need to accept the things we can give you. Claim us both, sweetheart. Make us yours.

I really can’t believe this!

Believe it. You’re an awfully stubborn witch, but I’m a Malfoy. We’re an opportunistic bunch.

“I’ll say...” muttered Hermione out loud, as she stared down at the contract.

It was all there, and to Hermione’s surprise, Draco had already signed and initialed everything. He had been telling her for days he wouldn’t negotiate further and it was best she just give it up. Hermione, naturally, hadn’t given up because it felt like far too much. She continued to resist the gold under the illusion that she would be

able to wear him down eventually, and he always gave her a teasing smile and said they would talk more about it in the new year. As she stared at the dry signatures on the page she could see now that he was very serious about his offer. He was so unwilling to negotiate that he had signed the bloody thing as it was, and now he was just waiting for her to do it too. She wondered how long it had been half-signed like this, kept safe in the Important Documents Vault or perhaps his desk while he was waiting for her to come around to his way of thinking.

With a flash of understanding, Hermione realized that Draco had *a/ways* waited for her to come around, or he tried to at any rate. It was true he struggled with it when they were in the middle of a fight, but for something like this he would give her the space she needed until the matter became urgent.

It was now urgent, and Hermione's stomach lurched as she remembered Harry's words from earlier that evening.

"...if you happen across it, please sign it. It was his final wish, Hermione."

How could she not, when put like that? Hermione still didn't know how she was going to fix this, and Draco might be dead soon. He would want to take care of her, and this would do it. If she signed it, everything else would happen automatically: the gold would transfer and the flat would become hers. She would want for nothing, and Draco must have known it when he told Harry his wishes.

Hermione felt her tears start again, but she brushed them away with frustration. She no longer had the time to fight him about this. She had to claim the Manor, and she needed the floor space that was being covered by their contract to do it. Draco had made it very clear that he wouldn't cooperate unless she signed the damn thing. Something told her the Manor would turn uncooperative too if she wrecked the document to clear the space she needed. After all, the Draco she was communicating with was the Manor, despite his insistence that they were just a part of each other.

There was only one way forward.

Without thinking about it again, Hermione grabbed the quill and ink and signed and initialed all the way down the page until she got to the very last line. She hesitated for just a split second but then gritted her teeth and added her final signature just below Draco's. The moment it was done, she gasped as the contract disappeared, along with the ink and quill.

Thank you, sweetheart. You've given me everything I've wanted. Now please... claim the Manor too.

As if on cue, Rosie appeared with a great *CRACK!* holding a small bag of sand and four candles.

Hermione waved her over, and Rosie rushed in as Hermione pulled out her wand and placed it flat on her hand.

"Point me," she muttered, and Rosie watched curiously as the wand spun before pointing due north.

"Handy little spell I discovered in fourth year for the Triwizard Tournament," said Hermione distractedly, as she placed a candle in that position and then used it to orient the other three candles in the four cardinal directions. She took the sand from Rosie's bag and sprinkled it in a line to connect each candle in the shape of a diamond, before lighting them with her wand.

"Mistress Hermy is knowing what to do?" asked Rosie.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I studied the ritual so much I know what to do. I don't even need the book."

With the room set up, Hermione pointed her wand to her palm and muttered a cutting spell. Blood immediately blossomed across her hand. Rosie gulped a little, but said nothing as Hermione placed her palm firmly into the middle of the diamond.

She began to chant, making one substitution as she did so.

"Sanguis coniugis mei evanuit. Sanguis meus hanc domum implet. Utere magia donec moriar. Terram, familiam meum, et hanc domum custodivi."

Hermione knew the original version of the spell referenced blood from a father. Hermione modified it to reference blood from a spouse. It was true they weren't married yet, but it was a technicality at this point. She hoped it would still work to claim the Manor by stating her intentions.

To Hermione's relief, she felt a sharp pull of her magic, and she gasped as she was pulled down onto the stone floor. A moment later, she felt a snap, and she was released.

She scrambled to stand up, healed her hand, and then she opened her magic curiously to see if it worked. She connected more easily than she ever had before.

Greetings, Mistress, it said.

Dispute the urgency and seriousness of the moment, Hermione was elated that it had worked.

Greetings. Now please tell me: how can I fix this? How can I save Draco without risking any others to do it?

Where might the answer to your question be found?

God, couldn't *anything* be straightforward? Why did the Manor always insist on asking rhetorical questions?

Because that's how you think best, it seemed to answer for her.

Oh bloody hell, it behaved that way because of *her* magic? Hermione exhaled and rubbed the bridge of her nose as she forced herself to think. Where could the answer be? What was the thing the Manor hadn't yet revealed?

It came to her in a flash, and she was suspended for a moment between relief that she had figured it out and resentment that the Manor evidently knew her so well.

I need you to show me the Master's Hiding Place.

She sensed the Manor's approval, which felt an awful lot like *Draco's* approval whenever she decided to cooperate with him.

This Malfoy has done things differently, said the Manor. My Master does not have a Hiding Place.

Hermione's heart sank, and now she was confused. The Manor had seemed to be in agreement with her only moments before.

But then what I am to do?

I said my Master does not have a Hiding Place, but my Mistress does. Find the Mistress's Hiding Place.

Hermione was stunned. The *Mistress's* Hiding Place? That was entirely unprecedented. She had never heard of such a thing in all of her reading about the Manor. As if sensing her thoughts, the Manor elaborated for her.

My Master claimed me through blood, but you claimed me through choice. You are his equal in every way that matters. During my Master's childhood my halls were stained with dishonor and dark magic, all in the name of perpetuating blood ties. But blood is insignificant compared to choice and action. In generations past, the Hiding Place has always gone to the Master because I have never been able to influence who else claims me. When Draco tried to claim me, I was finally given the opportunity to select my own Mistress. I chose you the moment I saw Draco's heart. I have been waiting for you to choose me too, Mistress.

Hermione was overwhelmed, but she could only think of one thing to say.

Thank you.

No need to thank us. It was your own actions that did it, came Draco's voice. Hermione found herself smiling at it.

Draco, where is the Mistress's Hiding Place?

Why would the Manor ever tell me such a thing sweetheart? I'm merely the second, after all.

Could that be? Was *Draco* second to Hermione? Did the Manor really believe in choice so much that it was Hermione's magic that was first and Draco's that came second? It was true that many of the changes reflected her in some way: the portraits, the flowers, even the room names were as much about her as they were about him. Now she had been given the Mistress's Hiding Place as well. Draco, however, had been given the wards. Hermione could not feel them like he could.

You are not second to me. We are equals. We balance each other. Your role is to protect the Manor and its traditions. My role is to sway the Malfoy family toward better choices for the future. We are not first and second to each other. We are two sides of the same coin.

Precisely, Mistress, said the Manor. Now then: find the Hiding Place. It is in a location that only you would be able to discover.

Hermione glanced at her watch and saw with a lurch that time was slipping away from her. But she was close. She was so *close*. Where could the Mistress's Hiding Place be? Where was this mysterious location that only Hermione would be able to discover?

Her first thought was the Library because it was her favorite spot in the Manor. She would surely be the swottiest of all Malfoy wives. But instinctively she knew that wasn't right. The Library was so famous that others visited it frequently. Hermione wasn't the only person who could discover it.

She forced her frantic mind to think, *think* about everything the Manor had told her. She was there because of choices she made. The Manor selected her because it saw Draco's heart. It also saw the potential in her. She was meant to right the wrongs from the past by making better choices than the Malfoys before her. She wasn't always perfect, and she knew she had flaws. She had been slow to accept her feelings for Draco. She had intentionally hidden things from him. She *still* fought his help now and then and could be awfully stubborn. The Manor had never hesitated to point these things out to her. But Hermione knew she must have made choices the Manor approved of too. There must have been things she had done that made her worthy, even if the Manor had never disclosed them to her.

As she considered this, her eyes drifted down toward Rosie, who had been watching her anxiously all this time. Rosie was silent, but scared, wringing her hands nervously as her ears drooped. And as Hermione stared at the little elf, she almost fell over as the answer hit her so powerfully it made her breathless.

"Rosie, come on!" she shouted, and she started to sprint out of the room and down the hall.

"Where is we going?" asked Rosie eagerly.

"You'll see! I think I know where the Mistress's Hiding Place is!"

Rosie's eyes were huge, but she said nothing more, as she followed Hermione. They tore down the gallery, and then Hermione went down a side hall before wrenching open the door to the Kitchen.

The Manor elves stopped to stare at her in amazement, but nobody questioned her as she ran toward the door that led to the elves' quarters.

Of course it was in here. It just had to be. Wasn't she the first human to visit this section of the Manor? Wasn't she the Mistress who insisted the elves be given rights and wages and freedom? They were *Manor* elves. The Manor valued them – it always had – and

she was the first Mistress to truly value them too. Even the Masters who had controlled them had never cared for them the way Hermione did.

“My Hiding Place has to be in the Elves’ Lounge!” she cried as she ran through the hall. “Please, everyone, help me look!”

Perhaps it was the dried blood on her dress; perhaps it was the wild look in her eyes; perhaps it was because those who had not yet chosen freedom could sense that she had performed the Manor ritual too. Whatever the reason, the Manor elves didn’t question Hermione’s odd statement, but they dropped everything they were doing and followed her to the Elves’s Lounge eagerly. The moment they arrived, they threw themselves into the search with her.

To Hermione’s great relief it only took a couple of minutes before Rosie squeaked, “I think I is finding it Mistress!”

Hermione spun around, and she hurried over to the tall cabinet where the elves kept their dishes and crockery for meals. Hermione had never opened it, but Rosie had opened it any number of times during their lunches. As she watched, Rosie and then several other Manor elves all pulled on the handle but it wouldn’t budge.

“I is thinking this is your Hiding Place!” cried Rosie excitedly. “It is not opening for us!”

Hermione took a deep breath and stepped forward. She placed her hand on the cabinet door and felt a small spark. Her face split into a broad grin as she pulled, and the door opened effortlessly.

The elves chattered excitedly, as Hermione quickly surveyed the shelves. She didn’t know what she was looking for exactly, but she trusted the Manor had led her here for a reason. As she looked closely, the answer struck her yet again.

This was Lucius’s stash.

A brief glance told Hermione that Lucius's stash obviously contained poisons, dark objects, and plenty of things she would have to sort through later. But it also contained something else, something critically important that she saw on the very top shelf: a royal blue potion that was the precise shade Lucius had described in his journals.

Hermione's pulse was racing as she reached for it. She knew it was more than six years old, but hopefully it still worked. It was her best chance, she knew, other than the time-turner that was stuffed down her dress.

Decision made, she pulled the potion off the shelf, and to her surprise something small clattered to the floor as she did it. She bent down to pick up a familiar ring: it was the one she had decommissioned several months ago.

You should keep it sweetheart, came Draco's voice. *It would look lovely on you.*

Despite the urgency, Hermione huffed a small laugh and slid it onto her right hand. Draco always was trying to get her to wear their heirloom jewelry, and she supposed that she had earned this one by solving the latest mystery of the Manor under less-than-ideal conditions.

Hermione clutched the potion to her and then looked at Rosie.

"Take me back to him," she said. "It's time to save his life."

"Right away, Mistress," said Rosie as she grabbed Hermione's hand and pulled her through the darkness.

They landed with a thud, and Hermione looked around to see Padma and two other trauma healers working on Draco and the aurors, all of whom appeared to be alive, but only just.

“I’ve got it!” shouted Hermione, as she pushed past them. Padma stepped away, and Hermione dropped to her knees and poured a dose of the completed potion down Draco’s throat and watched anxiously. To her relief a soft golden light covered the cursed wounds. It pulsed for a moment, and then Hermione heard a *SNAP!* as though the curse was breaking.

“Dose the others,” said Padma hurriedly. “I have blood coagulant potion with me.”

Hermione nodded in relief and left Draco to Padma’s care, as she assisted the other two. By the time she returned to Draco, she saw his bleeding had stopped and color was returning to his cheeks now that the blood replenishing potion could finally work its magic.

Hermione grasped his hand in hers and stroked his face as she watched his eyelids flutter.

“Hermione,” he rasped.

“Shhh,” she said. “You’re alright. Take a moment before you try to sit up.”

He closed his eyes for a few minutes and breathed deeply. “That hurts like hell,” he said.

“Yes, well a werewolf *did* claw you. Once you can move we’ll have Florrie take you back to the Manor, and I’ll give you some pain potion.”

He swallowed and nodded before opening his eyes and looking at her. Hermione felt tears well up again.

“Hey,” he said softly. “No need for that.”

“You almost died!”

“But I didn’t. As Blaise would say, you saved my pasty arse yet again. I know it was you, don’t deny it.”

She half-laughed, half-sobbed as she swiped away her tears. Draco's brow furrowed as he watched her, and then he grabbed her hand and stared at the ring.

"Where did you find this?" he rasped.

Hermione blushed. "It's a long story, but suffice to say that I finally found Lucius's stash. I had to sign that bloody contract, claim the Manor by repeating the transition ritual you did right after he died, and then find the Hiding Place to do it. By the way, it's the *Mistress's* Hiding Place, not the Master's Hiding Place, and that's why we've never been able to find it before now. I'm afraid the Manor didn't give you one. That ring was with Lucius's stash, right next to the potion that saved your life. The potion must have been leftover from when Lucius brewed it all those years ago."

A flurry of emotions crossed his face as he processed everything she just said. Then he looked at her seriously and swallowed. "You signed the contract then?"

"Erm, yes..." she said nervously. "And I know it was entirely out of order, but your *ridiculous* manifestation at the Manor held me hostage and wouldn't let me proceed with the ritual until I did it."

Despite his obvious pain, a very satisfied smile crossed Draco's face at this.

"Excellent," he breathed. "I *knew* it was on my side. The Malfoys have always done things differently. I have no problem doing this out of order."

Hermione's face flushed at this, as the full impact of that decision hit her: they had effectively agreed to get engaged, even though no proposal had taken place yet. Admittedly, this was an unconventional way to become engaged. Hermione had been selected by the Manor itself, and now they were both in a nondescript hallway of the Ministry of Magic, covered in blood. Then again, Draco had nearly died. The fact that he had survived made this moment pivotal as far

as Hermione was concerned. She didn't care where they were. She didn't care that the Manor had been stubborn about it and backed her into a corner with the contract. She only cared that she was with him and he was alive.

She took a deep breath. "In that case..."

Draco just raised an eyebrow in question.

"Will you marry me Draco?"

Draco's eyes widened in amazement, before his face broke into a broad grin. "I thought I was supposed to ask *you* that."

Hermione shrugged, now a bit nervous because he hadn't answered her yet.

"Perhaps. But as you just said, the Malfoys are allowed to do things differently. I love you more than anything in the world. So will you break the rules and marry me even though we haven't been courting a full year?"

Draco's eyes softened, and she saw his answer before he began to speak.

"I would love to marry you, sweetheart. Now let me ask you the same thing. Will you fulfill my dreams and make me the happiest bloke on earth? Will you marry me back?"

Hermione felt her face splitting in two, and she glanced around to find Rosie, Florrie, Harry, Padma, and several other auror and healer were listening to them in disbelief. Hermione just laughed.

"Yes, Draco. I can't wait to marry you."

"Good," he said, as he slid the ring off of her right hand and placed it on her left. Hermione's breath hitched as she realized that he had intended for this to be her engagement ring.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

“It’s almost as beautiful as you,” he agreed. “And I must thank you for finding it, sweetheart. Florrie and I have been looking for it everywhere.”

No More Secrets

Chapter 49: No More Secrets

AN: This is it! I can't believe this journey is done. This is the longest fic I've ever written because I just couldn't let these two go. I love them both so much. I can't thank you enough for the encouragement, support, feedback, and ideas. I changed a few things as I posted in response to your feedback, and I think it improved the fic!

I have a couple other things brewing — one partially written and one in the concept stage. I'll be back once I make enough progress to begin regular posting!

Thank you all once again!

Draco

It took several days for the aftermath of the werewolf attack on the Playground to settle, and during that time Draco reverted to his third-year self while he pretended to be more injured than he actually was. After all, every time he groaned, his adorable fiancée looked at him with her huge doe eyes and fussed over him, gently examining his wounds and fluffing his pillows. Draco was determined to enjoy every moment of her special attention. Hermione took one hour the day after the attack to confirm that the last experiment with the potion was successful, and then she delivered it, along with the instructions and extra centaur blood to St. Mungo's for their in-house potions masters to brew. Other than that short trip to complete her assignment, Hermione didn't leave his side. She spent hours reading to him, caring for him, and Draco was practically drunk with her

attention. The only downside was his inability to shag her without giving away the game.

It lasted nearly three days before she realized what he was doing.

“Draco Lucius Malfoy, you terrible, *terrible* man! You’ve had me worried sick! You’re just playing it up, aren’t you?”

Draco made a critical error when his dry spell motivated him to seek a quick wank in the loo – he was admiring some photos of her and took longer than he meant to. Naturally, she grew concerned and checked on him, and that was how Hermione discovered he was perfectly fine. She gave him the cold shoulder for a few hours before he eventually found her in one of the spare bedrooms and coaxed her into submission for him.

“You’re violating the terms of our contract! What about my decompression room, hmmm?”

“Sweetheart, your decompression room isn’t built yet. Besides, that’s for periods of conflict, remember?”

“We’re having a conflict!”

“No we aren’t. I couldn’t possibly be cross with you, and it takes two people to have a conflict.”

“Draco, you are *impossible*...”

“Come on sweetheart, cut me some slack. Can you blame me for wanting you all to myself after that terrible, awful attack where I nearly died? Maybe I just wanted to bask in the attention of my beautiful savior. I saw the light, you know, but something kept me from going to it. I know it was you. You are my own, personal angel who brought me back from the brink of death.”

At this reminder, she gave a giant sniff, and Draco pulled her in tight before kissing her deeply.

“I’m still annoyed with you,” she said, though her wavering voice and soft sighs said otherwise.

“Be annoyed all you want. Just let me take care of *you* now. We still haven’t celebrated our engagement properly.”

And that was how Draco broke his dry spell after the attack: with reverent kisses all along her body, eliciting the sounds and tastes he always craved from her.

“Marry me, Hermione,” he murmured into her bare breasts.

“We’re already engaged,” she said.

“I don’t care, say you’ll marry me again...”

“I’ll marry you Draco...”

“And again...”

“I’ll marry you...”

Draco couldn’t get enough of it. It was true that his plans for a very romantic proposal had been shot to hell, but Draco found he didn’t mind it so much. *She* had asked *him*, and she didn’t second guess it in the days that followed. They committed to each other in blood that day, and something about it was fitting for the journey they had taken together.

Still, that wouldn’t stop Draco from asking her over and over again and bringing her to completion while he did it.

Telling their friends was another matter entirely. Harry, of course, witnessed the entire thing, and within a few hours their whole friend group knew. Draco had endured a solid thirty minutes of high-pitched squealing from Pansy and Ginny, both of whom barged into the Manor the morning after the attack and settled into the seating area in Draco’s bedroom to debrief with Hermione.

Telling Narcissa was yet another matter. His mother was torn between being thrilled with the news and annoyed by the timing. The invitations for their courtship ball had to be redone at the last minute to remove all references to “courting,” and Narcissa made the executive decision to announce the engagement at the ball itself so they could control the messaging with the media. After making sure Draco was not at risk of dying, Narcissa swept out of the room with a determined glint in her eye and a list of all the people who were in that hallway with them. According to Harry, she was positively terrifying.

“She threatened me within an inch of my life if I spilled the news before your ball. She was... very convincing.”

“Convincing how?” asked Hermione curiously.

“I might have put the werewolves who witnessed it in solitary confinement so they couldn’t tell anybody about it either... at her suggestion of course. It’s only for a couple weeks,” admitted Harry.

“Harry, that’s barbaric!”

“Take it up with her. She’s way scarier than you.”

To Hermione’s consternation, she got no help from Draco.

“Don’t you *want* people to know?” she huffed.

“Of course, sweetheart, but all the people I care about know already. Besides, Mother’s very insistent. She wants a big reveal. And look at it this way: you’ll only have to endure one ball like this because Mother says it will count as our engagement party.”

Still, Draco had to admit that Hermione had good reason to be annoyed by the secrecy. He did *not* enjoy seeing her disillusion her engagement ring once it was time for her to return to the Ministry and see other people.

Once Draco was declared healthy, they were both called in to give their official statements about the attack. It was only then that Harry told Draco everything that happened after Hermione and the elves whisked him back to the Manor to heal.

“Two of the werewolves died, but Wilson is still alive. All of the attackers were from the New Pack, and it looks like there are only a few left we haven’t rounded up. Wilson was Grayback’s protege, so that’s how he learned about the spell. They found out that Hermione was working on the cure because Kingsley made some oblique references to it in *The Daily Prophet*. They captured one of the St. Mungo’s trauma healers and tortured her for information. She’s shaken up, but she will be alright.”

“And Alan Estes?”

“I sent a team to his home while you were passed out. They caught him just as he was about to flee the country. He’s culpable. He has no children, and Wilson was the closest thing he had to a son. He was also being very well-compensated for helping Wilson behind the scenes,” said Harry.

Draco shook his head in disgust. “It’s unbelievable – Wilson *did* have support in the Ministry the whole time.”

“It’s true, he did,” acknowledged Harry, “but Estes has always had a certain reputation to maintain. He didn’t want anybody to know he was related to a werewolf, even if it was a wolf he loved as his own. He wasn’t willing to go through the legal channels to secure the rights Wilson and the others wanted.”

It wasn’t until New Year’s Day that Hermione finally took Draco down to the Elves’ Lounge to show him the Mistress’s Hiding Place. He looked at the cabinet incredulously, but he had to acknowledge that the stash she found was truly impressive.

“We’re turning everything in with one day to spare,” she told him happily as they levitated numerous potions and at least a dozen

cursed objects out of the cabinet. Draco surveyed the collection with some disbelief.

"I can't believe he kept all of this," he admitted.

Hermione nodded sagely. "Yes, some of these are combustible when mixed together. And if the potions had spilled on the dark objects..." she shuddered.

Even more interesting than the dark items they discovered were the *other* things Lucius hid: a couple of unregistered wands, vials of memories about his activities during the war, and numerous journals that contained notes about his experiments.

"I knew Father always enjoyed potions, but this is unbelievable..." said Draco as he flipped through several of them.

Lucius, it transpired, had used the Stables as his personal potions lab during the war to continue his experiments under Voldemort's nose. It was obvious to both of them that Lucius had kept records of everything and hid all of his experimental potions in the Master's Hiding Place because it was even more secure than Gringotts. The Manor must have pulled the journal Hermione needed from his stash and moved it to the Book Vault to aid her in her discoveries.

"You'd think the Manor would have removed the potion too instead of sending me on a treasure hunt with very tight time constraints," said Hermione with some annoyance.

"Maybe the Manor needed insurance," remarked Draco.

"Insurance about what?"

"Insurance to make sure there was a reason you would claim it."

Sure enough, Hermione reached out to the Manor, and it confirmed Draco's theories.

"The Manor was unapologetic about it," said Hermione with a huff.

As for Draco, his own communication with the Manor had improved since Hermione claimed the Manor too. He did not enjoy the long conversations that she seemed to have with it, but whenever he reached out with his magic to find her the Manor told him precisely where to go.

“It’s much more direct with you than it is with me,” she said with consternation after he told her about this.

Draco just shrugged. “Maybe it knows you like to have a mystery to solve. I’m certain it knows that I’m a randy bastard who can scarcely wait whenever I’m looking for you. Maybe that’s why it doesn’t fuck around with me. Besides, you know the Manor wants us to make those babies and secure the line, sweetheart. It’s been very clear about that.”

After they cleared out the Mistress’s Hiding Place and turned in Lucius’s cache to the Ministry, Hermione spent a full week on the Playground examining the objects they had discovered. The outcome of this was an entire morning spent on the Playground, where Hermione once again made an exception to her rules and allowed a large audience to come watch. Not only did their friends join this time, but Narcissa was there too, along with a number of the aurors who had never been allowed onto the Playground before.

“They saved me,” she said simply. “It’s the least I can do.”

To Narcissa’s dismay, the decommissioning took place the morning of the ball due to a scheduling conflict for Shackbolt. Draco knew this was the *only* reason his mother permitted the overlap – she couldn’t tell the Minister of Magic no, especially since he had consented to attend the ball that night. Draco saw that she was torn between deep interest and chagrin as explosion after explosion took place in the curse-breaking room.

“Hermione is going to be a mess by the time this is over!” hissed Narcissa, who couldn’t seem to tear her eyes away.

Pansy made soothing noises while the others mostly ignored Narcissa's hand-wringing. They were too busy eating the pastries Shackbolt had provided as part of the entertainment and filling out the bingo cards Theo had made for the event.

"I've got a *reducto*, an *expulso*, a *bombarda*, a *protego*, and a *glacius*!" shouted Ginny, as she leapt to her feet, waving her card in the air. "BINGO in all of your *faces*!"

Ginny was rewarded by getting the first pick of the decommissioned items that survived the process. To everyone's surprise, she selected a diary that had been set apart from the journals Lucius himself used.

"This is the second diary I've received from Lucius," she said simply. "I'll let you know if this one writes back too."

Several hours later the curses were broken, Kingsley was practically hopping up and down with excitement, and the aurors were staring at Hermione with a mixture of awe and fear.

"You're sure she's not single?" Draco heard a young auror whisper to another.

"Absolutely *not*," interjected Draco with an icy voice.

Hermione was obviously tired from her efforts, but she came back into the viewing room with a broad smile on her face. Narcissa gave her fifteen minutes to chat and accept compliments from the group before stepping forward and whisking her away to get ready for the ball. Pansy and the other witches followed close behind.

"We only have six hours!" said Narcissa in a slightly hysterical voice.

Hermione just sighed and gave Draco a long-suffering look, but didn't otherwise object. Draco smirked and winked at her. Florrie told him that Mistress Cissy had planned an entire afternoon of pampering for Hermione's big debut as part of the House of Malfoy.

When Draco arrived back at the Manor he pressed his ear to the door of the extra bedroom in the Master Suite and heard tittering, giggles, and the occasional squeal. He had no idea what they were getting up to in there, but Narcissa had commandeered the entire thing, and he knew he would be risking his life if he dared interfere.

As for Draco, he spent most of the afternoon watching the elves scurry around with last-minute preparations and thinking about all the new changes that had been wrought by that night Hermione claimed the Manor for herself.

The portraits of the magical creatures were still there, but they had been reorganized and interspersed with numerous muggle paintings. Hermione and Draco had ventured into the Sitting Room together only to discover that all the paintings of dark creatures were gone, replaced entirely by the Matisse works that Hermione so admired. It was bright, bold, and entirely out of character for how the room used to feel. Hermione declared that if any artist could purge darkness from a room it was Henri Matisse, and they opened it for mixed use again.

As for the Wizards' Parlor, the Manor finally decided to cooperate and allowed Draco and Hermione to remove the muggle rape paintings that had been housed there for decades. They were planning on returning the paintings to the muggles after the ball, but in the meantime they were replaced with landscapes and still lifes – all paintings of entirely innocuous things that triggered no memories for Draco about what that room used to be. Draco ordered the furniture and stained rug replaced as well, and though it was still his least favorite room in the Manor, he made a point to go in there with his friends to use it for business. Most notably, he used the Wizards' Parlor to cancel the land contract with Wilson during his first visit to that room after it was refreshed.

One thing that did *not* change after Hermione claimed the Manor was the room names. With the Manor's magic now stable, Hermione was sure they could replace any nameplates they wished, by after talking about it together Hermione and Draco decided to leave the

room names alone. They would open the Sitting Room and Wizards' Parlor for use again to bring the Manor out of the darkness. They agreed, however, that they shouldn't forget the things that had happened there or the lessons they had learned from it. The nameplates were kept as a reminder of the past.

With less than an hour to spare, Draco made his way back to the Master Suite and pressed his ear against the door again. He heard the frantic noises of his mother and Pansy scurrying around with last-minute alterations to everyone's gowns. Draco sighed to himself and then headed to his old bedroom to shower and get dressed. He was still the first one downstairs and began to greet guests as he kept an eye out for his mother and fiancée.

In accordance with Malfoy family tradition, the ball was themed in the colors of the Malfoy crest: green and black. Narcissa, who declared the crest to be far too masculine for her tastes, added accent colors in gold, silver, and white to soften the overall effect. As Draco looked around the Ballroom he thought it looked similar to his first ball with Astoria, but far more luxurious. Narcissa was pulling out all the stops for Hermione since this time she was sure the relationship would end in a marriage, and Draco raised an eyebrow as he surveyed the towering floral arrangements, the ice sculptures, and even the enchanted snow that was falling from the ceiling to mimic the weather outside.

The magical instruments that could play themselves had been brought in from the Magical Objects Vault and were arranged in one corner, while Rosie had supplied all of the house elves with fresh tea towels for the occasion. To Hermione's dismay the ritual had bound her to the Manor elves in the traditional way, and so far only half of them had requested freedom. Unsurprisingly, Hermione had made a bit of a project out of it, and Draco had no doubt that by the time the actual wedding rolled around she would convince the rest of them too.

The guests continued to fill the Ballroom, until Draco's attention was pulled away by a commotion at the door. His breath caught when he

saw Hermione walking through the crowd, dressed in the same shade of deep sage green as the Malfoy crest. Her gown was daring for an event like this: strapless and fitted through the waist with a low back, before flaring out into a large skirt. With it she wore one of the prized necklaces from the Jewelry Vault that Draco knew wasn't made out of emeralds, but green diamonds. It was one of their most famous pieces, worn by Malfoy brides for centuries, and Draco beamed to finally see it on her.

The others, Draco was surprised to see, were not dressed in the bold colors Pansy had become known for, but creams and golds and silvers. The colors were light, but wintry and exceptionally neutral to make sure Hermione stood out from the bunch.

"Hermione," Draco breathed as he strode over to her and pulled her in for a very long, very public kiss.

Draco ignored the tittering as he clasped her left hand and subtly felt for the ring that was disillusioned on her finger. To his great relief she was wearing it. He couldn't wait to let the world know that she was his and that he was so infatuated by her they were already engaged. Draco would have shouted it from the rooftops if it hadn't been for his mother and her stern warning to wait.

"We need to control the messaging, and that includes announcing a wedding date at the same time as the engagement," said Narcissa. "I'm very pleased you two are so much in love, but you *did* break the rules Draco. Everybody is going to think Hermione is in a delicate condition unless we announce that the wedding is taking place later on this year."

Draco knew his mother was right about this, and so he had waited for *weeks* to finally make it public. He subtly checked his watch. Two more hours to go.

The next couple of hours passed in a blur of meet and greets, champagne, and the same conversations over and over again.

Draco barely let Hermione out of his sight, so attached was he to his fiancée.

His fiancée.

He still wasn't used to that. The only word that would be better was *wife*.

She will be. She will be my wife in six months and one day.

Not that Draco was counting.

Draco, naturally, had pushed for an early spring wedding, but Narcissa put her foot down about it.

"I need time to plan, Draco!" she insisted.

Draco was ready to overrule her, until Hermione backed his mother up.

"You know Narcissa's right," she said. "Besides, the wildflowers will be divine that time of year, even without the magic to help."

That sealed it: Draco would be marrying Hermione in July, just over a year after they first reconnected with each other. In the meantime, he had a fiancée, and now he was finally ready to tell the world.

"Attention!" he called, as he clanked a knife against his glass of champagne.

The magical instruments immediately halted their music, and the chatter died as the room quieted to hear what Draco had to say.

"I want to thank you all for coming tonight. We're here to celebrate my favorite person in the world, Hermione Granger, who has recently decided to join the House of Malfoy. My mother has outdone herself tonight to welcome Hermione into our family, and I'm pleased to announce that it's a bit more than a courtship at this point."

At these words, the few members of the press that Narcissa had strategically invited started writing frantically, their cameras flashing.

“As some of you may know,” continued Draco, “I was at the Ministry the night the New Pack infiltrated the Ministry of Magic. They were subdued by a team of aurors led by Harry Potter, but I was attacked with their novel curse and nearly died. Hermione saved me through extraordinary effort and moments later consented to become my wife.”

There was a shocked silence for a split second before applause and cheering broke out among the crowd. Draco smiled and saw Hermione was bright red at all the attention. He waved his hand to quiet the guests as he turned to address Hermione directly.

“Hermione, sweetheart, you are going to make me the happiest of men. I am counting down the days until July 16th when we become bound, and I am certain it will be the best day of my life. I can never thank you enough for your forgiveness, love, and support. You’re a treasure – *my* treasure – and I love you more than I have ever loved anything or anybody in this world.”

Draco heard some sniffs in the crowd, but he ignored them as he pulled out his wand and canceled the disillusionment charm on Hermione’s ring. Then he pulled her in for a deep kiss as the crowd cheered again.

“Let’s celebrate!” he cried, and the music began in earnest.

Draco’s announcement inspired another two hours of rounds through the crowd where they accepted congratulations and provided a joint statement to the press about their engagement. Included in that statement was confirmation that their engagement contract was already signed and contained a provision that established the Hermione Granger Malfoy Foundation, which had been formed and funded the previous day.

The first grant made from the HGM Foundation will be to St. Mungo's to fund the brewing and distribution of Wolfsbane, which will be provided to any confirmed werewolf on a confidential basis free of charge. The HGM Foundation will also support publicity efforts through the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to ensure that werewolf populations are made aware of this new benefit so that their condition may be managed in a more humane way and to improve their quality of life.

Rita Skeeter's eyes had nearly bugged out when she read it.

By the time Draco and Hermione could slip away from the ball, the party was well-underway, and Draco was sure they would no longer be missed. He tugged on Hermione's hand and gestured toward a side-door that they slipped through before Hermione slumped and pulled off her shoes.

"The cushioning charm wore off an hour ago!" she moaned.

Draco just grinned and vanished her shoes before pulling on her hand again.

"There's something I've been wanting to try, sweetheart," he said, "and tonight's the perfect time for it. Everyone's distracted."

"What's that?" she asked curiously, but he just grinned and shook his head as he steered her down the familiar hallway toward the Library. He nudged open the door and as expected, he found it completely empty.

Hermione looked at him like he had lost his mind.

"Try it, Hermione."

"Try what?" she asked in confusion.

"Try calling the books."

Hermione's eyes widened in understanding, and she looked around, both very hopeful and obviously terrified that it wouldn't work.

She thought for a moment and then said, "Find *The Art of Shibari*?" in a questioning voice, and then the small book came whizzing toward her from the same shelf she had stashed it all those months ago.

Hermione caught it and laughed with excitement.

"Draco!" she exclaimed.

She spun back around, and Draco just smiled broadly as she picked up the hem of her dress and started running barefoot through the Library, just as Draco had once imagined she would.

"Find *Old and Forgotten Bewitchments and Charms*! Find *Modern Magical History*! Find *Numerology and Nonsense*!" she cried.

Book after book came flying off the shelves and Hermione flung open her arms and twirled with delight. Draco couldn't help but stride toward her to catch her. She fell into him with a soft *flump*, and they ended up on the floor in a tangled heap of arms and legs and taffeta.

She was still laughing as Draco rolled on top of her and kissed her deeply before pulling away and smiling down at her.

"Well?" he said.

"It's wonderful," she said simply, "and it fulfilled one of my greatest fantasies."

"*You're* wonderful," he murmured. "And you know something... I've *also* had a fantasy about the Library... I first thought of it when I was thirteen years old."

"Oh?"

“Mmmm. I wanted to kiss you in here and then take you in here. I’m not sure how we haven’t done it yet.”

“No time like the present. Unless you’re afraid of getting caught,” she quipped.

“Never,” he said. “Let them all look. You know it excites me, and I know it excites *you*.”

And with that Draco pushed her dress up and ran his hand under it, finding smooth legs and a bare cunt.

“No knickers then?”

“Not tonight,” said Hermione.

“Why’s that?”

“I was hoping to tempt you.”

“Minx. Last time you did this I finished you.”

“I know, but I was hoping you would make an exception tonight.”

Draco grinned as he slipped a finger into her. “I think we can do that sweetheart. Get wet for me. I’m going to take you right here.”

“Oooh maybe we can roleplay as characters in a historical romance novel,” she breathed. “There’s always an illicit sex scene during a ball!”

“That’s fitting,” he acknowledged. “Our romance is one for the history books.”

And with that, Draco lifted her dress and moved his head under the skirt to lick and nip. He was sure that he looked ridiculous, half-covered by her gown, but he didn’t care. Her scent and her heat were all-encompassing this way. It triggered some primal part of his brain, and Draco now understood why wizards had been doing this

for centuries if the stories were to be believed. He was drowning in her wetness, and he could happily suffocate himself just like this.

Eventually he was forced to come up for air, if only to finish the thing he had just started with her. With the notable exception of shibari, Hermione never *did* get off with just his mouth.

He removed his head and stared at his witch, pink cheeked, chest heaving over the edge of her gown, looking both elegant and thoroughly ravished.

She had never been lovelier.

“I need you,” he groaned as he unfastened his pants.

“Yes,” she agreed, and she accepted his lips eagerly as he opened her and slotted inside of her.

“Promise me something,” he said as he wrecked her dress, crumpling it at the waist to give himself better access.

“Anything...” she agreed.

“Promise me that you’ll always tell me what you want, what you need. You’ll always give me a chance to keep your love.”

“I promise,” she said, and Draco rewarded her with the speed and angle and depth that he knew she craved.

She moaned, and it catapulted him to that place he loved to dwell – the place where he could only speak truths to her.

“...love you so much...”

“...my beautiful witch...”

“...love your mind as much as your body...”

“...can’t wait to call you my wife...”

It was hot, it was sweet. It was wild, it was ardent. It was everything Draco felt for her in one moment as they came together with the promise of their future before them.

When Draco pulled out and cleaned her up, he stayed half on top of her, tracing the planes of her face and the line of her neck.

She was perfect.

She was his.

“Sweetheart, I have something for you.”

“Hmmm?”

Draco reached into his pocket and pulled out the small box.

“I know I didn’t propose properly, but I hope this makes up for it.”

“Draco, our engagement was perfect.”

He smiled at this, knowing that she was right.

“That’s true. But I still wanted to surprise you with *something*. Please, open it.”

She did and pulled out a charm for her bracelet: a replica of the Malfoy crest, studded with the same green diamonds she was wearing around her neck.

“You’re joining my House. You’re the Mistress of Malfoy Manor. You’re the keeper of all my secrets. You’re the love of my life.”

She beamed and pulled him in for a kiss. He indulged himself for a moment before pulling out the bracelet, which he had kept in his pocket all night.

“Here,” he said, adding the charm to it. “I think this bracelet is complete. I’ll start a new one on our wedding day.”

She surprised him with another kiss, this time rolling on top of him before pulling back to look down at him a bit breathlessly.

“Thank you Draco.”

“Of course, sweetheart.”

Now she gave him an impish smile that made Draco raise one eyebrow in question.

“I’m the keeper of your secrets, is that right?” she asked.

“Every single one.”

“Well there’s one you still haven’t told me.”

Draco was nonplussed. “That’s impossible. We have no more secrets.”

“Hmmm, I think you have *one*.”

Draco furrowed his brow. “And what secret is that?”

“Were you or were you not my anonymous donor?”

Draco felt the laughter bubble on his lips before he could stop it.

“Call me your husband, and I’ll tell you,” he said.

“*Draco ...*” she groaned.

“*Sweetheart ...*” he echoed.

“Oh fine then. Will you tell me, *husband?*”

Draco broke into a broad smile.

“You’ve given me everything I’ve ever wanted, so I can give you this. Yes, my dearest wife... I was your anonymous donor.”

She got a triumphant look on her face.

“I *knew* it!”

Draco chuckled and pulled her down for one more kiss.

“No more secrets, my wife.”

“No more secrets, my husband.”

And Draco knew, as he stared in her eyes, that they both meant it. The Malfoy secrets could be kept from the world, but they would never be kept from each other. Not ever again.