

## The Informant

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/54018571) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/54018571>.

Rating:	<a href="#">Explicit</a>
Archive Warning:	<a href="#">No Archive Warnings Apply</a>
Category:	<a href="#">F/M</a>
Fandom:	<a href="#">Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling</a>
Relationship:	<a href="#">Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy</a>
Characters:	<a href="#">Draco Malfoy</a> , <a href="#">Hermione Granger</a> , <a href="#">Harry Potter</a> , <a href="#">Ginny Weasley</a> , <a href="#">Theodore Nott</a> , <a href="#">Blaise Zabini</a> , <a href="#">Luna Lovegood</a> , <a href="#">Narcissa Black Malfoy</a> , <a href="#">Crookshanks (Harry Potter)</a> , <a href="#">Antonin Dolohov</a>
Additional Tags:	<a href="#">Slow Burn</a> , <a href="#">Espionage</a> , <a href="#">Eventual Smut</a> , <a href="#">Smut</a> , <a href="#">Morally Grey Draco Malfoy</a> , <a href="#">Morally Grey Harry Potter</a> , <a href="#">Draco Malfoy &amp; Harry Potter Friendship</a> , <a href="#">Protective Draco Malfoy</a> , <a href="#">Possessive Draco Malfoy</a> , <a href="#">Sex</a> , <a href="#">Oral Sex</a> , <a href="#">Implied/Referenced Rape/Non-con</a> , <a href="#">Fluff and Angst</a> , <a href="#">Ectopic Pregnancy</a> , <a href="#">Sexually Experienced Draco Malfoy</a> , <a href="#">Sexually Inexperienced Hermione Granger</a> , <a href="#">Miscarriage</a> , <a href="#">Murder</a> , <a href="#">Draco and Hermione Go International</a> , <a href="#">Draco Is Creepy Yet Wholesome</a> , <a href="#">Harry/Draco Bromance</a> , <a href="#">Ballroom Dancing is Sexy</a>
Language:	English
Collections:	<a href="#">Read</a> , <a href="#">Cherry on Top</a>
Stats:	Published: 2024-02-23 Completed: 2024-03-27 Words: 158,904 Chapters: 39/39

# The Informant

by [Beforetheralbook](#)

## Summary

When Draco Malfoy overhears the whereabouts of one of the Death Eaters still at large after the war, he tips off Harry Potter.

Now, eight years later, Draco is still helping Harry Potter round up the inner circle, and he is working undercover to do it.

What happens when he runs into Hermione Granger purely by chance and suddenly feels the need to dig a little deeper? Will he be able to draw her closer to him, while keeping his great secret from her? And will she believe that he really wants her, or will she only think that he's using her for his own purposes?

Featuring a manipulative, possessive, and dangerous Draco Malfoy and a competent, but skeptical Hermione Granger. There are themes in later chapters that might be triggering for some readers. Please note the tags.

## **\*\*2024 Reddit Dramione Top Fics\*\* Best Post-War Fics (Top 10)**

## Notes

### ► Posting, Binding, and Anti-AI Policy

\*\*The bots are taking over the comments section on AO3, so as of Nov. 2025 I have now locked comments to registered guests only. If you are a human with an AO3 account, I would love to hear from you! If you are a human without an AO3 account, please consider getting one so I can hear from you!

# Chapter 1: The Tip

DECEMBER 1998

## Draco

*Thank fuck for the holidays.*

Draco's parents had forced him to go back to Hogwarts for an eighth year following the final battle with the Dark Lord, and he had spent the last three months holed up in his dormitory or the library, in an effort to avoid as many people as possible.

He supposed he was lucky he still had a couple of friends. Theo and Blaise had returned, and they had been more welcoming toward Draco than he was expecting. Goyle, however, still resented him, as did many of the other Slytherins whose family members were former Death Eaters. They blamed the entire Malfoy family for turning traitor during the final battle. His mother had saved Potter in the forest, and he himself had failed to identify Potter and his friends when they were captured and brought to the Manor. All of this came to light during his and his mother's trials the previous summer, and it did not endear him to most of Slytherin House.

As for the rest of the school, they knew that he was a former Death Eater, and they had uniformly turned against him. Despite the actions the Malfoys had taken during the last year of the war, it was clear to all of the students that they were acting out of self-preservation as opposed to some great change of heart. None of the Malfoys actively spied for the Order — they simply assisted Potter a couple of times when he was in a real bind. The Malfoy sins hadn't been forgiven by those who fought on the side of the light.

He sighed. Going back to Hogwarts wasn't easy, and he hadn't wanted to return, but his parents insisted he needed to. The Malfoys had to move on from the Dark Lord and having the heir finish Hogwarts was the first part of that plan.

The second part of the plan was not antagonizing muggleborns while he was there. So far, Draco thought he was doing an admirable job of this, though if he was honest with himself he had lost his hatred against muggleborns as soon as the Dark Lord moved into the Manor during sixth year. The prejudices that had spurred the entire war seemed ridiculous in light of how everything had turned out, and Draco no longer particularly cared about *anyone's* blood status. Still, he knew nobody would believe him if he said these things out loud, so he did the next best thing. He simply kept his head down and ignored them.

And these were the reasons Draco Malfoy was spending his final year holed up in the library or his dormitory with Theo and Blaise. Escaping to the Manor for the holidays felt like a much-needed break.

Draco was walking toward the Malfoy library to find something to read when he heard his parents' voices coming from his father's study.

"Lucius, I won't do it!" said Narcissa.

Draco knew he shouldn't eavesdrop, but he couldn't help it. He crept closer.

"Please, Narcissa, consider it. I'll be in Azkaban soon, and Draco is going back to school. You will be here all alone. Every Death Eater in his inner circle had access to the Manor, and they will be able to find you. I want you out of here."

Draco inhaled, his heart pounding.

"So ward them out," she said.

"It takes *time* to change wards this ancient, Cissy. And I need to use the time I have to transfer everything to Draco to manage while I'm in Azkaban. Besides, *nobody* can change them until I'm sentenced. That was part of the deal with the aurors. You know they've been in and out of the Manor all autumn looking for evidence..."

"Lucius, you don't know that you're going to Azkaban. Draco and I avoided it..."

"Of course I'm going," said Lucius harshly. "Our solicitors have made that abundantly clear over the last few weeks. You need to accept it, Cissy. You and Draco both had mitigating circumstances, and they never really wanted you. Not like they want me. I've traded a lot of information for a lighter sentence, but I'll still be there for a long time. And while Draco is in school..."

"I'm not going to move in with Rodolphus, and that's final," she said firmly.

Draco felt his jaw drop.

*His dad wanted his mum to move in with Rodolphus? Impossible.*

"Cissy..."

"No! What do you think would happen to me if the aurors found out I had moved in with a wanted Death Eater, Lucius?"

"He's in Bellatrix's villa in the alps, Cissy. The aurors will never find him there."

Draco heard Narcissa snort at this, and Draco had to agree with his mother on this point.

"They won't," insisted Lucius. "You know the aurors aren't even aware they own it."

"I know that's what Bella and Rodolphus always said, Lucius, but I don't believe it. And I'm not leaving the country without Draco. I will be perfectly fine here."

Draco heard his father huff and then say, "Fine. For now. But if there is even a hint of a threat I want you to leave Cissy, do you understand me?"

Draco heard his mother murmur something, and Draco pulled away and spun around to head back upstairs to his room, thinking hard.

*Of course Mother would be in danger, Draco thought. But she can't go stay with Rodolphus. He's a wanted Death Eater. And he's dangerous.*

Draco was sure Narcissa had never told Lucius about the leers and stares Rodolphus had directed toward Narcissa ever since he was broken out of Azkaban. Rodolphus had always seemed to have a bit of a fascination with Narcissa that made Draco deeply uncomfortable. Lucius, however, had been so wrapped up in the Dark Lord that Draco didn't think he had noticed.

*Obviously not or he never would have suggested Mother go there.*

Draco himself had no love for Rodolphus. He was Draco's uncle, yes, but only because he had been idiotic enough to marry Bellatrix. As far as Draco was concerned, the world was better off without Bellatrix, and he rather wished her husband had suffered the same fate during the final battle. Draco knew he was still at large, and the aurors were looking for him. Draco was a bit surprised his father hadn't turned over his location to the auror department himself, but Draco knew that Lucius had a strong sense of family obligation. He didn't particularly like Rodolphus either, but they were related. Lucius would never betray him.

*But I don't have those same loyalties, thought Draco.*

He chewed on his lip as he turned this over in his mind for a few moments and then finally pulled out a piece of parchment. He hesitated for a bit longer before he wrote.

*Scarhead,*

*I hear you're gallivanting across the countryside rounding up my dad's former mates. I have information on one of them that might be of interest to you. I'm home on break and can meet whenever.*

*Ferret*

Draco folded the note and found his owl to send it off, wondering if he had truly lost his mind to do this. But he knew he needed to. He might be able to use it to secure his mother's safety once Lucius was in Azkaban. Unlike his mother, Draco was certain his dad would be serving a considerable sentence, and he had to admit that Lucius had a point about his mum staying in the Manor alone.

He pulled out some potions homework in an effort to distract himself. He forced himself to work through it for a couple of hours until a loud *CRACK!* made him jump so hard he nearly fell out of his chair.

"Master Draco, I have a message for you from my master," said an old house elf with rheumy eyes. He looked vaguely familiar, but before Draco could ask him who he was, he shoved a note into Draco's hand and then disappeared with another loud *CRACK!*

Draco just gaped at the spot the house elf had been in for a moment before finally shaking himself and opening to the note to read.

*Ferret,*

*Meet me at the Rose & Crown Mayfair, 2 Old Park Lane, London tomorrow night at 10 PM.  
Do something about your hair and then come find me. I'll look like your favorite weasel.  
Burn this after you read it.*

*Scarhead*

Draco sucked in a breath when he read it. Potter wanted him to meet in muggle London, and he wanted Draco to hide his most distinctive feature when he did it. His heart started to pound, but he was certain now he had made the right decision. Potter obviously knew how dangerous this was. Draco read the note three more times, making sure to memorize the address before he pointed his wand to the note and said, "*Incendio.*" Immediately it burst into flames, and Draco watched as the note shriveled and burned. Then he took a deep breath and stood. He needed to get to work before his meeting tomorrow night.

\*\*\*\*\*

At five minutes to ten, Draco pushed open the door to the muggle pub and looked around to see if he could find Potter.

*I'll look like your favorite weasel.*

There was no question who that was referring to, and sure enough Draco soon noticed a very tall redheaded man standing near the bar and ordering a drink. Draco ran a hand through his dark hair, took a deep breath, and moved forward. As soon as he approached, the face of Ron Weasley took a sideways look at him and said, "Actually, make it two. First round is on me tonight."

The muggle bartender grinned and poured two glasses of something gold with foam on top. Potter moved one glass in front of Draco and said, "Come on, there are some tables back here."

He turned without another glance and started to weave his way through the crowd. Draco snatched the glass and followed a few paces behind until they reached a two-person high top

in a corner. They sat down, and Potter looked around for a moment before pulling his wand out of his pocket and muttering, “*Muffliato*.”

Then he looked at Draco and raised an eyebrow.

“Potter,” said Draco.

“Malfoy,” replied Potter. “What can I do for you?”

There was an awkward pause for a moment, and Draco took a sip of his drink and then choked.

“Fucking hell, this is revolting,” he said.

Potter just gave him an amused grin. “Muggle beer isn’t your thing then?” he asked.

Draco just gave his drink an appalled look. “If this is what muggles drink, then the Dark Lord needn’t have bothered. This shit will kill them faster than he ever would have.”

To Draco’s surprise Potter snorted at this, and then looked a bit chagrined at himself. Finally he took a deep breath and just raised his eyebrows at Draco.

Draco studied him for a moment before he said, “I know where Rodolphus Lestrange has been hiding.”

Potter blinked once and then smoothed his face into a passive expression.

“And how do you know that?” he asked.

Draco shrugged. “I overheard someone talking about it the other night.”

Potter cocked his head and studied Draco for a moment. Draco just stared back at him with wide eyes.

“What?” asked Potter.

“You have no idea how weird it is to see Weasley thinking,” said Draco.

Potter rolled his eyes, but Draco caught the briefest flash of amusement cross his face at this before saying, “Ron is more strategic than you think. And he’s easy enough to transform into for this sort of thing.”

Now Draco narrowed his eyes. “Speaking of that, why bother? I know we can’t be seen together, but meeting in muggle London is fairly anonymous.”

Potter looked a little uncomfortable and said, “Yes, but I live nearby and come here fairly often. You can’t be too careful with this sort of thing.”

Draco sat back and crossed his arms. “And the Weasel doesn’t come here with you?”

Potter shook his head. "Not really, no. He's not that comfortable around muggles. I usually come here alone or with Hermione when she's on break."

Draco smirked. "Does the Weasel know you're dating his girlfriend then?"

Potter rolled his eyes. "She's like my sister. And I'm dating *his* sister."

Draco just gave him an amused look until Potter seemed to shake himself out of it and said, "Look, we aren't here to talk about that. Why don't you tell me what you want in exchange for his location."

Draco smirked. "Maybe I'm telling you out of the goodness of my heart."

"Bullshit," said Potter. "If that were true you would have told me already."

Draco shifted uncomfortably. "Fine. I want some protection for my mother after my father goes to Azkaban. Just until I'm out of school and I can change the wards on the Manor to keep the other Death Eaters out. We aren't allowed to touch the wards until he's sentenced, and I'll be back at Hogwarts then."

Potter stared at him now in apparent surprise.

"That's more like Weasley," said Draco, surveying him with interest.

Potter just snorted and rolled his eyes, but then looked thoughtful.

"So you want us to hide her for what... six months?"

Draco nodded. "My dad's trial is the first week of January. He will be going to Azkaban, and I'll be in school until the end of June. He's in the process of turning everything over to me to control once he's gone, but I figure it will take a couple weeks to update the wards once I'm allowed to do it. I won't have enough time until I'm out of school, and I don't want her there without me or my dad. He's turned over so much information that the others may target her."

Potter narrowed his eyes. "I thought you had a second home in France?"

Draco shifted uncomfortably. He didn't know that Potter was aware of this, though he probably shouldn't be surprised.

"We do. But she won't leave the country without me, and it's also fairly well-known among those who are still at large. And that one has never been as well-warded as the Manor. It's not as old."

Potter gave him a small nod and said to himself, "If it's only for six or seven months..."

Then he turned to Draco and said, "She can stay at my house. It's warded and under a new fidelius charm. There are only a few people who can get in."

Draco was taken aback. He struggled to think of what to say and finally settled on, “You have your own house?”

Porter nodded. “It used to belong to Sirius Black. He was my godfather, and I inherited it when he died. Your mum has probably been there before.”

Draco raised his eyebrows. “She has. So have I, actually, though I was about five the last time I was there.”

Potter nodded absently. “Well you may not remember it well, but it’s fairly large, and it’s just me most of the time. Hermione lives with me during school breaks, but they won’t run into each other if it’s just until Hogwarts is done. She usually stays at school through Easter break to study for exams.”

Draco gave him a sharp look. “What about Weasley?”

Potter shook his head. “No, Ron moved back home to be with his parents. Fred died in the last battle you know, and he and George both moved home for a while so their parents wouldn’t be alone. When I visit, I always go over there. He never comes to my place. Besides, once he decides he can move out I think he will go live with George above the shop. George has had a really rough go of it, and Ron and I see each other all the time.”

Draco nodded slowly, thinking it through. It just might work. But he needed to close all of the loopholes to be sure.

“Is there anybody who visits you often?”

Potter hesitated for a moment and Draco gave him a hard look. “Who is it Potter?”

Potter glared at him a bit but then took a deep breath and said, “Only two people. Andromeda. Your mum’s sister. And her grandson Teddy, who is a baby.”

Draco looked at him in shock, but Potter just shrugged. “Teddy is about eight months old, and I’m his godfather. Andy’s husband, daughter, and son-in-law all died in the past year fighting Voldemort. Teddy is all she has left, and she gets me by proxy as his godfather. I see them for dinner about once a week, but we usually alternate. Your mum could keep to her room when Andy visits if she didn’t want Andy to know she was there. It’s not like Andy wanders the bedrooms when she comes over. Or your mum could try to reconnect with her. I think Andy would be open to it. She’s awfully lonely.”

Draco felt his mild whirling. He knew about Andromeda of course, but Narcissa had never talked about her very much growing up. Potter clearly knew her well though, if he was calling her by a nickname. He knew the sisters had called each other Andy, Bella, and Cissy growing up, but Draco had always thought of Andy as Andromeda, because he had never met her. It seemed odd to assign a casual name to an estranged relative.

Then again, he knew his mother was lonely too and about to get even lonelier when Lucius was sent away. She might be open to it.

"I think...." he hesitated. "I think that might work, Potter."

Potter sat back with a slightly satisfied look on his face. Draco was suddenly suspicious.

"Why would you offer though?" he asked.

Potter shrugged. "First, this is a lot easier if it's off the books and the Ministry doesn't know. Second, I have the space and privacy for it. And finally, she's my favorite Malfoy. I don't much fancy the idea of her being in the Manor alone once your dad is in Azkaban."

Draco felt his mouth twitching at this. "She's my favorite Malfoy too."

"Obviously," said Potter.

They sat in silence for a moment and then Draco said, "So I should probably tell you where Rodolphus is then."

Potter stared at him hard. "If you want to. The offer to your mum is open regardless."

Draco blinked, feeling totally wrong-footed now.

"Why?" he asked.

Potter rolled his eyes. "I just told you, didn't I? You're right that it's dangerous for your mum to live there alone until you can fix the wards. I don't want her to get hurt. Besides..." and now he smirked. "If you tell me, then it *is* out of the goodness of your heart, and something about that is incredibly satisfying."

Draco rolled his eyes. Potter had more Slytherin in him than Draco had ever realized. Draco felt a muscle in his jaw twitch as he thought about whether or not he could give this away gratuitously, but he finally decided he would owe Potter if he didn't. Besides, Draco didn't like Rodolphus at all, and he deserved to be put away. He took a deep breath and said, "Fine Potter. Here."

He pushed an address, a blueprint of the chateau he had found at Gringotts, and a vial of blood across the table to Potter.

Potter looked stunned. "Blueprints?"

Draco nodded curtly. "From Bellatrix's old vault."

Potter looked shocked. "But how did you get in?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "She died, didn't she? That vault you broke into was her marital vault from the House of Black. Her marriage to Rodolphus was a blood match, not a love match, so she never gave Rodolphus access to it. My mum's her sister, and Bellatrix named Mum as her heir. Mum combined her marital vault with the Malfoy vault years ago because she actually loves Dad, and she moved the things from Bellatrix into the Malfoy vault as well. I've been able to get into the Malfoy vault without my parents since I came of age. I can

assure you, those blueprints are for Bellatrix's chateau in the alps. Though technically my mum owns it now."

Potter was running his finger across it.

"And this...?" he trailed off, as he looked at a list of spells in one of the margins.

"A list of the wards."

Potters eyes widened a bit at this. "So this is..." he said, now eyeing the blood.

Draco rolled his eyes again. "My blood. The chateau is protected by several blood wards Bellatrix put into place, but any blood from the House of Black should work to get you through them. Mum hasn't been to the chateau to change anything since Bellatrix died."

Potter nodded slowly and then gave Draco a piercing look. It was an odd expression to see on Weasley's face.

"He's your uncle. I'm surprised you're doing this, Malfoy."

Draco just sneered at this. "He's a fucking arsehole. I don't like him, and I won't be sorry to see him join my dad in Azkaban."

Potter nodded slowly. "And your mum...?"

"Will probably throw a party once he's put away. She's not as open about it as I am, but I can assure you she hates him just as much as I do and will be thrilled. Rodolphus always made my mum uncomfortable."

Potter shot him a knowing look. "And your dad?"

Draco shrugged. "He won't be pleased, but he missed quite a bit about Rodolphus while kissing the Dark Lord's arse the past few years. And he'll be in Azkaban very soon. I'm not sure his opinion is relevant anymore."

Potter gave a small smile at this in acknowledgement and said, "Alright then. You've convinced me. And just in case there is any other information you run across..." and Potter passed Draco a galleon.

"A galleon Potter?" asked Draco, raising an eyebrow. "I thought my information would be worth rather more than that."

Potter just snorted. "It's not a real galleon. It's a method of communication. Here."

He pulled another galleon out of his pocket and tapped it with his wand. Suddenly Draco felt the one he was holding grow hot and the words, "Thanks ferret," appeared on his galleon.

Draco's jaw dropped. "What...?" he asked inelegantly.

"Hermione's idea," said Potter. "She charmed them."

Draco's head shot up. "Did you tell her?" he asked in alarm.

Potter rolled his eyes. "Of course not. But she's made these kinds of galleons before, and I told her I wanted a new pair to use with whomever I'm partnering in the field."

Draco just stared at him. "And Granger believed this?"

Potter smirked. "She was so busy telling me that I would be able to do this myself if I had bothered to return for NEWTs that she didn't question the reason."

Draco felt his lip twitch at this. He could picture it. He thought about it as he turned the galleon over.

"I'm not saying I'll ever give you more information, Potter. I just owe you this one for my mum. And I want Rodolphus gone."

Potter shrugged. "Fair enough. But keep it in case you ever want to. Anything you tell me will remain confidential. And I've heard your mum is hosting a New Year's Eve party soon."

Draco shot him a look. "There aren't any Death Eaters invited."

Potter just looked at him. "Maybe not. But as somebody once told me, the world isn't divided between good people and Death Eaters. There are plenty of people who maintained neutrality who are related to Death Eaters or who believe in pureblood supremacy and just stayed away from Voldemort because he scared them. You never know what you might hear."

Draco hesitated but then gave a nod and pocketed the galleon.

Potter smirked again. "I need to head out. Thanks for this Malfoy. And let me know once you've talked to your mum about moving in. You can contact me with the galleon."

He gathered the items Draco had provided and just nodded at him once before turning to leave.

Draco stuck his hand in his pocket and felt the galleon sitting there. He realized Potter hadn't offered him anything at all in exchange for future information. Just a promise of confidentiality. But even as he thought about it, he knew he would do it. He was going back to Hogwarts this year to rehabilitate the Malfoy name. But Potter had just given him a way to rehabilitate his soul.

## Chapter 2: A Failed Proposal

**May 2006**

### Hermione

Hermione looked at herself in the mirror and sighed. She had just spent the last couple of weeks going through the annual round of memorials and social functions surrounding the anniversary of the war. Hermione hated these weeks more than anything, but there was nothing she could do about it. Her presence was in high demand. She only hoped it would taper off once they passed the tenth anniversary.

Hermione briefly wondered if she was truly mad for putting herself through what she knew would be a wretched encounter tonight on the heels of everything else, but she had never been one to dally once she made up her mind about something. And now that she was sure, she had to do it, poor timing be damned.

She checked her appearance once more in the mirror before she looked at her watch. It was time. She left the bathroom, grabbing her wand and her handbag, as she walked toward her fireplace. She grabbed a pinch of floo powder, threw it into the grate and made her way to the British Ministry of Magic. She went to the international floo area, spent several long minutes in security before she cleared it, and then threw some powder into the one of the Ministry's fireplaces while shouting "Bulgarian Ministry of Magic!"

She felt the familiar whoosh as she was swept away. The journey to Bulgaria took exactly 72 seconds. Not for the first time she was amazed by how swiftly wizards could travel around the world, but this thought was quickly overridden by the severe nausea she felt as she reached the 35 second mark. Instinctively she clenched her stomach and counted in her head until she finally slowed and stepped out of the grate on the other side. This journey had become very familiar over the last two years, but it never failed to give her motion sickness.

"Good evening Ms. Granger," said the welcome witch.

"Sasha, please, call me Hermione," she said.

Sasha just twinkled at her. "Off duty, yes. On duty you are Ms. Granger."

Hermione gave her a small smile and walked forward to check in. Between her job at the Ministry and her rather famous relationship with Viktor Krum, she had done this so many times that everybody knew her. It took very little time before she was cleared to make her way to the apparition point, where she closed her eyes and turned, finally opening them to see the familiar manor where Viktor lived.

It didn't take long before he was hurrying out of the gate to let her through the wards. "Hermoninny!" he said, pulling her toward him for a kiss.

Hermione grimaced a bit. Whereas most of the wizarding world declared his pronunciation of her name to be adorable, Hermione had always found it a bit grating. She was sure he was capable of saying it correctly. His English was quite good. He had just never bothered to try, and when she pointed this out to him he countered that the press liked the way he said her name and then moved on. She pursed her lips, but put it out of her mind for now.

She followed Viktor into his home, stopping short when she saw Alexey Ivanov, Viktor's press secretary, lurking in the study.

"Viktor," she whispered. "What is Alexey doing here?"

Viktor just gave her a dashing smile. "Nothing to worry about Hermoninny. He is here for a meeting later."

Hermione gave him a confused look but didn't press the matter further. She knew that Viktor and Alexey were prone to meeting at odd times. Still, she felt her stomach clench as she thought about the implications of this given her plans for the evening.

Viktor led Hermione into the sitting room and handed her a drink. "Wine tonight Hermoninny," he said.

She gave him a tight smile. She liked wine as much as the next witch but really wished for something stronger. Still, she knew Viktor wouldn't pour her anything else. This was his way, and it would take a fight to make him deviate from the things he wanted. She wasn't willing to fight him on this tonight, especially when the fight was about to get much bigger.

"Viktor," she said, "there is something I want to discuss with you."

"Of course," he said. "But first, there is something I need to ask you."

Hermione bit her lip. Years of experience had taught her that it was best to head off Viktor before he got settled into any one topic. But tonight, she felt she owed him this. She could wait for her turn while he took his first.

"Very well," she said.

To her horror, Viktor pulled a box out of his pocket, dropped to one knee, and opened it to reveal a large and rather gaudy diamond ring.

"Viktor!" she said with alarm, but there was no stopping him now that she had given him an opening.

"Hermoninny, you are the most beautiful woman in the world," he began.

Hermione barely resisted rolling her eyes at this, as his words washed over her. She was feeling numb, she realized. She didn't even hear what else he was saying to her until his final words made it through the buzzing in her brain.

“Will you marry me?”

“No,” she said automatically, and then winced when she heard her own voice.

Viktor’s jaw dropped, and then he cleared his throat. “Erm perhaps you did not understand?” he asked.

Hermione sighed. “Stand up, Viktor.”

He did slowly, looking at her like she had gone mental.

“Viktor, I came here tonight to end our relationship. It’s just not working for me.”

He gaped at her, clearly unable to believe what she was saying.

“But... but...” he stuttered.

Hermione plowed on before he could find his own voice. “We want different things. You want a wife who will keep your home and manage your social engagements and live here in Bulgaria. That’s not what I want. I want my job and my life in England.”

Now Viktor rolled his eyes at her. “As my wife you will not need to work,” he said.

Hermione struggled to maintain her temper. This had been a recurring fight in their relationship, and it was the primary reason she was ending it.

“I know that Viktor. But I’ve told you a hundred times I *like* my job. It fulfills me. I want to keep doing it whether I’m married or not. I won’t give it up for anybody, and it’s time we stopped fooling ourselves about this. We want very different things.”

Viktor just snorted at this. “You are delusional Hermoninny. When we are finally together like this, you will see that your job is nothing compared to the life I can give you.”

Hermione rubbed her temples, silently coaching herself not to lose her temper. Finally she took a deep breath and looked at him. “I’m sorry Viktor, but that’s not me. It’s never been me. And I’m done. I’ve said what I needed to say. The relationship is over. And now I need to go.”

She turned to walk toward the door when Viktor called, “But the press! Alexey has drafted an engagement announcement already!”

She spun to look at him, suddenly understanding why Alexey was here tonight. “Tell him it’s over. He can announce it or we can just let it fade away when we aren’t seen together again. I don’t particularly care. But we aren’t engaged. And if you announce that we are, I’ll publicly state that we aren’t. Neither of us wants that Viktor.”

His jaw dropped, and Hermione realized she was finally getting through to him.

“But...” he started.

"No buts," she said firmly. "I'm done. Goodnight."

Then she turned and strode toward the door before he could see her tears. She knew if he sensed any weakness from her he would pounce.

She made it to the gate and turned to apparate back to the Bulgarian ministry.

"Ms. Granger! Back so soon?" asked Sasha curiously.

Hermione struggled to compose her face as she shrugged. "Urgent appointment I forgot. I need to head back."

Sasha gave her an odd look but nodded as Hermione quickly went through the process of leaving. Once through security she waved to Sasha as she strode toward one of the fireplaces. She hesitated for a moment, but then threw some floo powder into it to return to the British Ministry of Magic, clenching her teeth when she hit the 35 second mark. After another round with security in Britain, she went to the domestic floo area and threw some powder into the fireplace. She said as quietly as she could, "Number 12 Grimmauld Place!"

She knew she wasn't expected at Grimmauld Place tonight, but she really had to see Ginny.

Finally she felt herself slowing, and she stepped across the threshold of the fireplace into the sitting room of Grimmauld Place. There she found a mostly clothed Ginny Weasley on her knees in front of the sofa, pleasuring a completely naked Harry Potter.

"Oh my God!" shouted Hermione, slapping a hand over her eyes.

She winced as she heard a wet pop, and a rather high pitched yelp that she was pretty sure came from Harry, because Ginny's voice said, "Hermione? What are you doing here?"

Hermione was so mortified, it came spilling out of her. "Viktor proposed, and I dumped him!" she gasped.

"Shit," muttered Ginny. Then Hermione heard her address Harry. "Sorry love, you better go finish this yourself. This is an emergency."

Harry groaned and started to protest, but Ginny was shooing him away.

Hermione heard some shuffling and a bit of laughter from Ginny and finally Ginny said, "It's safe now," with clear amusement in her voice.

Hermione peaked between her fingers to see Harry's bum walking toward the stairs.

"Gin!" she squealed, and Ginny just collapsed onto the sofa with laughter.

Harry yelped again and hurried off, as Hermione looked at Ginny who was still laughing so hard she couldn't speak.

"I am never going to forgive you," said Hermione, but she was smiling now.

"Sure you will," said Ginny, now wiping tears of laughter from her eyes. "It's Harry who is going to be in a right state. We were almost to the end, you know."

"Oh God," said Hermione again. "I never *ever* want to think about that Gin."

Ginny just laughed again, now sitting up and buttoning her own shirt. "That's one of the things I love about you Hermione. Harry is your brother, and you've never been even remotely tempted to get into his pants."

"Not even once," agreed Hermione with a smile.

Ginny led her into the kitchen and tapped the kettle with her wand before pouring Hermione a cup of tea.

"So tell me," she said simply, as she put the cup in front of Hermione.

Hermione breathed in the scent before taking a sip and then telling Ginny the whole story.

Ginny winced a few times and then eyed Hermione cautiously. "So how do you feel then?"

Hermione contemplated this for a bit. "Honestly? Mostly relieved. I mean, I'm clearly dreading the press. And work won't be great once it comes out. They leaned on our relationship quite a bit for Eastern European relations. But personally.... I feel free."

Ginny gave her a small smile and nodded. "It was the right choice then. And tell you what...."

Hermione looked at her questioningly.

"Let's take a girls trip. You were going on vacation with Viktor in a week anyway, weren't you?"

Hermione gave her head a sideways tilt. "In a manner of speaking. It was vacation time for me, but we were going to spend it in Bulgaria."

Ginny wrinkled her nose at this but said, "Well come with me instead then. Let's go someplace just the two of us. We can leave all the blokes behind and just have some pampering and fun."

Hermione started to smile slowly, and Ginny grinned back at her.

"Where then?" asked Hermione.

Ginny thought for a moment and finally said, "Paris."

Hermione raised her eyebrows and said, "But France is..."

"Not one of your countries. You've told me that a hundred times. So you can go there on vacation and it will be a *real* vacation. Not a pseudo vacation tacked onto a work trip like you usually do."

Hermione chewed her lip as she thought about this. She worked in the Department of International Magical Cooperation, and she had jurisdiction over much of Eastern Europe and several Mediterranean countries as well. She had been offered France many times, but she had always declined it, claiming that she had plenty to be going on with and that her French wasn't good enough. While neither of these excuses were true, she had never told anybody the real reason she didn't want France. So far, her excuses had worked well enough to keep France in the hands of somebody else, though it tended to be passed around more often than many other countries, much to the dismay of her supervisor.

*Because Malfoy's absolutely impossible*, she thought. But she had always kept these opinions to herself.

But this wasn't for work, this was a vacation, and Ginny's idea had merit. Hermione had loved going to France with her parents as a child, and Paris was enormous. There was virtually no chance she would run into him, and if somehow she did they could surely manage to be civil to each other for the thirty seconds they would spend in each other's company. Both of them did that for a living, or rather *Hermione* did that for a living. She still wasn't certain why *he* had joined the French Ministry, since he wasn't eligible to hold office in France and had no need of an actual job. She had never pressed the issue to find out though. All of the knowledge she had gathered about him after the war had been through careful eavesdropping when other people gossiped and strategic subscriptions to various newspapers and magazines.

It wasn't that she hated him. She didn't, not really. She knew Harry interacted with him now and then because Narcissa and Andromeda had reconnected after the war. They all shared Teddy in a way, and Harry insisted he wasn't that bad. Even Ron had reluctantly agreed that he had improved after running into him a few times in the shop. But Hermione knew that if she interacted with him it wouldn't be a casual run-in like Harry and Ron. They would be on opposite sides of the negotiation table. Their interactions would be frequent, and it would become contentious at times. Their history was so negative that it was easier to avoid him when she could.

And then there was the other thing... the thing she had never admitted to anybody.... the thing that had never made sense even to *her*:

Yes, Hermione had always avoided France, at least professionally. But she had to acknowledge that while she had carefully curated her professional life to avoid him, there was no reason she needed to do that in her personal life too.

She turned the idea over in her head once more as Ginny waited patiently for Hermione to make up her mind. Finally, she looked at Ginny and nodded, while Ginny's eyes started to sparkle.

"Excellent Hermione!" she gushed. "We've been talking about doing this for years! Merlin knows we could both use the break! We can just floo, yes?"

Hermione nodded a bit absently at this. She knew that when she and Ginny Weasley checked into the French Ministry there would be some press, but they could disappear into muggle Paris after that and enjoy their holiday.

"Yes, we have to check in going and coming, but after that we will be on our own. I'll book us a hotel in the muggle section of Paris. We can just avoid the wizarding areas."

Ginny grinned. "Perfect. But make it two rooms. I plan to find you some lovely French bloke to snog to make sure Viktor is truly out of your system, and I don't fancy walking in on you."

Hermione shot her a look. "Oh, you mean you don't want to see me doing what you were just doing to Harry?"

Ginny didn't look the least bit embarrassed as she said, "Nah, I mean, I wouldn't really care, but I'm pretty sure you wouldn't be able to look me in the eye afterwards. I'm actually shocked you're speaking to me right now."

Hermione groaned. "Well you weren't the one in the truly compromising position just now. That was..."

"Harry, true," said Ginny with another grin. "Poor thing is probably traumatized. That's alright though – my jaw could use a break."

"Gin!" squealed Hermione, before collapsing into laughter. This was one of Hermione's favorite things about Ginny. She was absolutely shameless, and Hermione loved her for it.

Ginny just smirked. "So Paris then?"

"Paris," said Hermione, smiling at her friend.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

Draco was sitting at the breakfast room table working his way through the papers. After skimming the French papers he read every morning, he picked up *The Daily Prophet*, which was a paper he always read much more thoroughly than the others. It was his main window into Britain when he wasn't there, so he made a point to read it cover to cover every morning, though he maintained a healthy dose of skepticism toward any article written by Rita Skeeter.

He turned it over and on the front page saw the headline, "*Potter Arrests Thorfinn Rowle After Manhunt Through Stockholm!*"

Draco felt a slow smile bloom on his face as he read the article eagerly. He and Potter had been working for a couple years to track down Rowle, and their efforts had only been successful after Draco had met his niece at a pureblood rout in Amsterdam several months ago. Realizing who she was, Draco had promptly introduced himself, flirted with her, and then taken her to bed to gently pump her for information about the Rowle family. In an effort to impress the Malfoy heir, she had bragged about the Rowle family properties, and Draco

had carefully committed to memory everything she told him and then passed that information on to Potter.

He and Potter had narrowed it down to three possible properties that should be searched, and sure enough, Thorfinn Rowle had been found at the property in Stockholm, which was the one Potter had visited personally. Draco read the article curiously and noted that Rowle had run for it and initially disappeared again, but Potter and the Swedish aurors he was working with had preemptively shut the floo network and placed an antiapparition jinx across several blocks of Stockholm before cornering him. It didn't take long for them to find him again with a manual search.

As if on cue, Draco felt his galleon warm, and he pulled it out and glanced at it.

*Another one bites the dust.*

Draco smirked and tapped his wand to his own galleon.

*Yes, though you look shitfaced in that article.*

He chuckled to himself waiting for his galleon to warm again. Sure enough, a moment later another message appeared.

*At least I didn't fuck his niece.*

Draco raised his eyebrows, knowing that now that he and Potter had gotten started, it wouldn't end until one of them conceded defeat.

*I didn't fuck her. I just let her have her way with me.*

*I don't believe you. She told you too much.*

*She seduced me, not the other way around.*

*Don't tell me you liked her. She looks like a horse.*

*Which means her lips were large enough to cover my dick.*

*For fuck's sake Malfoy, that's not an image I need.*

Draco grinned, knowing he had won this round. He would never tell too many people this, but he and Potter had become good friends over the last eight years as they worked to put away the rest of the known Death Eaters. Draco, and to a lesser extent Narcissa, had become a critical informant for Potter after Rodolphus Lestrange.

Draco had been forced to come clean to his mother after telling her about Potter's offer for her safety during those last few months that Draco was in Hogwarts. To his surprise, Narcissa was not only perfectly fine with the fact that Draco had turned his uncle in, but she wanted to help with the others. As soon as Lucius had gone to Azkaban, Draco and Narcissa had worked together to rebuild the Malfoy family image in public, while also staying close to those they knew through old pureblood circles. Those circles were filled with gossip, and

they had passed on a mountain of information to Potter through Draco's galleon and the occasional meeting at Malfoy Manor.

Potter, of course, had benefited from it professionally. Though still quite young, his track record at finding and arresting the Death Eaters from the former inner circle had become nothing short of astonishing, thanks in no small part to Draco and Narcissa. After proving himself with Lestrange, he had been given wide latitude by his superiors to follow future leads without explaining their source, and it meant Draco and Narcissa were protected from those at the Ministry who would usually be inclined to dig.

Draco knew that in an earlier part of his life he would have envied Potter for getting all of the credit and attention for the arrests, but after the war he no longer cared. Potter, he now knew, really did not want to be in the spotlight. He just tracked Death Eaters because he was skilled and thought it was the right thing to do. And Draco knew that he could never get any credit for his role in it. It would be too dangerous for him and his mother if any whisper of what they had done reached pureblood circles. Working with Potter, however, gave Draco a thrill so he continued to do it. And Draco felt the weight of everything he had done in the war lighten with each successful capture. He and Potter made a surprisingly good team.

Thorfinn Rowle made eight. Draco, Narcissa, and Potter were responsible for finding eight former Death Eaters of the inner circle.

At that moment he heard a noise and looked up to see his mother walking in. She caught the look on his face and raised her eyebrows.

"Potter got Rowle," was all Draco said, and Narcissa's face broke into a wide smile.

"Excellent," she said. "That one was rather personal, you know."

Draco did know. He had been forced to torture Rowle. It was the first time he had ever performed the cruciatus curse against another human being. He didn't feel guilty about *Rowle* exactly, but the torture had damaged him in some way.

As Narcissa made herself a plate of breakfast from the sideboard, Draco opened the paper and nearly spit out his coffee at the next article he saw.

*"War Heroes Granger and Weasley on Holiday in Paris!"*

Draco read the article with wide eyes, forcing his heart to slow down as he absorbed it.

"What is it?" asked his mother curiously. She had turned to find Draco utterly absorbed in the article about Granger and Weasley.

Draco tried to shake himself out of it. "Nothing. Just an article saying that Granger and Ginny Weasley are taking a holiday together in Paris."

Narcissa's eyes lit up. "Oh that's lovely. You know Harry has spoken fondly of them both for years."

Draco rolled his eyes. “Of course he does. And Ginny isn’t bad, I’ll grant you that, but Granger...” Draco grimaced a bit.

Narcissa gave Draco a sharp look. “I’m sure Ms. Granger is perfectly lovely to most people. I do wish we could connect with her to apologize for the appalling treatment she experienced at the Manor that day, but we never seem to run into her.”

Draco felt his stomach lurch at this. Watching Granger be tortured in his home had been one of the worst things he had seen in the war. When he found out she was returning to Hogwarts just like he was, he had dreaded it and made a point to avoid her as much as possible. This had worked rather well, and she had avoided him too. They managed to make it through the entire year without saying a single word to each other, though Draco knew this was largely due to the fact that he had ordered his house elf to follow her the first week and report her schedule back to him so he could avoid seeing her.

Once they were out of Hogwarts and there was no longer a great risk of seeing her every day, Draco had sent her a short letter apologizing for everything he had done to her over the years. She had never responded. Draco had taken the hint and left well enough alone, but he had always been very careful to stay away from her as much as possible after it became clear she didn’t forgive him. He kept a close eye on her through Potter and the papers, and he made sure to always be where she was not. It was clear she hadn’t forgiven him. Not that he could blame her. He didn’t forgive himself either.

When he and his mother had moved to their second home in France soon after Hogwarts, Draco had joined the Department of International Magical Cooperation in the French Ministry and had been assigned Britain as one of his countries. Potter had helped arrange it all behind the scenes. The entire move was to help the Malfoys track the remaining Death Eaters. Many of them had fled to the continent right after Voldemort fell, and so the Malfoys had opted to move too in order to be closer to those circles.

Draco’s job in the French Ministry gave him a perfect excuse to travel all over Europe for work, as well as for family business. He was responsible for the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, and Portugal. After some hemming and hawing, they had also given him Britain, purportedly since his family seat was still based there, though Draco had always suspected Potter had something to do with it. Retaining Britain in his portfolio gave Draco an excuse to return at a moment’s notice whenever he needed to work a case with Potter.

It had been a perfect arrangement, or so he thought, until Hermione Granger moved from the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures to the Department of International Magical Cooperation after only six months at the British Ministry.

For a brief period of time Draco had been worried that Granger would be assigned to France. Potter had mentioned once or twice that her French was very good, and it was an incredibly important ally for Britain. Granger was young of course, but then so was he. She was internationally famous, and Draco didn’t think the Ministry would mind giving her some of the more important countries to manage. But Granger appeared to be keeping up with him as much as he kept up with her, because he heard she had been offered France multiple times but always declined. Instead, she focused on Eastern Europe, Greece, Croatia, and Italy – in other words, all countries that did not overlap with Draco.

It was fairly obvious to Draco that she was trying to avoid him, though he had never voiced this out loud. The papers had never picked up on it, which told him that she had kept quiet about her motivations as well. Still, the notion that she had arranged her entire career to avoid him rankled just a bit, especially as he had built a friendship with Potter and even a truce with Weasley. He knew enough about her that her persistent avoidance surprised him. She really wasn't the type and usually faced conflict head on. But he had let it go. After all the things that had happened to her, she was entitled to keep her distance from him if that was what she wanted, and Draco wasn't going to press the issue.

Besides, by all accounts she had done an excellent job with the countries that *were* under her jurisdiction, though Draco suspected that her relationship with Viktor Krum was the linchpin to Eastern Europe. He was as much of a celebrity as she was in that part of the world, and Draco was sure that this was the real reason Bulgaria, Romania, and the others had started falling into line with the British Ministry so readily over the last few years.

Reading the article again, Draco knew that it was the first time she had been to France since he had moved there. He read the papers religiously, and he would have taken note of it if she had ever come here before.

*But she's just here on holiday, he thought, trying to calm his racing heart. It's just one week. There's no way I'll see her.*

Still, he made a mental note to let Blaise know they should meet at a different restaurant for his birthday on Tuesday.

Just then an owl flew in for Narcissa. He watched as she took the letter and said, "Oh it's from Andy!"

Draco put the paper down while he listened to his mother read the letter out loud.

*"... and Teddy put that frog spawn Draco gave him in Harry's bed. Harry didn't notice at first and was completely covered in it from what I heard..."*

"Yes!" said Draco, pumping the air with his fist. He was two for two with Potter today.

His mother gave him a sharp look.

"Draco, honestly. Please tell me you didn't instruct Teddy to do that."

"Of course I did," said Draco with no remorse whatsoever. "Teddy is the perfect sleeper agent. He can keep a secret. Potter has no idea it was really me."

Narcissa just rolled her eyes, but Draco saw a faint smile around her mouth. Draco himself was quite pleased. Teddy was finally old enough to carry out missions against Potter on behalf of Draco. Teddy was sneaky and had a mischievous streak that Draco had been told must have come from his father. And as Draco frequently reminded Potter, Teddy liked Draco more than he liked Potter. Draco found that he had no trouble convincing Teddy to do his dirty work for him if it meant he got to prank Uncle Harry.

Draco was lost in thought as he pictured it until his mother's voice pulled him out of it.

"Maybe we can invite Harry to your party this year dear? I do wish he could attend."

Draco gave his mother a sharp look. "You know that's not a good idea, Mum. He has no cover for it."

Narcissa sighed, conceding the point. Potter had kept the full extent of his relationship with the Malfoys quiet from everybody except for Andromeda for their safety. It would be strange if Potter showed up to Draco's birthday party, which had turned into a bit of a production over the years and always attracted the press.

"Well perhaps when the last of the Death Eaters are rounded up we can be more open about our relationship with him."

Draco shrugged, not wanting to commit to anything. The list of known Death Eaters was dwindling, but there was one more in the inner circle he needed to catch first. And he had no reason to stop at the inner circle if Potter still needed help once that was done.

"How many people are coming this year?" he asked.

"A little over two hundred. It's going to be a good turnout."

"Including several Romanian purebloods, correct?"

Narcissa nodded in the affirmative.

"Excellent," said Draco quietly. "I'm dying to get Dolohov."

"I know you are dear," said Narcissa. "And we are making inroads there. They have never consented to come to your party before."

Draco nodded in acknowledgment of this. Draco's birthday party was one of two large bashes his mother threw each year, the other being her annual New Year's Eve ball. Before working with Potter, the New Year's Eve ball was the only large event she hosted each year, but after Hogwarts she had thrown a large graduation party for Draco and his friends, which had then morphed into an annual party for his birthday. They used it as a cover to connect with other purebloods and sent invitations all across Europe for it. Draco was slightly embarrassed that the cover they used was his *birthday* of all things, but he had to admit it was a good excuse. Narcissa's hosting talents were legendary, and she had always publicly doted on Draco. His annual birthday bash had become a must-attend event each year, and nobody seemed to suspect that it was really a cover for information gathering.

Over the years the parties had paid off. Draco and Narcissa had gathered helpful information for Potter during several of the parties from previous years that led to the arrests of a couple Death Eaters. As ridiculous as it was to throw a two-hundred person celebration for his twenty-sixth birthday, Draco knew it was too good of an opportunity to pass up, and his mother would continue to do it as long as they worked undercover with Potter.

“Speaking of the party, I need to be going dear. There are quite a few last minute details I need to attend to.”

Draco nodded and kissed his mother on the cheek as she leaned toward him. She soon left Draco to his thoughts, which drifted back to Granger as he surveyed the article one more time.

*I'm being ridiculous, he thought. I won't see her.*

He focused on his occlumency shields to push the thought of her out of his mind and soon she was no more than ink on a piece of parchment.

## Chapter 3: Reconnect

### Hermione

“Ginny, come on we’re going to miss our reservation!”

Hermione was tapping her foot in Ginny’s room, waiting for her friend to finish whatever the hell she was doing in the bathroom.

“Honestly Gin, it’s just us! Nobody cares what you look like!”

“I care!” shouted the muffled voice of Ginny from the other side of the room.

Hermione rolled her eyes. She had learned to do her hair and makeup for an evening out very efficiently over the last few years thanks to her job. She saw no reason to change things up just because they were on holiday. Ginny, however, usually didn’t bother because she was a Quidditch correspondent for *The Daily Prophet*. She attended Quidditch matches when she could and listened to them on the wireless when she couldn’t, and then she wrote about them from the privacy of Grimmauld Place. Her work uniform was usually a pair of jeans and a jumper.

Suddenly the door opened and Ginny appeared with a flourish. Hermione just stared.

“Good right?” asked Ginny.

Hermione looked at the wavy hair, smokey eyes, and little black dress. She gave a small smile.

“Harry would love it. But he’s not here, Gin.”

“So?” said Ginny, as she grabbed her purse and made her way to the door with Hermione following behind. “We’re in *Paris*, Hermione. You never know who might see us. We have to look the part.”

Hermione just gave a small chuckle, but she didn’t say anything more as they made their way toward the restaurant Hermione had read about in her guidebook. Hermione and Ginny had stopped by the day before to make a reservation and had to confound the hostess because the restaurant was already fully reserved. Hermione felt a bit guilty about this, but managed to push it out of her mind as she thought about the dinner they were about to have. Hermione and Ginny were determined to eat their way through muggle Paris, and this one was highly recommended.

They turned a corner and approached the restaurant when a voice stopped Hermione in her tracks.

“Hermione!”

She whipped around to see Blaise Zabini smoking a cigarette a few paces away. She had always thought he was handsome with his dark hair and patrician nose. His deep brown eyes twinkled when he saw her.

“Blaise!” she laughed. “What on earth are you doing here?”

He grinned and came up to give her a hug. “Meeting some friends for dinner. They’re already inside, but I stepped out for a smoke break. What about you?”

“Oh Ginny and I are on holiday,” said Hermione, motioning to Ginny behind her.

“Oh of course,” said Blaise with an easy smile. “Ginny Weasley, I certainly remember you.”

Ginny gave Blaise a dazzling smile and shook hands with him.

“Blaise and I work together,” said Hermione. “He’s in the Italian Ministry’s chamber of commerce.”

They made small talk for a few more minutes before Hermione realized what time it was.

“Oh Blaise, I’m sorry to do this but we’re already late for our reservation.”

“You’re eating here then?” he asked, with his eyebrows raised.

Hermione and Ginny both nodded.

Blaise put out his cigarette and said, “Why don’t you join me and my mates then? They gave us a table that was too big.”

“Oh we couldn’t possibly...” said Hermione a bit uncomfortably.

“I insist,” said Blaise firmly. “I haven’t seen you in ages, and they just seated us. Come on.”

Hermione shot a look at Ginny, who just gave her a bemused shrug. Conceding defeat, Hermione followed Blaise toward a large table in the back with two others. Hermione felt her heart sink as she saw the shock of white blonde hair that she would recognize anywhere.

*Oh bloody hell,* she thought. Of course Blaise would be visiting Malfoy if he was here in Paris. Hermione should have realized it.

“Lads!” boomed Blaise as he approached. “I found our very own Golden Girl and the Girl-Who-Scored-With-Potter!”

Hermione heard Ginny snort with laughter behind her, but her eyes were fixed on Malfoy. She saw a look of shock flash across his face before it settled into a smirk, as he took his time examining her.

She had the oddest feeling he was looking straight through her, as though cataloging all of the changes in her since the last time they had interacted. He was sizing her up. He barely spared a glance for Ginny as he continued to study her.

To Hermione's surprise, Malfoy and the other young man she thought she recognized as Theodore Nott both stood as she and Ginny approached.

"Ladies," said Nott warmly. "Ignore Blaise. He's an idiot. But please join us." Then he stepped smartly toward Hermione and pulled a chair out for her, while Blaise did the same thing for Ginny. Hermione turned in surprise and looked at him more carefully. He was taller than she remembered, with piercing blue eyes, fair skin, and brown hair that was lighter than Blaise's. He had filled out since Hogwarts, and he was now considerably larger than her. It was a surprise, as she remembered the small weedy boy who had gone to school with her.

Hermione felt like she was moving in slow motion as she lowered herself into the chair that happened to be directly across from Malfoy, while Ginny did the same next to her. As soon as she and Ginny sat, the wizards all sat too. Hermione quickly looked at Ginny who appeared as bemused as Hermione felt. She couldn't recall a single time that Harry or Ron had ever done that for her, and she was sure Ginny couldn't either.

Realizing she hadn't said a word yet, Hermione forced herself to pull it together. It appeared she would be spending more than thirty seconds with Malfoy tonight. It was unfortunate, but there was no helping it. She was determined she wouldn't let him get under her skin.

She pointedly looked away from him to the wizard on his right.

"Theodore Nott, isn't it? I haven't seen you since Hogwarts."

Nott twinkled at her and said, "Quite. Call me Theo though. Everybody does."

Hermione gave him a gracious smile. "Theo then. And I'm Hermione of course. Not the Golden Girl," and she rolled her eyes but gave Blaise an amused smile as she said it. He just grinned back unapologetically.

"And I suppose you know I'm Ginny Weasley," chimed in Ginny, now looking at Theo. "I've seen Draco now and then, but I haven't seen either one of you since Hogwarts either."

Theo nodded. "You're both unmistakable. You're in the papers all the time."

Hermione and Ginny both grimaced a bit at this.

"That bad, huh?" asked Blaise with an amused smile.

Hermione shot a look at Ginny and said, "Well it's usually just gossip columns and such. It's ridiculous how much people seem to care about who we are dating. Of course, Harry gets into the paper for his actual work. But for witches...."

"It's a double standard," said the soft voice of Draco Malfoy, still watching her intently.

She snapped her head forward to look at him, but before she could say another word the waitress came over to take their drink orders.

She was surprised to see that Malfoy ordered a bottle of wine for the table, and Blaise and Theo both deferred to him and said they would just drink that. Ginny did as well. Hermione, however, ordered a gin and tonic.

Malfoy gave her an amused look. “Drinking gin in Paris, Granger? How very British of you.”

She scowled at him for a moment, but Ginny jumped in. “It’s her warm up drink. She never starts with wine.”

Hermione glared at Ginny, who gave her an innocent smile back. “What? It’s true. You only start with wine when somebody orders for you, and you’re too polite to decline.”

Hermione gave her a warning look, but Ginny just smiled. Malfoy, she saw, had his eyes narrowed a bit.

Thankfully Theo chose to jump in.

“So what brings you ladies here? I thought surely we would see Potter at least.”

Hermione noticed Malfoy listening intently as Ginny said, “Oh, just a girls’ trip. We’ve meant to do one for years and the opportunity finally came up a couple weeks ago.”

Hermione nearly groaned at the opening she had just given them. Of course Malfoy took it.

“What happened a couple weeks ago then? Surely Granger here doesn’t schedule her vacation time at the last minute.”

Ginny gave Hermione an apologetic look, as Hermione rolled her eyes.

She looked at the three wizards who were now watching curiously.

“Oh bloody hell, fine then. It will be public soon anyway. I was supposed to go to Bulgaria this week to take a holiday with Viktor Krum, but we broke up. So Ginny suggested a girls’ trip here instead.”

There was a ringing silence at this, and Hermione was uncomfortably aware that Malfoy’s eyes were boring into her.

“Erm...” Blaise said a little awkwardly. “Sorry about that. Was it mutual, or...?”

“It’s fine,” said Hermione shortly. “It wasn’t mutual, but I ended it.”

“She dumped him right after he proposed,” added Ginny.

“GINNY!” shrieked Hermione, now turning to her friend in horror.

Ginny just gave her an impish smile. “What? It’s true! And you know his press secretary is going to make it out like you’re the one who is all broken hearted once Viktor finally accepts that it’s really over, and you aren’t changing your mind. The only reason it hasn’t come out yet is because he’s begging you to come back to him, and he won’t listen to you when you say it’s done.”

Hermione just grimaced and chanced a glance at the three wizards, all of whom were staring at her in amazement. Or rather, Blaise and Theo were looking at her in amazement. Malfoy was looking at her like she had just issued him a personal challenge, and he had accepted it.

She gulped.

“So let me be clear,” said Theo. “He got down on one knee, asked you to marry him, and you what... told him no? Or did you accept, and then break up soon after?”

“I told him no,” said Hermione.

Theo got a gleeful look on his face. “That is unbelievable. I mean, that never happens!”

“Speak for yourself,” muttered Hermione.

“Why though?” asked Blaise. “I mean, he’s an international quidditch star. And you two dated for a long time right?”

Hermione shrugged, desperately wishing they would move on from her love life. “We dated a couple years. But we just wanted different things. He wanted me to quit my job and move to Bulgaria with him and be a housewife.”

All three wizards stared at her now in disbelief. “Not that there’s anything wrong with that!” added Hermione quickly. “But it’s not really me.”

“Fucking hell, you should have dumped him ages ago then,” said Malfoy.

Hermione looked at him in surprise.

“What?” asked Malfoy. “You’re a workaholic. Everybody knows that. You’ve been that way since you were eleven years old, if not earlier. You’re about the last witch alive who would stay at home with her husband.”

“I’m not a workaholic!” said Hermione, but to her consternation all four of them gave her incredulous looks at this.

“OK fine,” she huffed. “So I work a lot. But the point is Viktor thought I was doing it just as a way to support myself, and I would stop if we got married because obviously he can support me. I finally realized he was never going to accept the fact that I actually *like* my job. It fulfills me. So I broke up with him. In my defense, I didn’t know he was going to propose that night. It was a total surprise.”

“That wasn’t the only surprise...” muttered Ginny.

Hermione shot her a furious look now, but Malfoy picked up on it.

“Oh do tell,” he said with a wicked smile, focusing on Ginny for the first time.

Hermione trod on Ginny’s foot under the table, but Ginny ignored her.

“Well,” said Ginny, a bit conspiratorially, “Krum proposes, she dumps him, and then she floos back to Britain and decides to come find me to tell me what happened. I live with Harry you know. So she steps out of the floo and finds us... in the middle of a moment.”

All three wizards started to laugh. Malfoy, Hermione saw, looked positively delighted.

“Please tell me she got an eyeful,” he said, as Hermione’s jaw dropped in outrage.

“She did,” said Ginny matter-of-factly. “I had gotten Harry naked already, and I was working away, you know — fulfilling the terms of a bet I had lost of course — and then Hermione walks in on us.”

Hermione spun to look at her friend. “You didn’t tell me it was because you lost a bet!”

Ginny looked at her incredulously. “Of course I lost a bet! It’s not like I blow Harry in the living room every night!”

At this, Malfoy actually choked, and Blaise pounded him on the back. Hermione ignored them.

“But you sent him away to finish himself!”

Hermione vaguely heard a strangled sound coming from across the table, but she was focused on Ginny.

“Well yeah, I said I’d give him head, not that I would finish him,” said Ginny, rolling her eyes. “I fulfilled my end of things even though you interrupted.”

Hermione suddenly remembered who she was sitting with.

“Erm...” she said a bit awkwardly.

“You’re my favorite Weasley. I want you to know that,” said Blaise suddenly, looking at Ginny like she was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

“It’s true,” said Theo. “They saved the best for last.”

Ginny just grinned. “I know. I’m Hermione’s favorite too.”

“You are,” agreed Hermione. “Even if I want to kill you sometimes.”

“Even more than the Weasel?” asked Malfoy, and Hermione rolled her eyes.

“Honestly. And these days, yes. I love Ron of course, and we went through a lot together but...” she trailed off.

"But after Harry kicked Voldy's arse, Hermione had some time to take a step back and see what she had been missing while trying to keep my boyfriend and darling brother alive."

Hermione shrugged. "I don't love Ron any less. But it was always a bit lonely being the only girl in the Golden Trio at times. Eighth year was wonderful by comparison. I finally had a quiet year, and I got a lot closer with Ginny and Luna. It's just different than being with the boys."

"Chicks before dicks," chimed in Ginny, and Hermione, Blaise, and Theo looked at her in amusement.

Malfoy, however, was giving her a thoughtful look that made Hermione squirm a bit.

Hermione decided it was time to turn the tables back on them. "So what are you three doing here then?"

"Oh, it's Draco's birthday," said Blaise offhandedly.

Hermione looked horrified. "We're crashing your party?"

Theo and Blaise laughed while Draco smirked. "Nah, his party is Saturday night," said Theo.

"But speaking of crashing, you should both come," said Blaise.

"Oh we couldn't possibly..." started Hermione.

"You should," chimed in Malfoy. "It's the bash of the summer."

Hermione sucked in a breath, suddenly realizing it was *that* party. She had read about it in the papers of course. Hundreds of people attended.

"Oh, well, we didn't really come prepared for...."

"You're in Paris aren't you?" said Malfoy, rolling his eyes at her. "Buy a dress."

Hermione clenched her teeth a bit. She really did not want to spend her last night in Paris at Malfoy's birthday party.

"Really Malfoy, I've read about this party, and it's practically all purebloods who attend. You don't want me there."

He gave her an amused look and cocked his head a bit as he studied her. Hermione felt herself start to blush.

"There are a lot of purebloods who come, but that's not all. Besides...." he trailed off and cast a quick look at Blaise and Theo, both of whom were smiling slightly as though they knew what he was about to say. "You just dumped Krum, yes? And as Ginny pointed out, he's going to spin it in his favor when it becomes public to make you look weak. So why not get out in front of it a bit? Come to the party without him, look smashing, and dance with

some blokes who aren't him. The press will be there, and the story will write itself. You won't have to say anything at all."

Hermione sat back as she considered this.

"You can be my date," said Blaise, and now Hermione turned to him.

"Aren't you taking somebody already?"

"No," said Blaise. "I usually don't. I'm still sowing my wild oats, and I like to keep my options open. But I would make an exception for the Golden Girl."

He gave her his most dashing smile, and Hermione barely resisted rolling her eyes.

"And after you and Blaise arrive, I'll cut in," said Theo. Now Hermione focused on him.

"What? Why?"

All three wizards gave her exasperated looks now.

"Honestly Granger, it's like you've never done this before," said Malfoy.

"I haven't though," she said. "I haven't been single in ages."

Malfoy looked at her squarely now. "You go with Blaise. You know him from work, and you reconnected in Paris during your holiday. He asked you to the party as his date. It's nothing less than the truth. Then Theo makes your acquaintance at the party and steals you away for a while. The others in the room will notice. He and Blaise are both well known, and they rarely share a witch. So if they're competing for your attention, it must be because they think they have a real shot with you. That implies that you're single and looking for a replacement for Krum. By the end of the night, I wager several other wizards will try to insert themselves too. The media will obviously notice, and by Sunday morning Krum will be forced to admit it's over between you. And if you make sure to flirt and dance, then anything he says about your broken heart won't be convincing."

"But... but..." she started.

"You can dance, can't you?" asked Theo, with sudden concern.

"She can," said Ginny. Hermione gave her friend an appalled look.

"What?" asked Ginny. "You *can*. I can't, but didn't you take lessons before moving into your department at the Ministry?"

"Oh my God, Ginny!" said Hermione, rolling her eyes at her friend. "Must you tell them everything?"

All three wizards were grinning at them now, but Ginny looked unapologetic.

"That's perfect then," said Blaise. "Ginny can come alone and just mingle. No date though. That way nobody thinks she's ditching Potter. But you, Hermione... You come as my date and spend the evening on the dance floor. First with me, then with Theo, then with whomever else tries to claim you."

"It's brilliant," said Ginny, turning to Hermione in excitement. "Viktor's been driving both of us mad trying to get you to change your mind. They're right that this will make the papers, and you know he's bound to see it."

Hermione thought about it for a moment and then looked at the three wizards. "Why though? Why do you all want to help with this?"

She saw them all exchange glances, and to her surprise Blaise and Theo both deferred to Malfoy again. He gave her a knowing look and said, "Let's just say we owe you one, Granger. Me in particular."

For some reason she had the niggling thought that this wasn't the only thing Malfoy was thinking about. But she couldn't place her finger on it. Finally, she sat back and looked at Ginny one more time. "You really think it will work?"

"It will definitely work," said Ginny. "I'm part of the press, remember? Everybody knows who you are, and the journalists will be up all night writing the story to make it into the morning news. It will be on the front page of *The Daily Prophet* and many of the international papers on Sunday morning. Draco's right. They're all right."

Finally Hermione sat back and studied all three wizards. She took a deep breath. "Alright then. I'm in."

Just then the waitress came back to take their order, and Hermione used the distraction to change the subject. But she couldn't help but notice that Malfoy had a small smile on his face for the rest of the evening.

*What did I just get myself into?* she wondered.

## Chapter 4: The Popa Brothers

### Draco

Draco was sipping his coffee, his papers shoved to the side. He couldn't concentrate this morning. He was too busy marveling at the bizarre dinner with Granger and Ginny Weasley the night before and pondering his next move.

He wouldn't have invited them to his birthday party on his own – it created several complications for the *real* reason the party was being thrown. But when Blaise invited them, he couldn't very well rescind the invitation. And he had to admit, using it to help her end things with Krum for good would probably work. He had come up with that plan on the fly, and he congratulated himself on his quick thinking. He was pretty sure he had smirked all night as he contemplated the final dumping of Viktor Krum.

As the night wore on, he watched her carefully, and he was forced to conclude several things.

First, Hermione Granger did not despise him like he initially thought. If anything, she seemed wary around him. She was much warmer toward Blaise and even Theo than him, but she wasn't openly hostile toward him either. This was intriguing.

Second, the excuses she had given to the British Ministry for not taking France were bullshit. She had always been one of the most capable witches he had ever met, and her French was impeccable. He listened to her chat with the waitress, and the words flowed easily from her tongue. Her accent was nearly perfect. So he had been right to think she was avoiding France because of him, and not for the professional reasons she had fed to the Ministry.

Third, she was lovelier than he remembered. He shifted uncomfortably as he thought about this, but it was true. Draco had really noticed her looks for the first time at the Yule Ball in fourth year, but she had still been a girl then. She had gotten prettier as she had gotten older, and now... well there was no denying the fact that she had grown up.

Her formerly bushy hair was tamed into ringlets. Her skin was creamy with a hint of peach and pink in all of the right places. Her eyes weren't brown or even hazel, but glowed gold in the candlelight of the restaurant. And when she removed her coat to sit down, Draco couldn't help but run his eyes over her figure. Her well-cut dress was a deep green that clung to her breasts and hips before stopping at her knee. It was conservative, but it showed off her curves to perfection. He was sure Blaise and Theo had noticed as well, and he suspected that this was the real reason they were so willing to help her at the party. A beautiful, brilliant, and famous witch would be awfully tempting to both of them.

If Draco was being honest with himself, he found her tempting too. He wasn't sure if he actually *liked* the adult version of her yet. He knew an awful lot about her — especially from their school days — but he had to admit his information about her had grown stale over the

years. Despite the fact that she had done her best to ignore him the night before, he couldn't help but be drawn to her, at least physically. And now that he was sure she didn't despise him, he was no longer terribly interested in leaving her alone. He wanted to learn what the adult Granger was like. The only question was how to do this without blowing his cover for Potter.

As he contemplated this, he pulled his galleon out. He needed to tell Potter what had happened the night before.

*Blaise ran into Granger and Ginny last night. They had dinner with us.*

*What? How?*

*Random. We had reservations at the same restaurant.*

*How was it? Did Hermione hex you?*

*Very funny. No, she seemed cautious.*

*That checks out.*

*And I heard she watched Ginny suck you the other night, but it ended early.*

*Fucking hell Malfoy, how much wine did you give to her?*

*Granger? Not much. Ginny drank enough though.*

*I'll never forgive you.*

*Funny, I think it's Granger who did the unforgivable thing by interrupting you two.*

*Well she had a good reason.*

*Yes, she dumped Krum after he proposed. I heard that too.*

*Dammit.*

*I never liked him much.*

*You know he wasn't my favorite either. He got worse as he aged.*

*Well Blaise invited her to my party on Saturday. Ginny is coming too.*

*That's bad. Do I need to be there?*

*No, that will scare off the Romanians.*

*I don't like it.*

*I don't like it either, but Blaise invited them. Nothing I could do.*

*Is he any good in a crisis?*

*He's decent, but nothing's going to happen.*

*How will you handle the Romanians then?*

*I'll meet with them before the party. I'm going to be "surprised" when Granger shows.*

*I suppose that will work.*

*It should. She won't be the only muggleborn there.*

*No, just the most famous one.*

*I'll keep an eye on it. Theo and Blaise will too. She'll be OK.*

*Watch Ginny also.*

*The only thing you have to worry about with her is her mouth.*

*Like I said, watch her too please.*

*I suppose we can't have the story of Granger's voyeurism getting around.*

*You are the worst.*

Draco smirked, knowing he had won that round, but it soon fell from his face as he thought about Potter. Draco knew Potter was right, and Granger really didn't need to be there. Ginny didn't either. But there was no helping it. Draco would just have to work quickly before Blaise arrived with the girls.

Decision made, he returned to his coffee and papers before working through his plan one final time.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Andrei, you must give our host here a break. You will be taking all of his gold at this rate."

Draco chuckled indulgently, as he did his best to lose the poker game he was playing with the Popa brothers and their friend Sorin Cazacu. Andrei and Luca Popa were twins, near Draco's age, and Sorin was a couple years older. All three were purebloods, rather high in the instep in Romania, and after a couple of years of careful vetting, Draco and Narcissa had determined that the parents of all three were Death Eater sympathizers. So far Draco had kept the conversation light, but he was determined to lose the poker game and ply them with alcohol to loosen them up a bit.

"You will never win all of my gold, Andrei. You know I control the Malfoy fortune now."

The Popa twins cast amused looks at each other, and Sorin raised his eyebrows.

“Ah yes, I’ve heard,” said Sorin. “Rather convenient, is it not?”

Draco gave a negligent shrug. “I admit, things worked out rather well for me after the war. It’s unfortunate Father is in prison of course, but he’ll get out eventually. In the meantime, he turned everything over to me to manage. Mother is a wonderful hostess, but she has no head for business.”

This was categorically untrue of course, but Draco suspected the Romanians would believe it.

Luca snorted. “No doubt. Your mother is lovely, Draco, but women never understand matters of business.”

The others nodded in agreement of this, and Draco barely resisted rolling his eyes.

“Yes, well, as the only heir I took over, so I have access to the entire estate. I rather like it, you know. I don’t think I’ll be returning control to Father once he’s out.”

The others grinned at this.

“I’ve heard you’ve done rather well with it,” said Andrei. “And you’ve rehabilitated your family’s name in Britain, am I right?”

*Here’s my opening,* Draco thought.

Draco gave the group a knowing smirk. “Let’s just say that the Malfoys are always seeking to be in favor with any administration that may be in power. We do what we have to do in order to maintain that favor. But we also have over 900 years of pure blood behind our name. And my mother’s family is even older than that.”

Draco left the rest unsaid. It wasn’t necessary.

The three Romanians exchanged rather satisfied glances.

“That is what we thought. There are mudbloods coming to your party tonight, no?”

Draco shrugged. “Most likely. Those that curry favor are always invited, and of course not all purebloods are as discriminating as we are in their choice of partner. As I said, the Malfoys always aim to support the political agenda of those who are in power, and right now it’s the mudbloods’ time to shine I’m afraid. But you will find that most of the guests are pure. Mother really tries to invite the bare minimum of the other, you know. It’s a delicate balance.”

At this Andrei gave his brother a teasing look. “Well Luca here rather enjoys rolling in the mud, so I don’t think he will complain about the guest list. How many have you fucked now Luca? At least a dozen.”

Luca gave an arrogant shrug. “Fucked them, yes, but never anything more than that.”

“Don’t lie, Luca,” said Andrei, now giving his brother a superior look. “You’ve dated a few.”

“Only because it was required to get to the fucking,” said Luca, and the others laughed at this.

Draco decided to press this a bit.

“Well I admit I’ve been known to stray now and then too. But that’s what the contraception charm is for, no? That, and a good scrub to get the mud off.”

They all laughed at this.

“I must say, I like you Draco,” said Sorin. “I was a bit worried the Malfoys had gone soft given your public views, but I see now that this is not true. You are simply doing what you must do to stay in favor. You may take your pleasure where it is offered, but your heart is in the right place.”

“Without question,” said Draco. Then he gave them a grin and doubled down. “Just promise me you will look the other way when I dance with a mudblood tonight. I’m overdue for a good fucking.”

They all laughed at this. “Not possible, my friend. I’ll need a photograph to remember the occasion,” said Andrei.

“It’s true,” added Luca. “We will need... what do you call it? Ammunition, I believe, to convince you to visit Romania with us. Some mudblood blackmail should do the trick.”

Draco’s heart leapt. This was exactly what he was hoping for.

“Ah gentlemen, you will twist my arm then? I suppose I must be careful tonight. Either that, or I will go all in. If you’re going to blackmail me anyway, I might as well choose a good one for it.”

They laughed again, as Draco folded, passed some gold across the table to Andrei, and then offered them another drink.

“I want you to find the most beautiful one in the room, Draco,” said Andrei.

“Or the most difficult,” said Luca. “Let’s see what you can do.”

“And then parade her around before you take her to bed,” said Sorin, laughing now. “It will make all the heads turn.”

“It would probably make my mother ill,” said Draco, grinning at them. “She’s good about looking the other way, but at my party....”

“No, no Draco, you must find a mudblood whore tonight and take her to your bed. I insist. She should be grateful to have the heir of Malfoy inside of her.”

The others laughed, and Draco tried to as well, though this line of discussion was really starting to make him feel ill. He decided it was time to put an end to it.

“I’ll do my best, gentlemen, though I can make no promises.”

“I’m sure your best will be sufficient,” said Luca. “And we three shall join you as well.”

Andrei cocked an eyebrow at his brother. “You know I don’t fuck mudbloods, Luca,” he said.

Luca just rolled his eyes at his brother. “That’s just because you’re afraid of what father will say since you’re technically the heir by four minutes. But we’re in France tonight, brother. He’ll never know.”

Sorin grinned. “Luca is right Andrei. This is your chance.”

Andrei gave a reluctant smile at this.

“Excellent,” said Luca, now clapping his brother on the back. “We have a plan then, gentlemen.”

“And since our new friend Draco has been such a wonderful host to provide us with liquor, women, and gold, we shall return the favor in due course,” said Andrei. The other two nodded in agreement. “You must join us in Romania soon, Draco.”

Draco smiled. “I would be delighted.”

At this, Sorin raised his glass. “To the mudblood whores!”

“To the mudbloods!” the others replied.

Under the table Draco slipped his wand from his sleeve and tapped his galleon.

*I’m in.*

\*\*\*\*\*

After another hour of poker, Draco managed to slip away from the Romanians, using the excuse that his mother required him for last minute preparations before the guests arrived. Once he was sure they could no longer see them, he turned and made his way to the study.

*I have to get to Blaise*, he thought a bit frantically. There was no question in his mind that the Romanians would make a beeline for Granger as soon as they recognized her. They had all but promised each other they would do it. He told himself he was so anxious because Potter would actually kill him if anything happened to her, but he knew he was lying. Draco was worried about Granger. He didn’t want anything to happen to her either.

He checked his watch and saw he had about thirty minutes before the party started. Blaise, he knew, would be fashionably late, but he was still cutting it close.

He grabbed a piece of parchment and wrote quickly.

*Blaise,*

*I just played poker with the Popa brothers and Sorin Cazacu. They challenged each other to find a muggleborn witch at the party to bed tonight. They are the only ones coming from Romania so you should be able to identify them. Keep an eye on Granger, and don't let her near them. Tell Theo to watch as well.*

*Draco*

He ripped off the paper and tied it quickly to his owl, who gave an indignant hoot as he threw it out into the night.

Then he sat back and rubbed his temple.

*This is why I didn't want her to come*, he thought to himself. He had to admit he was intrigued by Granger. He had always been a bit fascinated by her, especially after getting to know Potter. But this was *really* not the time to do anything about it. He was playing a dangerous game with the Romanians, and the conversation had taken a bit of a turn that he wasn't expecting. But he had to go along with it, at least for a while, to get into their good graces. Besides, he knew he wasn't above using sex to get information for Potter – he had done it before, though always reluctantly. But playing those games around Granger was a disaster waiting to happen for so many reasons. She was vulnerable and also far too observant. Having her around was a liability.

He forced himself to breathe as he thought through all of the angles. He trusted Blaise and Theo to act right around Granger, even if they were both interested in her. The only thing they would do is flirt, and they were both rather territorial like he was. Now that he had warned them about the Romanians, he was sure that they would keep an eye on her all night.

*And I'll keep watch too*, he thought, as he chewed his lip.

The other thing he wanted to do tonight, more than he cared to admit, was help Granger with her Viktor Krum problem. Some soft prodding last night had given Draco the impression that Krum was very persistent when he wanted something, and what he wanted was for Hermione Granger to marry him. Draco didn't doubt that Granger would win eventually — she had to be one of the most stubborn witches he had ever met to do what she did for Potter all those years — but still, he could tell that Krum was bothering her.

The notion that some wizard was bothering Hermione Granger annoyed him more than he cared to admit. He told himself it was because he owed her something, and Potter had been

complaining about Krum on and off for the last couple of years. Draco himself had met Krum a few times, and they had never clicked. He found he wanted to help orchestrate the end to their relationship because he would take great pleasure in watching Krum be sent away for good. He sat and thought about this new complication with the Romanians, but decided that Blaise and Theo together should be enough to make Krum go away.

*But more would be better.*

He wondered if he had the balls to do it. Deep down he knew he wanted to dance with her. He wanted to see if the frisson of attraction he felt when he first saw her in the restaurant was real or just a figment of his imagination. But he also knew she wasn't comfortable around him. And if he danced with her for more than a song or two, the Romanians would surely see it, and they would assume he was doing it to take her to bed. It made his stomach churn to think about it. He would be using her, in a way.

*But maybe she would forgive me if she knew.*

The problem, of course, was that he couldn't clue her into it, so he would never know if she would forgive him for it. And while Draco had used plenty of other witches and wizards in the course of his investigations for Potter, something about using Hermione Granger — even if it was just for appearances — really made him pause. In the last few days he had discovered that all the work he had done with Potter had assuaged his guilt about everything *except* for Granger. He had spent much of the week revisiting all the times he had bullied her as a child and that horrible day at Malfoy Manor when she was tortured. Could he really bring himself to use her after all that?

*But am I really using her if it's something I actually want to do?*

Draco suddenly grasped onto this train of thought like a lifeline.

*Maybe it's not so bad if my interest in dancing with her is honest. The Romanians will make assumptions, but they're idiots.*

Draco found himself going in circles. He didn't know, and it was giving him a headache trying to sort it out. Finally, he took a deep breath and decided to table the decision. He would leave her in the care of Blaise and Theo to start and see how the night went.

Decision made, he drained his drink and went downstairs to the party.

## Chapter 5: Blaise & Theo

### Hermione

“You have to admit, this has been fun,” said Ginny as she and Hermione primped in front of the mirror in her bathroom. “I wasn’t expecting to go to a fancy party while we were here, but it’s going to be a great way to end our trip. A wonderful shopping spree and champagne and cheese while we get ready.”

Hermione was amused. Ginny had really leaned into the party, and she had dragged Hermione to boutique after boutique until they both found dresses Ginny deemed suitable. And then she ordered a fancy snack to get them in the mood.

“I still can’t believe we agreed to go,” said Hermione.

Ginny just grinned. “It’s going to be great. Blaise and Theo are both gorgeous. Draco is too. You’re going to have your hands full tonight.”

“Well I don’t know about that, but if it makes Viktor finally accept the inevitable I’m willing to do just about anything at this point.”

Hermione had been waffling about the party for the last few days, but multiple owls from Viktor had finally convinced her that desperate times called for desperate measures. He still wasn’t convinced she was serious about ending it, and while his persistence was a quality she had admired in him at times, in this instance it was bloody annoying.

“What do you think of them, then?” asked Hermione. “I mean, other than how they look.”

Ginny thought for a moment as she weighed this.

“I think all three are flirts, though Draco is more sarcastic than the other two. But I think they could be a lot of fun if you let yourself relax around them. They’re clearly gentlemen, and you have a carte blanche to flirt with them outrageously without leading them on, since they are all in on the plan. You should take advantage of it.”

“Well Blaise and Theo, that’s true. Malfoy didn’t volunteer.”

Ginny shrugged. “Maybe not, but he’s hosting isn’t he? He can’t commit to spending a lot of time with you tonight. And if he does ask for a dance you can still flirt with him. He’s in on it too.”

Hermione gave her a skeptical look. “Malfoy though....”

Ginny shot her a look. “Do you still hate him?”

"No," said Hermione quickly. "No, not for a long time actually, and I have to admit last night he was fine, it's just..." she trailed off.

The truth was, Malfoy had surprised her the night before. He was blunt, but he wasn't cruel to her. Still, she had been on pins and needles the whole night waiting for the other shoe to drop.

"You don't trust him," finished Ginny.

Hermione nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, that's it exactly. It's always like he has some other agenda. And we have such a bad history, even if we've both grown up. Last night I was just waiting for him to insult me."

Ginny shrugged. "But he didn't insult you. Quite the opposite, actually, by inviting you to this party of his. I doubt you will see too much of him tonight, but if you do, you can handle him. He's probably not going to insult you — he would have done it already if that was his aim — but if he does it's nothing you haven't dealt with before. You don't have to trust him, but you don't have to be so uptight that you don't enjoy yourself tonight."

Hermione paused while she thought about this. She realized that Ginny was right. She had been very cautious the other night. But it seemed as though he had truly grown up. Maybe it was time to move forward, and if he did revert to the Malfoy of her youth, she would shut it down and leave. It's not like she was trapped in a castle with him anymore.

"You're right, Gin. I'll have fun tonight flirting with all the handsome men, and if Malfoy puts a toe out of line I'll hex him."

"That's the spirit," said Ginny grinning. "Now come on, we need to get our dresses on. Blaise said he would meet us in about fifteen minutes."

Hermione and Ginny slipped on their dresses and shoes before Ginny grabbed her handbag. After one final check in the mirror they made their way to the lobby where they found Blaise lounging casually against a pillar, waiting for them.

"Ladies," he said, smiling as he walked forward. "You're both stunning."

To Hermione's surprise he reached for Ginny's hand and kissed the back of it. Then he reached for Hermione and pulled her in for a peck on the cheek.

"Honestly Blaise, we aren't there yet," said Hermione, as she blushed.

He just gave her a devastating smile. "I'm warming up. I may never have the chance to kiss the Golden Girl again, and I plan to take full advantage."

Hermione just shook her head, but took his proffered arm as he led the both out to an alleyway.

He extended his other arm to Ginny, who took it, and Hermione felt him turn on the spot, pulling them through the darkness. When she opened her eyes she was staring at a building that took up most of a city block. It was large and stately, and she was surprised to see a small

garden in the front with lilacs framing the door and flowers spilling out of planters arranged strategically up the short walkway to the house.

“Draco’s summer home,” said Blaise casually. “Though he lives here now most of the time.”

Hermione just shook her head. A home this size in Paris would be worth a fortune, she knew. As Blaise pulled them forward, Hermione looked around and realized they must still be in a muggle section of Paris. Blaise confirmed this when he said, “There are enchantments to keep the muggles away. Once we cross through the gate you’ll see all the guests and the press. Ginny, best get behind us so Hermione is the star.”

Hermione felt Ginny fall back as she and Blaise led them through the gate. As soon as they crossed it it was like somebody turned the volume on and all of a sudden dozens of people appeared, and she could hear the clinking of glasses and the distant strains of music coming through the windows. As they approached the front, Hermione saw several people with notepads and cameras.

*The press, she thought.*

Before she knew it, several reporters had seen her, and they were hurrying over. A few cameras flashed, and she automatically pasted on a smile as she turned to look at Blaise.

“Miss Granger! What are you doing here? Who is your date?” shouted several reporters.

“Oh this is Blaise Zabini,” she said. “We used to work together and happened to meet up at... erm...”

“The Louvre,” cut in Blaise smoothly. “She was looking at the Italian art, and I had to insert myself.” He turned to look at Hermione, with his eyes twinkling.

“Yes of course,” said Hermione with a light laugh. “Well in any event, we reconnected and Blaise was kind enough to invite me.”

She started to move away but a reporter then noticed Ginny.

“Miss Weasley! What are you doing here? And where is Harry Potter?”

“Oh Blaise was nice enough to let me tag along on his date with Hermione. She and I are on a girls’ trip you know. Harry is in London of course.” Then she started to walk away as the reporters fired more questions.

“Date? What about Mr. Krum?”

Hermione turned and took a deep breath.

*You knew this was coming, she thought.*

“Viktor and I are dear friends of course. But I’m very pleased that Blaise asked me to come tonight.”

She ignored their other questions, and she and Blaise made their way into the home.

*Let them chew on that*, she thought, with some measure of glee. Blaise caught her eye and gave her a wink, clearly approving of how she handled it. She knew that the questions would be swirling, and they would be watching her more closely than ever tonight.

“First, we must greet our hosts,” said Blaise lightly as he escorted her over to Narcissa. Ginny, Hermione saw, was chatting with a couple people that Hermione thought might have played quidditch. She seemed perfectly comfortable left to herself, so Hermione moved on with Blaise.

They stood behind a few people until it was finally their turn. Malfoy had joined Narcissa, and she saw an odd look pass between him and Blaise as though they were sending each other a message, before Malfoy seemed to relax and then turn to look at her. She gulped as she watched his eyes travel over her and a slow smile crossed his face. She raised her chin just a bit, and she thought she saw a hint of approval on his face before they turned to speak to Narcissa.

“Narcissa, splendid as always,” said Blaise, raising Narcissa’s hand to kiss it.

Narcissa smiled warmly. “Blaise, darling, really. And Miss Granger....” Narcissa turned to Hermione, who felt a slight blush start. “Just lovely. I was ever so pleased to hear that Blaise had run into you earlier this week and invited you.”

“Of course, Mrs. Malfoy,” said Hermione. “I’m delighted to be here. You have a lovely home.”

“Please, call me Narcissa. Everybody does. And I must say Miss Granger, now that I have you here.... I really must apologize for your treatment the last time we saw each other.”

Hermione saw Narcissa looked a bit nervous, and Hermione gave her a soft smile. “Please, you have no need to apologize. Draco already apologized years ago, you know. We were all in a difficult position back then. I never blamed you for it.”

Hermione chanced a glance at Malfoy and saw he had a stunned look on his face. She gave him a slight smile before turning back to Narcissa.

“You are too kind, Miss Granger,” said Narcissa warmly.

“Please, call me Hermione. It’s only fair if I call you Narcissa.”

“Hermione then,” said Narcissa beaming. “I do hope you enjoy yourself tonight my dear, and I quite look forward to making your acquaintance at a later date. Blaise, behave yourself.”

Hermione laughed as Blaise pulled her away. She caught Malfoy’s eye one last time as they disappeared into the crowd, and she saw him studying her with an oddly speculative look. She could tell she had surprised him, and she chuckled to herself a bit. It was a good feeling, she realized, wrong-footing Malfoy just a little bit.

"That's the spirit," said Blaise, as he grabbed her a glass of champagne and began to make the rounds.

She was surprised that Blaise stayed so close to her, and a couple times she got the impression that he was making a point to avoid certain people. But she didn't object. While she recognized a few faces from her work, it was clear that Blaise knew the people in the room much better than she did, and everyone he introduced her to seemed pleased to see her there.

After they finally reached the far side of the room Blaise said, "Now then. We should dance, don't you think? The journalists will be thrilled."

He held out a hand and she took a deep breath but then grabbed it, as he pulled her toward the middle of the dance floor just as a waltz began. Blaise pulled her to him, and suddenly she was being swept away, as the room and other couples blurred around them.

"You dance well," he said, with a smile.

"So do you," she replied. "I'm surprised."

Blaise cocked an eyebrow at her. "Why is that? Every pureblood in Europe learns basic ballroom dancing. It's one of those traditions, you know."

Hermione gave him an amused look. "Surely not. After all, Ginny can't dance."

Blaise gave her a sly grin. "That's because she was too busy putting frogs in the dancing mistress's bag to pay attention."

Hermione stared now. "What do you..."

"Ginny took lessons. I was there. But she never paid attention. And her brother Ron was hopeless. Two left feet, that one."

Hermione stared for another moment before she burst out laughing. She heard cameras clicking like mad in the background, but she ignored them.

"Oh I can picture it!" she said. "Poor Ron!"

Blaise chuckled at this. "Ginny wouldn't be bad if she practiced," he said fairly. "She was always really athletic. But it takes practice, just like anything else."

"And you've clearly practiced," said Hermione, with a small smile.

"As have you," said Blaise nodding toward her. "You're better at it than I was expecting."

Hermione felt herself turning a bit pink. "Well I did take lessons when I wanted to move into the Department of International Magical Cooperation. I remembered some of the traditional dances at the Yule Ball in fourth year, and I had no clue what I was doing. I thought I might need it for my job. But it turns out I really like it. So I practiced more than I had planned to."

"It's obviously paid off," said Blaise smoothly, and they continued to chat through two more dances before Blaise called a break.

"Come on, let's go find Ginny for a bit before it's Theo's turn," he said, winking at her.

Hermione nodded agreeably, and they headed toward a gaggle of people with a redhead in the middle.

"Hermione!" squealed Ginny. Hermione winced. Ginny sounded tipsy.

"Maybe you should switch to water Gin," said Hermione, but Ginny just rolled her eyes. "I'm fine, *honestly*."

Hermione felt Blaise lean toward her. "I'm going to get Theo," he murmured. "I just need a quick word with him first. Stay here with Ginny and don't dance with anybody else until he gets here."

She gave him an odd look, but agreed, as he gave her another peck on the cheek. She saw a camera flash and rolled her eyes, but then he moved into the crowd. She watched him go, smiling to herself. He really had been a perfect gentleman. Maybe a bit too smooth, but she couldn't deny that she had enjoyed herself.

She watched curiously as he approached Theo in the distance. He grabbed Theo by the arm and muttered something in his ear that caused a dark look to cross Theo's face. Suddenly he looked at her for a moment, before looking back at Blaise and nodding firmly. Then he looked back at her and strode toward her quickly, a smile blooming.

"Hermione Granger," he said as he approached her, and Hermione extended her hand to him. He kissed it, lingering a bit longer than was strictly polite, his eyes twinkling at her and his cheek dimpling.

She saw some reporters watching with rapt attention in the background.

"Care to dance? I've been dying to make your acquaintance."

"Of course," she said, and Theo grinned before pulling her onto the dance floor.

He spun her around and then pulled her to him.

"Now then," he said, "I was watching you with Blaise. Tell me, was he on his best behavior tonight?"

Hermione grinned. "Very polite. Very smooth. I almost wanted him to crack a bit, but I don't think I could get through that veneer."

"He's always been that way," said Theo. "You know his mum is on her ninth husband by now. Blaise has learned from the best."

"Her husbands?" asked Hermione in amusement.

“No, his mum,” said Theo bluntly. “She’s beautiful, I’ll grant you that, but she’s always had this sort of magnetism about her. I think half the boys in Slytherin house wanked to thoughts of her.”

“Theo!” she laughed, feeling a bit scandalized. He just gave her a devilish smile, and she saw the cameras clicking.

“So were you one of them then?” she asked.

“Oh absolutely,” said Theo, with no shame whatsoever. “She kissed me on the cheek once in fifth year, and I had an erection for a week.”

Hermione burst out laughing again, and the camera clicking increased.

“But Draco was worse than me. I’m pretty sure he slept with a picture of her under his pillow for about three years at Hogwarts.”

Hermione was laughing so hard now she paused the dance. “You’re a terrible gossip,” she finally said after she caught her breath.

Theo smiled as he picked up the dance again. “I am. I was always the quiet one you know, but I was really just watching everyone else. I have loads of stories.”

“Tell me one then,” said Hermione.

“About who?” asked Theo.

Hermione thought for a moment and finally said, “Pansy Parkinson.”

“Oh she’s easy. I have hundreds. Let’s see. She bribed a couple Ravenclaws to do her charms homework for her entire seven years at Hogwarts. And the first person she snogged was Goyle.”

“Eww!” squealed Hermione.

Theo nodded importantly. “It’s true. It was in fourth year after the Yule Ball. Draco ditched her so she snogged Goyle in the broom closet across from the Great Hall to get back at him, but Draco didn’t notice. It caused all sorts of drama.”

Hermione laughed. “Ok tell me one about somebody not in Slytherin.”

Theo nodded. “Who?”

Hermione thought again. “Cormac McLaggen.”

Theo cocked his head and studied her for a moment. “OK, fine. In sixth year he tried to spike your drink at Slughorn’s Christmas party. Draco gate crashed the party to sneak into Slughorn’s office for something, but he saw McLaggen do it while your back was turned. Draco purposely bumped into him to knock the drink over, and then he hexed McLaggen from behind. You didn’t see any of it, but the hex was why you were able to shake him off

that night. Draco gave him boils around his crotch, and it took McLaggen some time to reverse it.”

Hermione just stared now. “Wait... what?”

Theo shrugged. “He was a git.”

“But Malfoy hated me!” said Hermione.

Theo hesitated. “I don’t think that’s true, at least not by the time sixth year rolled around. He had been marked by then you know, and I think a lot of his prejudices disappeared after that. He knew he was fucked, and the rest of it didn’t seem that important anymore.”

She was quiet for a long while as they finished the dance.

“More champagne then?” asked Theo.

“Oh I really...” she started.

“A gin and tonic then. For some reason the gin selection is better this year than usual. Curious, don’t you think?”

He grinned and pulled her toward the bar, and she smiled a bit as the bartender rattled off an entire gin list for her. Decision made, she accepted the proffered glass and took a sip as she turned back to Theo.

“Now then Hermione, tell me something about yourself I don’t already know,” he said.

She gave him an amused look. “It sounds like you know everything already.”

“With you? I know a lot. I watched you and Potter quite a bit in school. But I don’t know everything. For example, why did you get back together with Krum?”

She thought about this and said, “Well he’s older than me you know. He’s intense and very focused when he wants something. He has to be in order to be as good as he is at Quidditch. It was a bit much when I was fifteen, and frankly I was busy saving the world with Harry. But once that was done, and I was older I was better prepared to handle it. I don’t know. He’s always been kind to me, and he always cared about me. I suppose you could say he swept me off my feet.”

“But the spark died?” he asked curiously.

“Yes,” said Hermione. “The things we want are too different. And he lets the press run his life in a way, even more so than I do. I’m always going to have the press following me. But the number of outings he would stage just for the perfect shot used to drive me mad.”

“We’re doing something similar tonight are we not?”

“I suppose that’s true,” said Hermione slowly. “But with him, the picture was always supposed to be Hermione Granger as arm candy for Viktor Krum. It took me a long time to

realize that. It's not that he doesn't care about me, but he has more traditional views on that sort of thing. What we are doing tonight... well..."

"Blaise and I are the arm candy."

Hermione winced, but he grinned. "We have no problem with it, don't worry about that. But I understand what you're saying. And I admit it answers a lot of questions I had about you. I would read those articles, and you were always a bit in the background. Like an accessory. It never made sense to me."

"Well he has a press secretary, and I don't," she said. "But yes, he wanted me to be there to support him. And I did. I was happy to. But it wasn't as mutual as I needed it to be."

Theo opened his mouth to say something else when a man Hermione didn't recognize with dark hair and eyes approached her.

"Miss Hermione Granger, I must make your acquaintance," he said in a voice with a familiar accent.

She felt Theo stiffen next to her, but she turned to him.

"Luca Popa," he introduced himself. "I'm from Romania. Of course I hear you travel there frequently, along with our sister country Bulgaria?"

"Oh, I..." but then Hermione faltered, as she saw Malfoy striding toward them.

## Chapter 6: Rumba

### Draco

Hermione Granger was nothing short of stunning. The moment she walked in, Draco had seen her, and it was like all the air had been sucked out of the room. She left him nearly breathless.

She was in a floor-length gown, like most of the women in attendance. But unlike the others, she had chosen to wear gold tonight.

*The Golden Girl*, he thought, grinning to himself as he took her in. The gown was fitted and again, showed off her figure. The neckline was demure, but he noticed a slit in the side that would enable her to move freely. And when she turned around to look at Ginny behind her, he saw that the back plunged low. His cock twinged, involuntarily.

Her hair, he saw, was pulled into a low chignon, with a few curls escaping. They were tantalizing, and he felt his fingers twitch as he ached to touch them. She wore gold chandelier earrings, but she was otherwise devoid of jewelry, and unlike many of the witches in the crowd, she had opted not to wear gloves. That would make a statement, he knew, as her hand would be bare any time a wizard kissed it. Her makeup was dark, but it enhanced her golden eyes, and she had finished the whole look with shocking red lipstick. He noticed she wasn't carrying a handbag, and for a split second he wondered where she was keeping her wand, until the answer hit him like a ton of bricks — she must be wearing a holster on her inner thigh, under her dress. It was the only place it could be without ruining the line of her dress. He groaned a little as he thought about it.

Ginny, he noticed, was in navy blue, and she had gone for a more traditional look with the gloves and handbag and hair piled high on her head. She was very lovely as well, but she had clearly chosen a dress that wouldn't stand out in the crowd. And sure enough, despite her vibrant hair color, she seemed to disappear next to Granger. Draco felt a rush of excitement as he considered it.

*She's here to play the game*, he thought.

Of course the choice of color for her dress would cause comment. He could see the headlines already. And it was an admittedly bold choice among the sea of black, navy, deep amethyst, and other dark dresses that were the preferred modus operandi of the pureblood society witches. There was no question every eye would be on Granger.

"Heavens," his mother whispered when she noticed Granger. "She's spectacular. Blaise is going to be the envy of every wizard tonight."

Draco felt his own lurch of jealousy at this, but he forced himself to tamp it down. He had informed his mother of the plan of course, though he hadn't given her details about the poker

game. There hadn't been time, and he wasn't keen on admitting he had been a part of *that* conversation.

"She'll be coming over here soon," he muttered.

Sure enough, Blaise led Granger to them, and after a brief exchange Draco found himself staring at her, stunned at the transformation that had taken place over the last few days. Granger, apparently, had decided she was no longer wary of him. She was gracious to his mother and even acknowledged the apology he had written to her for the first time, though she did it rather obliquely. She met his eye without flinching, and he thought he saw a bit of a challenge on her face that caused a familiar heat to pool in his stomach. And then all too soon it was over, and Blaise whisked her off for a drink and some conversation before leading her onto the dance floor.

Draco watched her out of the corner of his eye, and he could see that she was an extraordinary dancer. This rather surprised him, despite the little gem Ginny had dropped at dinner about her lessons. Ginny had acted as though the lessons were just in preparation for the social demands of her job at the Ministry, but Draco could tell she had really studied it. Her movements were smooth, graceful, and almost unconscious. Draco noticed she was able to chat and carry on a conversation with Blaise without faltering.

After Blaise came Theo, and Draco watched with a bit of consternation as Theo seemed to charm her even more than Blaise did. There was one moment when she fully stopped in the middle of the dance floor and threw her head back and laughed. The sound and sight of it was so distracting, his mother had to stomp on his foot to make him refocus on the conversation at hand.

And then he noticed Theo pulling Granger away for another drink, and the dark head of Luca Popa heading toward them.

"Fuck," he muttered, and he ignored his mother's shocked look as he quickly excused himself and made his way over toward them. All thoughts of keeping away from Granger had officially gone out the window.

*It's better for them to think I'm trying to bed her than allowing them the opportunity to try it themselves,* he thought.

"Luca, I think Andrei's looking for you," Draco said, as he arrived. He caught Theo's eye, and he exchanged a quick glance, which told him Theo would defer to him on this. Draco gave a sigh of relief.

Then he turned to Granger. "Granger, you promised me this dance, don't you remember?"

"I..." she started again, but Draco grabbed her hand and started to pull her away.

"Later then, Miss Granger," Luca said with a smirk. "I wouldn't want to get in the way of our host."

Draco forced himself to tamp down his anger and flash a smile at Luca instead. He couldn't afford to get on the wrong side of the Romanians, not now that they had given him an opening.

"What on earth was that?" Granger hissed, as Draco dragged her toward the dance floor. He thought for a moment about the best way to phrase this.

"You need to stay away from him. I thought Blaise and Theo would be enough of a deterrent, but apparently not."

"What are you talking about?" she pressed.

"He's dangerous," said Draco in a clipped voice. "That's all you need to know."

Then he pulled her to him, he felt Granger's breath catch, but he forced himself to focus. He knew Granger, and he knew she wouldn't be done with the questions.

"How do you know he's dangerous?"

Draco rolled his eyes at her. "I just do. I overheard a conversation with him, that's all. Just trust me, you need to stay away from him, his brother, and their friend."

"How do I know..."

"They'll tell you they're from Romania," he said shortly. "They're the only ones from Eastern Europe here tonight."

He hoped this was enough, but Granger was Granger, after all.

"Why are they here then? You clearly don't like them."

"Fucking hell Granger, must you ask so many questions?" he said with exasperation.

She just gave him a pointed look.

"Fine," he ground out. "Family business. Mother invited them thinking they could be a good connection for me. We don't have many connections in Eastern Europe. But they are worse than I was expecting."

Granger cocked her head to study him.

"So all these people here tonight...." she started.

"Are Mother's friends or my business associates. Blaise and Theo are here for me. The rest are here for other reasons."

She contemplated him for a moment. "So we really did crash your birthday the other night then?"

At this Draco felt himself grinning. “I told Blaise it was the most unusual birthday gift he’s ever given me. He’s never going to top it.”

Granger actually flushed at this, and Draco studied her with some satisfaction.

They danced in silence for another moment and then Granger blurted out, “So what’s your favorite color?”

Draco thought he was getting whiplash. He looked at her like she was mad.

“What?” she said. “I’m making small talk.”

Draco was incredulous. “Granger, you make small talk for a living. Surely this isn’t how you open.”

“Well normally I’m making small talk with people I haven’t known for half my life.”

“So you start with my favorite color? What, are we thirteen?”

To his consternation, she smirked. “Perhaps you’ve forgotten, but when we were thirteen I was slapping you, not talking to you. Well.... You were thirteen. I was fourteen.”

Draco rolled his eyes at this, but smiled a little despite himself. She was fiery, and he had to admit he was remembering that slap with more fondness than he would have expected.

“Fine. But starting with colors.... You can do better than that. If you thought about it for two seconds you would already know the answer to that question.”

She sighed. “It’s green, isn’t it?”

“Naturally,” he said, giving her a cocky smile now.

“Well I had to ask. Mine’s not red, you know.”

“I did know that, actually,” he said.

He felt her stumble and savored the moment. Wrong-footing her had always been one of his favorite things to do. Somehow it was even better now that they were adults.

“What? How?” she asked.

He shrugged, but decided he would tell her. “You’ve never once worn red when you had a choice. The only red you have ever owned was the Gryffindor uniform.”

Now she stared at him. “How did you know that?”

He smirked. “I’m a Slytherin. We keep our friends close and our enemies closer.”

“So I’m your enemy then?”

“At one point I thought so. I made sure to keep an eye on you. I’m observant.”

She cocked her head. "If you're so observant, what *is* my favorite color then?"

He tried not to roll his eyes. It was so obvious. "Blue," he said without hesitation. Then he thought for a moment and added, "and yellow is second place."

"Damn," she muttered. He gave her an arrogant smirk.

"So is it my turn then?" he asked.

"Your turn for what?"

"Our question game."

He could see she was trying not to smile, but she couldn't seem to help it. "Alright go on then, I suppose it's only fair."

Draco licked his lips. *Perfect*, he thought.

"Excellent. Do you like to be on top or on the bottom?"

"Malfoy!" she shrieked, as her jaw dropped.

He forced himself not to laugh at her. "What?" he asked innocently. "It's a fair question."

"No it's not!" she insisted.

He thought about this for a moment and finally said, "I suppose you're right."

She exhaled, clearly thinking she was off the hook.

"I mean, I'm pretty sure I already know the answer, so I really wasted a question didn't I?"

"WHAT?" she shrieked again. He forced himself not to let go of her to rub his ear. She was getting shrill.

"Merlin Granger, no need to have an aneurysm. It's obvious now that I'm thinking about it."

She gave him an appalled look, and he grinned at her.

"So what is it then?"

He knew he had her now. She could never resist getting her answers. "Bottom. You wish it were top, but it's not."

She just stared at him now. "And what makes you say that?"

He studied her for a moment, and he watched her blush with some satisfaction.

"It's because you're a control freak. You like to be in charge."

"But then..." she started, but Draco cut her off.

"The thing is, nobody can be in control all the time. It's exhausting. It has to give now and then. And for you, I think it gives in your personal life. You were always top of the class in school. I've heard you're quite good at your job. You manage to keep a large group of very different people in line there. So where else could you release that pressure except in your personal life?"

"I... I...." she stammered, but Draco pressed on.

"I could tell you turned the reins over to Potter in school. Why else would you follow him on his all of his mad adventures? Half of them were not thought through at all."

"He's my best friend," she said.

"Of course. But you're smart enough to realize when he's doing something half-arsed. You still went along with it because you love him and trust him, and he earned the right to be in control when it came to defeating the Dark Lord."

"There was a prophecy..." she started, but Draco just rolled her eyes, cutting her off.

"Please. Don't tell me you actually believed it."

"You don't know what it was!" she said.

He shrugged. "I don't have to. Didn't you actually quit divination halfway through the year because you thought it was so ridiculous?"

"Well I..."

"But still," he pressed on, "you let Potter be in control. There's nothing wrong with that. But it tells me you're the type who is willing to relinquish control when it comes to personal things."

"And this translates to my sexual preferences, how exactly?"

He rolled his eyes again. "Don't be dense. You have less control when you're on the bottom. And I wager Krum liked to be on top. You liked him and trusted him, and you gave up some of the control in the bedroom so you could just relax and *be* now and then."

She was just staring at him now. He could tell by her expression he had nailed it.

"But Krum's problem," he continued, "was that he wasn't satisfied to just leave it in the bedroom. Over time he wanted to control more of your life. And that's why he suggested you quit your job, even though any idiot could see that you would never be happy if you did that. You like to relinquish control when it's somebody you trust, but only to a degree. Once it crossed into your professional life too, he went too far with it."

"I can't believe this," she muttered.

"Am I wrong?" he asked.

She grimaced. “You’re not wrong. He’s very focused on what he wants. He had to be, you know. He became a professional quidditch player while he was still in school.”

Draco thought about this for a moment and realized she was right. “Yes, he must be somebody who is very focused. So let me change my question then. What has happened since you tried to dump him?”

He watched her study him, as though sizing him up. Draco suspected he already knew the answer to this, but for some reason he wanted to press her on it. He wanted her to open up to him just a little. Finally she sighed.

“It’s mostly been owls. He owls me a couple times a day. He’s sent flowers. He’s tried sending other gifts. I’ve sent them back of course and told him it’s done over and over again, but he won’t let up. I’m sure he’ll stop eventually, but it’s going to take a while before he accepts it.”

“He needs a grand gesture then,” said Draco. “Something undeniable.”

“Perhaps,” said Granger slowly. “That’s why I agreed to this mad plan of yours in the first place you know. It’s working. The journalists have been watching me like a hawk all night.”

Draco wondered how much more he could push her. He decided to try.

“You’ve given them a decent show, I’ll grant you that. But it might not be enough.”

“What do you mean?” she asked. Then she looked at him nervously. “I’m not snogging them on the dance floor,” she said suddenly, “if that’s what you’re implying. I try not to do public displays like that, even when I’m with somebody.”

Draco just rolled his eyes. “You don’t have to snog them. But there are other things you can do. Tell me. Did you take your dance lessons with Madam Markham?”

Granger stared at him in surprise, but Draco was sure he was right about this. Madam Markham was the best, and he could tell Granger had learned from the best. “Erm, yes. And her husband of course.”

“Naturally,” said Draco. “And how long did you take lessons?”

Granger shifted uncomfortably. “I’ve been taking lessons ever since I joined my current department at the Ministry.”

“Still?” he asked in surprise.

Granger shrugged. “I enjoy it. And they offer lessons in private, so nobody knows. I can’t just sign up for a class for that sort of thing.”

Draco studied her for a moment, as a half-baked plan started to form in his mind. “So you know all of the variations of ballroom dance then?”

"Most of them, yes," she said. Then to his surprise she smirked at him. "Though I have to admit I was surprised to use it tonight. When you all said dancing, I thought you meant something more... modern."

Draco gave her an exasperated eye-roll. "I go to clubs, Granger. I can dance that way too. But this is my mother's party. My birthday is just an excuse for her to throw a bash. She loves to entertain, and she controls everything. That includes the style of dancing."

Granger grinned now. "Fair enough. I admit I can't envision Narcissa Malfoy grinding on the dance floor."

Draco broke into a smile, amused despite himself. "Never. The waltz and foxtrot are more her speed."

"Evidently," said Granger.

He studied her for another moment, wondering if he could push her to do this. "But you and I both know that ballroom has its moments. So what do you say? Do you want to send Krum packing for good?"

She narrowed her eyes, but he saw that Gryffindor spark in them. "What do you have in mind?"

He just raised an eyebrow. "I can't tell you that, Granger. You have to decide if you're going to trust me or not. You know... to lead."

*To take control*, he thought. Draco didn't know what was getting into him, but he wanted to do it. Now that she had loosened up around him, he could see the old Granger peeking through. The one who had slapped him in third year. The one who had lied to his aunt while she was being tortured. The one who had lured Dolores Umbridge to meet the centaurs. She had always been in the background of Potter of course, but Draco had watched her for years. He had been jealous of her as a child, but even then he had known she was magnificent. He had learned so much more about her after they were no longer in the sphere of Hogwarts together, and the things he had learned had fascinated him. And now as an adult, she had truly grown into it.

*Will she let me direct her fire? Will she trust me for just a moment, like Potter and Krum?*

Slowly she nodded. "OK then, Malfoy. I'll let you lead."

He felt something roar in satisfaction, as he gave her his best slow smirk.

"This way, then," and he led her toward the stage. "Wait here. I'll give my speech, and then we'll give them a show."

She watched him cautiously, but she did as he asked, as he grabbed a glass of champagne from a nearby tray and climbed onto the stage with the band.

"Attention!" he called into the magical microphone, and after a moment, everyone came to a halt.

"I just want to thank you all for joining us tonight. I can assure you I am appropriately mortified that my mother insists on celebrating my birthday with hundreds of people, but I wouldn't have her any other way."

He heard some chuckling at this.

"And so," he said, "I ask you to raise a glass to toast my mother. To Narcissa Malfoy, a wonderful hostess, a loving wife and mother, and one of the strongest and most beautiful women I know."

He raised his glass, and he saw Granger giving him an odd look, but she raised her glass as well, as did most of the room.

"Cheers!" shouted many of the guests.

Draco grinned and drained his glass. "And now," he said, "as it's my birthday, I'm going to take the liberty of choosing the next dance."

He turned and whispered to the band leader, who raised his eyebrows, but nodded. Draco saw he still had the attention of the entire room as he exited the stage and grabbed Granger by the hand, leading her into the middle of the dance floor. He glanced around and saw that people were watching them, giving them space to dance alone.

*Perfect*, he thought.

The first notes of the song began, and he saw Granger's eyes widen slightly as she recognized it. He had chosen a rumba, widely known as the most sensual ballroom dance, and one his mother rarely allowed at her parties. But then he saw the flash of determination in Granger's eyes, and he gave her a slow smile.

*I have her*, he thought.

The rumba, he knew, required serious chemistry and trust between the couple in order to make it convincing. It was slow, smooth, and was intended to be a dance that was suggestive of other activities in the bedroom. He started with the basic box step to ease them into it, but as he observed her technique, he could immediately tell she was comfortable with this dance, and he decided to push her to see what they could do together.

Soon he was spinning her before pulling her to him to move their hips in tandem together. It didn't take long before their audience faded away, and he was focused entirely on the feeling of her in his arms. Her lithe body, her long limbs, the roll of her hips as she moved with him — they were enticing him and making him ache for her.

He was holding her much closer than Madam Markham would have condoned, he knew, but he kept his grasp firm with his leading hand, and she let him take control, as she followed his commands perfectly.

Suddenly a flash of a bulb reminded him what they were doing, and he made sure to give the press a few perfect shots.

*Flash*, there was Granger, pulled close to him, while his lips hovered over hers.

Then *flash*, Granger was in front of him, while he stood behind her, nuzzling her neck. One hand was holding hers while the other strayed across her abdomen.

Another spin and then *flash*, he was facing her again, pulling her to him and holding her leg around him, while he gripped her thigh through the slit in her dress.

He didn't have to kiss her at all, he knew. All he had to do was dance with her in a way that would make the press send Krum running for the hills. And Granger, he quickly discovered, played along and molded herself to him perfectly. It was like she knew what he was going to ask of her a moment before it happened. She never wobbled. She never hesitated. They were perfectly matched. The waltz he had danced with her earlier suddenly felt like a colossal waste of time. She was made for the steam and sex of Latin ballroom, as opposed to the more staid European and American dance styles his mother favored.

All too soon the music was reaching its final notes, and Draco reluctantly pulled her in for one last pose for the cameras, before stepping back. The room erupted into applause, and he saw Granger's eyes shining as she smiled at him. He grabbed her hand and kissed the back of it, brushing her knuckles with his thumb just a bit as he did so. Then he decided to give the press one last gem, as he turned her hand over and kissed the inside of her wrist on her pulse point. His eyes were boring into hers, and he saw her inhale. He gave her a slow smirk at this, before motioning toward Blaise, who was watching from the edge of the dance floor.

Blaise walked forward, giving Draco a knowing look, and Draco slapped him on the back and handed Granger back to him rather reluctantly. He melted away into the crowd again, as the music resumed and the guests reentered the dance floor.

As he cast a final look back at her, he could see her watching him over Blaise's shoulder with a curious expression on her face. Suddenly an idle thought that had been floating around in his head solidified into a plan, as though fully formed.

*I'm going to see her again*, he thought. *And I know exactly how to do it.*

## Chapter 7: Bienvenue en France

### Hermione

Hermione groaned as she rolled over, trying to calm her pounding head. Oddly, it wasn't just a painful throb. It was as though she could hear the pounding in her brain.

"Hermione, let me in!" shouted a voice Hermione recognized as Ginny.

*Oh,* she realized. The pounding was real, and it was coming from Ginny Weasley right outside her door.

Hermione forced herself out of bed and shuffled over to open the door, only to be nearly bowled over by Ginny, bouncing excitedly on her toes.

"Hermione, the plan worked! It was perfect!"

"Gin," she said. "Give me a minute. I feel terrible."

Hermione closed her eyes to try to stop the room from spinning. Champagne always went to her head, and she drank way too much of it the night before.

"Oh, here," said Ginny, holding her a small bottle of something. "I got an owl from Draco this morning."

Hermione whipped her head up to look at Ginny, and then nearly wretched from the motion.

She closed her eyes for a moment.

"What do you mean?" she finally asked.

Ginny just gave her a knowing look. "He just sent a couple bottles of hangover potion to us. His note said he thought we might need it, and he didn't want his party to ruin our last day in Paris."

Hermione looked at it skeptically, as Ginny rolled her eyes.

"It's fine, Hermione. I took some already."

Hermione shot a glance at her friend, noticing that she seemed perfectly normal. Grimacing a bit, she uncorked her own bottle and downed it. Immediately she felt her head clear and stomach settle.

"Oh thank God," Hermione sighed, sinking down onto the small sofa in the room.

"Better?" asked Ginny.

“Much,” said Hermione.

“Excellent. Then take a look at this morning’s news,” and Ginny shoved a paper under Hermione’s nose.

Hermione opened her eyes to stare down at the front page of *The Daily Prophet*. Staring back at her was a full color photograph of her dance with Malfoy from the night before. The editor had chosen a moment when he was behind her, holding her close to him, while his face was buried in her neck, as though kissing her. The photograph was moving, and she watched Malfoy put his face to her neck over and over again, while her head tilted sideways to give him room and her eyes rolled back, as though she was savoring it.

“Bloody hell,” she muttered.

Ginny just grinned in delight. “It’s *amazing*. You two look like you belong on the cover of a trashy romance novel.”

Hermione glanced at the headline now.

“*Britain’s Golden Girl Done with Krum!*”

She skimmed the article and saw herself quoted, along with Ginny. Ginny, it transpired, had been a bit more direct with the reporters than Hermione had.

“Hermione broke up with him, and she’s much happier for it...” she read out loud. “Honestly Ginny!”

“What?” said Ginny, unapologetically. “I know you don’t like to give the press much, but this opportunity was too good to waste. Besides, I didn’t tell them everything.”

Hermione skimmed the rest of the article and saw that Ginny was right. She hadn’t mentioned the proposal.

“There are more pictures on pages 2, 4, and 7,” added Ginny.

“My God,” said Hermione, as she flipped to see additional pictures of her and Malfoy, the largest being the moment he had kissed the inside of her wrist. She watched the Malfoy in the picture look her directly in the eye and slowly bring her wrist to his lips. She saw herself gasping as he did it, staring back at him with amazement. Hermione felt herself blush, remembering how much she had liked it, but then she groaned again as she watched the moment replay over and over again.

Then she kept flipping and found pictures of her and Blaise. He was leaning in to kiss her on the cheek, leading her in the waltz, and guiding her in and out of the house where the party was held. To her surprise, she saw he had his hand hovering over her lower back, perilously close to her bum, but never quite reaching it. She realized she hadn’t noticed this in the hustle and bustle of the party, but she laughed to herself as the Blaise in the photograph turned back to the photographer and winked.

And then finally they ended with pictures of Theo. Here, she saw him offering her a drink with a knowing smirk on his face. Then another shot where he pulled her close and whispered something in her ear that made her blush. And finally, the moment where he had made her laugh so hard she stopped dancing. In this final photo, she saw that his eyes were sparkling with mirth as he watched her intently, and she felt her face heat up as she remembered it.

To Hermione's surprise, the article was less about Krum, and more about the three wizards she had danced with the previous night. The reporter went into great detail discussing their relationship with each other. They were the best of friends, and they had all attended Hogwarts with Hermione Granger in the same year. The reporter was practically breathless with speculation about what Hermione Granger would do to their relationship. They were all clearly vying for her attention. Would their friendship survive it if she chose one over the other two?

And then, of course, the article went into excruciating detail analyzing Hermione's reaction to each of the three wizards in turn. Blaise, the reporter concluded, was the most charming. Theo was the funniest. Malfoy was obviously the most sensual and, the reporter was sure to point out, the wealthiest.

Hermione raised her head to stare at Ginny in amazement, and Ginny just grinned. "There's more," she said, pulling out a stack of international papers.

Over and over again, Hermione saw pictures of her and one of the three wizards on the front page. The Italian paper, unsurprisingly, featured Blaise, as did the paper from Spain and Croatia. Hermione was a little surprised to see that the Scandinavian papers focused on Theo, until she read one of them and learned that his mother was from Copenhagen. But the French paper, as well as those from Eastern Europe featured Malfoy. The pictures from their dance would be thrown into Viktor's face this morning.

"I really didn't think it would be this newsworthy," said Hermione, raising her eyebrows at Ginny.

Ginny just rolled her eyes. "Of course it is. You're both famous. And the stunt you pulled last night, especially with Malfoy... well it probably gave the society writers wet dreams."

"Ginny!" said Hermione, but she was laughing now.

"I'm serious! It was like all their professional fantasies came true, I'm sure of it. And that dance with Malfoy... honestly, Hermione, I don't know how you haven't shagged him already."

"It's only been a week since I met him again!" insisted Hermione.

"So?" shrugged Ginny. "He's hot. And you were hot. And together you two looked explosive. The sexual tension was unbelievable. I bet half the room got off to memories of you two last night."

"Ginny!" squealed Hermione. Ginny just gave her a satisfied look.

"I'm sure *you* did, at any rate," added Ginny with a smirk.

Hermione felt her face turn crimson.

"Aha!" announced Ginny. "I knew it! You want to shag him!"

Hermione buried her face in her hands. "No! I just... he just..."

"He turned you on," said Ginny. "There's nothing wrong with that."

Hermione groaned. "Well it doesn't matter. I'm not going to see him again any time soon."

Ginny looked at her askance. "What? You totally should! Send him an owl, strike up a correspondence! I'm sure he would be into it!"

Hermione just shook her head. "I don't think so. It was all a stunt. He felt he owed me for all the stuff he put me through when we were kids, that's all it was."

"You're mad," snorted Ginny. "Nobody fakes chemistry that well. You two have it. You should make a point to stay in touch."

"He sent his owl to you, not me," said Hermione. "I really don't think that's what he's after."

Ginny just rolled her eyes, but let it drop for the moment. "Speaking of owls, have you noticed anything different about this morning?"

Hermione stared at her for a moment before her eyes got wide. "No owls," she breathed.

"No owls," said Ginny with some satisfaction. "It's the first morning we haven't woken up to an owl from Viktor. Mission accomplished," she said.

Hermione just laughed, as she moved into the bathroom to get ready for their last day in Paris together.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione stepped out of the fireplace, onto the familiar marble floor of the Ministry of Magic. The heels of her shoes clicked as she made her way toward the lifts, nodding to people she recognized. To her slight consternation, she saw many people in the lobby reading the morning's copy of *The Daily Prophet*, which featured a picture of Viktor and her, ripped apart down the middle. The headline had announced, "*Krum Confirms Relationship Is Over!*"

She grimaced a bit at it, but she couldn't help but be satisfied that he had finally confirmed it publicly. He hadn't sent her any owls since Malfoy's birthday party in Paris, and she was relishing her newfound freedom. She had known it would make for an awkward week at

work, but she had dealt with worse before, she reminded herself. She put her chin up, her eyes forward, and she walked with purpose until she reached the lift.

She pressed a button and the lift clattered closed, while the cool voice announced the levels until they reached “Level Six: The Department of International Magical Cooperation.”

Hermione stepped off the lift and headed toward her office, the picture of her and Viktor winking at her from cubicle after cubicle as she passed.

She opened the door to her office and came to a halt as she stared at her boss, Harvey Cooper, who was waiting for her. She saw a copy of *The Daily Prophet* was on her desk.

“Hermione,” he said, grimacing at her. “Sit.”

Hermione cautiously made her way to the other side of the desk, where she sank down in her chair. Long experience with Harvey had taught her it was better to wait for him to start.

“We need to discuss this,” he said, gesturing at the article from the morning’s *Prophet*.

“I’m not sure why,” said Hermione cautiously. “It’s my personal life. It has nothing to do with my job.”

Harvey looked at her, as though weighing something.

“Hermione, unfortunately that’s not true,” he finally said.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “Please explain to me how breaking up with my boyfriend has anything to do with my job.”

Harvey cocked his head and studied her for a few moments.

“It has to do with your job,” he said, “because Viktor Krum is a celebrity in Bulgaria and other parts of Eastern Europe – in other words, countries in your portfolio.”

Hermione gaped at him. “Are you saying...”

“That the Ministers of these countries are deeply offended that you dumped him? Yes,” said Harvey bluntly.

Hermione sucked in a breath. She knew Viktor was popular in countries other than Bulgaria. She knew she might have to smooth over some ruffled feathers. But she had never imagined it would become a true political issue.

“I can’t get back together with him,” she said insisted. “I’m not doing it, Harvey. It took weeks to get him to leave me alone. I had to pull that stunt in Paris because he wouldn’t bugger off. Besides, he wants me to quit my job and marry him. I don’t want to do that.”

Harvey chewed his lip as he stared at her for another long moment, and then he nodded to himself.

“Very well. I’m certainly not going to ask you to resume a relationship with him. That would be unprofessional of me, and it sounds like it would be counterproductive anyway given what he really wants.”

Hermione let out a sigh of relief.

“However,” he continued, and now Hermione’s stomach clenched. “I have been inundated with owls ever since the news was released yesterday that it’s over between you two. Your counterparts and their supervisors in Bulgaria and many of its neighboring countries are deeply offended, and they want you off their file.”

“You mean...” she said slowly.

“I mean that I’m going to have to pull most of Eastern Europe from you, Hermione. There’s nothing I can do, they are insisting. You’ll still have Italy, Greece, and Croatia. And Romania has agreed to stay for some odd reason, though I get the impression it’s because your counterpart there doesn’t like Viktor Krum.”

“He doesn’t,” she said automatically, as she was trying to process everything Harvey was saying to her.

“Well then, that explains it,” said Harvey. “But the rest of the countries under your jurisdiction want you out. I cannot force them to play nice with you after this, so I have no choice but to remove them from your portfolio.”

“But I’ll only be left with four countries then!” she exclaimed. “You know that’s not enough!”

He studied her. “That’s the same number that many in our department manage, Hermione,” he said.

She shook her head. “Only those who are managing countries like the United States or China! I’ve always had more. You know I like to stay busy, and I...” she trailed off, suddenly feeling sick at the situation.

Harvey exhaled, and she looked at him.

“I know, Hermione. You do excellent work. And I hate that your relationship with Mr. Krum mattered so much, but unfortunately that’s the position we have found ourselves in. That being said...”

She looked up at him hopefully.

“France is available again.”

Hermione’s eyes widened in horror. “No,” she said. “Absolutely not.”

Harvey raised an eyebrow at her. “I want you to listen to me, Hermione. I’ve offered France to you several times over the years, and you’ve always turned it down claiming you are too busy and your French is inadequate. But you are no longer too busy for it.”

“But my French...” she started.

“Will be sufficient to be going with. You’re not fluent in any of the other languages of the countries you have managed in the past. If you find you really need to improve your French, we can arrange for lessons.”

Hermione grimaced. She didn’t need French lessons. She needed to convince Harvey this was a terrible idea.

“But Harvey, I really don’t think I’m best suited for this,” she said. “I don’t have the experience, and...”

“Bullshit,” he said.

She just stared at him. He was quiet for a long moment before he started speaking again.

“Hermione, in addition to the letters I received about your recent breakup, I also received a copy of a letter from Mr. Malfoy to Bernard Lorraine. You know Bernard has been managing France for the past six months.”

“Yes sir,” she said, wondering where this was going.

“In his letter, Mr. Malfoy rejected every single one of Bernard’s proposals regarding the trade agreement we are working on with France. He didn’t even bother to offer a counterproposal. He simply told Bernard that France was not interested.”

“Well I’ve heard Malfoy has always been difficult to work with,” she said hesitantly.

“He has been, yes,” said Harvey. “And I’ve been complaining about him to the French Ministry for years, but for some reason they seem to like him. So we are stuck with him. But he’s refusing to work with Bernard.”

“Sir, I don’t see how I could do a better job than Bernard,” said Hermione a bit desperately.

Now Harvey pulled out a copy of Sunday’s *Prophet*, and Hermione winced as he put the paper on the desk in front of her and pointed to the front page.

“This, Hermione, tells me otherwise,” he said.

Hermione stared at the damning picture with Malfoy, as he breathed into her neck.

“Sir, it was just a stunt. Ginny Weasley and I ran into him completely by chance at dinner one night, and we got on the topic of relationships. I mentioned that Viktor and I were over, but Viktor wasn’t letting it go. Malfoy, Theo Nott, and Blaise Zabini were all there, and they cooked up this scheme to force the issue in the press. None of it was real with any of them, I can promise you that.”

To her dismay Harvey was smiling at her slightly.

“That’s even better then,” he said.

“What?” Hermione asked, totally nonplussed now.

To Hermione’s consternation, Harvey rolled his eyes at her as though she was being dense. “Hermione, please. If Mr. Malfoy likes you enough to stage an intervention for you, then he surely likes you enough to work with you. And it’s better that none of this was real. Mixing romance with work is fraught with complications, as we have recently discovered with Mr. Krum. It’s not always avoidable, and in the case of Mr. Malfoy I would allow just about anything to get him to actually negotiate. But still. Given the choice, I would always prefer your relationships stay professional.”

Hermione gaped at him, but Harvey stared her down until finally she nodded slowly.

“Excellent,” he said. “I want you to meet with Bernard today. He’s going to take your former countries, and you will take his.”

“You’re giving him seven new ones then?” she asked hesitantly.

Harvey gave her a hard look now. “Hermione, I don’t want to deter you from your new project. But I would wager that the seven countries Bernard is assuming will be easier to manage than one country with Mr. Malfoy.”

Hermione groaned a little. She knew Harvey was right. Malfoy was rumored to be absolutely *impossible*.

Harvey smiled at her a little and said, “I have a good feeling about this, Hermione. You obviously made a personal connection with him this past weekend, and that’s something nobody else in the department has ever achieved.”

Hermione just sighed, as Harvey stood to leave.

“Very well. I’m off to give Bernard the good news, and then I’ll be writing Mr. Malfoy and the others to let them know of the switch. Please get with Bernard today to compare notes.”

Hermione nodded glumly as Harvey walked out the door. Slowly, she collected herself and started to compose a note to Malfoy while she waited for Bernard to come find her to meet about their swap. It took her much longer than usual, but she was struggling to put her thoughts into words in a professional manner. Finally, letter complete, she walked out of the office to their small owlery and attached the note to send off.

As she turned around to find Bernard, she got a glimpse of several large somethings floating through the office. Curious, she followed them until she realized they were house elves, carrying three large bouquets of irises: one all red, one all white, and one the distinctive blue. To her horror the house elves walked the bouquets into her office and set them down on her desk all in a row.

Hermione moved toward them, barely noticing the crowd of her colleagues who were watching curiously from behind. She saw that each bouquet had a card. She opened them one by one, noting that the stationery was stamped with a fleur-de-lis. Each card contained a single word.

*Welcome*

*To*

*France*

Hermione just groaned.

## Chapter 8: Brunch

### Draco

Draco was chuckling to himself as he twirled his wine glass in his hand, re-reading the letter Granger had sent him the previous morning for the dozenth time.

*Dear Mr. Malfoy,*

*I have just met with Harvey Cooper, and he has asked me to swap most of my countries in Eastern Europe for France with Bernard Lorraine. While I'm not sure that this is a wise plan, the powers that be seem to think you and I will have a positive working relationship. I will be meeting with Bernard later on today to discuss the status of your negotiations with him, and I hope you will give me a few days to get up to speed before we meet to begin our work together.*

*I do apologize for the switch, as I know Bernard was also relatively new to your file. However, I hope that it will be for the best.*

*Please write back and let me know when you are available to meet so we can begin our negotiations.*

*I am, yours most truly,*

*Hermione J. Granger*

Draco had ignored her letter, deciding to let her stew for a bit before responding. He had a feeling she was the type to obsess over a letter that went unanswered, and he wanted her to obsess a little bit. He wanted her to be thinking about him, even if she was going a bit mad while she did it.

After all, he himself had started to go a bit mad ever since the party on Saturday night. Handing her back to Blaise after their dance was one of the hardest things he had ever done. But he had no choice. She was Blaise's date. Draco was hosting, and he had other duties. Seducing Hermione Granger was not on the list of things he could achieve that night.

The problem of course, was that *she* had already seduced *him*, though he suspected she wasn't aware of it. That final dance with her had been so sexual, so perfect, he could suddenly imagine what she would be like naked in bed with him. He had gotten just the slightest hint of it, and he spent the last few days thinking of little else.

He was thrilled that his plan to get her assigned to France had been so successful. He was sure she was dreading it, and he didn't intend to make it easy for her, but he knew that he would make concessions if it kept her close to him, at least until he had finally bedded her. He briefly considered whether this conflict of interest meant he couldn't do his job well, before he dismissed this train of thought. His real job was with Potter. His work at the French Ministry had always been a cover for that. He wanted Granger closer to him, and that meant making sure she got enough out of him that the British Ministry viewed their relationship as a wild success. If she was the first person to get Draco Malfoy to make real concessions, she would be assigned to France indefinitely whether she liked it or not.

But still, he wanted to make her work for it a little bit. Needling Hermione Granger had always given him a rush, only now it had morphed into something more.

So he was going to make her wait for a response.

As if on cue, he felt his galleon burn, and he checked it.

*Hermione is going spare.*

Draco grinned broadly at this.

*Why would that be?*

*She said you haven't responded to her letter.*

*She only sent it to me yesterday. I've been busy.*

*Not too busy to send her flowers though.*

*It was a welcome gift.*

*Why do I think you've never done that for any of the others?*

*You'd be right, but they've all been blokes.*

There was a long pause, but Draco suspected Potter wasn't done with him yet. Sure enough, his galleon burned again.

*Between us, did you arrange it?*

Draco chewed his lip at this. For better or for worse, Potter knew the way Draco's mind worked. They had spent the last eight years solving problems together. If there was one person who would see through him, Draco knew it was Harry Potter.

*Between us, that's none of your business.*

*Bloody hell Malfoy. How did you do it?*

*Who said I did anything? I simply rejected Lorraine's last proposal in full.*

*After you were photographed feeling her up on the dance floor.*

*I'll have you know that the rumba is a perfectly appropriate dance.*

*Ginny said it looked like you two wanted to jump each other.*

*I can't speak for her, but I wouldn't be opposed.*

*Just be careful with her. She's my sister.*

Draco exhaled, feeling an odd sort of satisfaction. He had known Potter could be a hurdle. He was the only person who was connected to both of them so intimately, and Draco had half expected Potter to blow up at him when he realized what Draco had done. But to his relief, Potter seemed to accept it, provided that Draco behaved himself.

*I will behave, he thought to himself. Mostly.*

Finally he bit his lip and decided to let Potter have this round. He tapped his galleon one last time.

*You have my word.*

Finished with Potter now, Draco pulled out the letter again and read it one final time. He could tell she was gritting her teeth while writing it. He wondered how long she sat at her desk, worrying over the words before finally putting her quill to paper.

Chuckling to himself one more time he pulled out his own parchment and wrote.

*Granger,*

*Lorraine's proposal can sod off. We'll start from scratch, but first we should continue our question game. Let's have dinner Friday or Saturday night. Let me know what works best for you and send me your address. I'll come pick you up.*

*DLM*

He sealed the letter and thought about sending it, but then paused. He decided to let her stew one more night. He dropped the letter on his desk to wait until morning.

\*\*\*\*\*

Draco felt his heart leap as an owl flew toward his window. He sent the letter to Granger that morning, and he was sure this was her response. He had already made reservations for both

nights, and he was eager to find out how long he would have to wait to see her again.

The owl landed in front of him, and he ripped the letter off and opened it eagerly.

*Malfoy,*

*Since we've dispensed with formalities, I'll just tell you that I'm busy. And seeing as how my plans for Friday night involve Theo and my plans for Saturday night involve Blaise, no I will not cancel them for you. We wouldn't want The Prophet to think your friendship can't survive sharing me, would we?*

*Before you ask, I'm also busy Saturday during the day and Sunday night, though I could meet Sunday for brunch if you insist on eating while we talk. Or, alternatively, you could simply do what I suggested in the first place and find a time during the week when we can meet in a professional manner.*

*I await your owl. Faster this time, please.*

*Hermione*

Draco just gaped at her letter. He was torn between fierce jealousy that she was apparently dating Theo and Blaise at the same time, humor at the tongue-in-cheek manner in which she had written to him, and a determination to get what he wanted.

He warred with himself as he thought about his next move. Finally deciding he had to win *something* he whipped out some parchment and wrote her back.

*Granger,*

*Though I question your taste in men, I will not ask you to cancel with those wankers. Still, I must insist upon a casual meeting over food and drink before we commence the professional side of our relationship.*

*Seeing as how you have left me with no other choice, it will have to be brunch on Sunday. And while I hesitate to suggest this, I think we should meet for brunch at Malfoy Manor in Wiltshire. The house elves make a cracking good full English (yes we pay them, don't get your knickers in a twist). It's better than anything you'll find at a restaurant.*

*I'll make sure the floo is open for you, and I'll see you at 11.*

*DLM*

*PS: I trust the speed of my reply is satisfactory for you.*

Huffing in annoyance now, Draco sent the owl off with his response and considered what he should do next. The thing he really wanted to do was throttle Theo and Blaise, but he knew they hadn't done anything wrong. Not really. It wasn't like they had discussed this between themselves. He didn't have a claim on her yet.

But he did have an angle that they didn't. Smiling to himself again, he pulled some parchment toward him and began to write.

\*\*\*\*\*

"Master Draco, Miss Granger has arrived!" squeaked Topsy, his house elf.

Draco thanked her and rose from his desk to meet Granger in the breakfast room. Even though he wasn't thrilled that they were having *brunch*, he did have to admit that it had its advantages. He would be able to press her about her dates with Theo and Blaise, and it was an excuse to bring her to the Manor, which was far more private than any restaurant.

He had been a little worried she would have trouble with it. The last time she had been here she was tortured. But his mother had redecorated, and it looked very different than what she would remember. Besides, he wouldn't be taking her into the drawing room. They would be in a part of the Manor she had never seen before. In any event, she hadn't objected when he suggested it, so he decided to trust that she could handle it.

As he approached the small parlor he came to an abrupt halt as he heard female voices chatting and laughing.

*Voices?*

He strode forward to find Granger laughing at something his mother had just said. Draco scanned the table and saw it was set for three. He gritted his teeth. This was not what he had in mind.

"Draco darling! Hermione was just telling me the most amusing story about one of her adventures with Harry. Did you know they smuggled a baby dragon out of Hogwarts once?"

Draco just gave them a stony look. He noticed Granger's eyes were twinkling at him, and he glared at her.

"Of course, Draco was the reason we got caught," said Granger, now turning back to his mother. "He saw the dragon and turned us in. I've never lost so many points for Gryffindor in one go."

His mother gave him an exasperated look. "Really, Draco."

He just grunted at them and came to the table. His mother gave him a stern look.

"Honestly Draco, I don't know where your manners have gotten to this week. Why, if it hadn't been for Hermione I would never have known you invited her over for brunch. It was a lovely notion of course, and I was ever so pleased to hear she would be here."

Draco now raised his eyes to Granger, and she smirked at him from across the table. Draco couldn't decide if he was incredibly annoyed or incredibly turned on as he realized she had just bested him yet again.

"My apologies, Mother," he said, as he was still staring at Granger. "I've been terribly busy, you know. It must have slipped my mind."

"Well I do hope the work will go more smoothly now that Hermione is your counterpart."

"I'm sure Draco and I will have a productive relationship," said Granger, still making eye contact with Draco.

He studied her for a moment and watched her start to blush under his gaze. He gave a small, satisfied nod as he broke eye contact and said, "No doubt. She's far brighter than any of her predecessors. I have hopes that we'll finally get somewhere."

They made small talk for a few more minutes until Narcissa finally said, "Hermione dear, have you heard anything more from Mr. Krum? I'm afraid Draco filled me in on the little scheme with Blaise and Theo."

Draco watched her closely as she smiled. "No, it worked perfectly. Though evidently my popularity in Eastern Europe was a byproduct of my relationship with him. Most of the countries object to me now, so that's why I was reassigned to France."

"That's a shame dear," said Narcissa.

Granger just shrugged. "It's a bit galling, but there wasn't anything I could do about it. And at least I kept Romania. That one was the most active besides Bulgaria. Russia, of course, has always belonged to somebody else."

Draco felt something in his stomach clench.

"Romania?" asked Narcissa delicately. Draco trod on her foot under the table.

"Yes," said Granger. "My counterpart there didn't like Viktor so he wasn't offended when I ended the relationship. He actually seemed pleased by it. He said he always felt I had too many countries, and now I'll be able to give more attention to Romania than I have in the past."

"I rather think France will keep you quite busy," cut in Draco a bit sharply.

Granger gave him an amused look. "Of that I have no doubt. And Italy has been more active recently too."

"And what are you working on with the Italians?" asked Narcissa politely.

"A new trade deal," said Granger. "In fact, I saw Blaise last night at the preliminary meeting. They've brought him in to help. I suspect they think he will soften me up for them."

Draco stilled before throwing caution to the wind.

"I thought you had a date with him?" he said.

Granger looked at him innocently. "What on earth gave you that idea?"

*Minx*, he thought to himself. She had bested him twice now. Suddenly he had to know.

"And how was dinner with Theo on Friday?"

"Oh that was lovely. He and Luna really seemed to hit it off, just like I expected."

She gave him a teasing look and then pointedly turned away from him to engage his mother in conversation while his mind raced.

*She hadn't been on a date with either one of them. Nor me...* he realized, as he eyed his mother.

Granger, it appeared, was playing her hand carefully, making sure she wasn't alone with any of them.

While Draco wasn't pleased that his own date had been interrupted by his mother, he felt a rush of relief that Granger had evidently managed Theo and Blaise.

*And now she's trying to manage me too*, he thought.

Draco, however, had no intention of letting her do that.

Draco was quiet through much of the meal, simply observing Granger and his mother together, only chiming in when needed. He could tell Narcissa liked her. Though Narcissa was always charming and pleasant, Draco sensed a warmth in her tone that told him it was genuine. And her sharp eyes missed nothing. His mother was taking note of Granger's manners and posture, and Draco could tell she approved.

As for Granger, she was talking animatedly, and Draco rather enjoyed watching her face. She was expressive, he realized. She might be able to lie to others, but she would never be able to lie to him, not really. Her eyes would give her away every time. She was earnest and determined, and Draco could see how she managed to do her job so well. She simply won people over.

He allowed himself to take in the rest of her that he could see as well. She had worn a muggle sundress, blue of course, and it showed off a lovely expanse of her neck. Her hair was down today, he could see the curls bouncing as she spoke, and Draco saw a flash of something in her ears. He watched until her hair moved and noticed she was wearing a pair of very well-cut

diamond earrings. He narrowed his eyes a little at this. He noticed a sparkle and fire that told him they were goblin made, and that was very unusual for a muggleborn. They would cost a small fortune, and the Hermione Granger he knew would be too practical to spend her money on something like that. If she wanted diamonds, she could always get the muggle version for much less.

*Somebody must have given them to her.*

Draco felt another surge of jealousy, as he realized the earrings had probably come from Krum. She had mentioned that he gave her gifts. He was certainly wealthy enough to afford goblin made jewelry for his girlfriend. Krum probably gave them to her ages ago, Draco assured himself. Surely she wasn't wearing them because she still had feelings for him. Still, he continued to cast dark looks at them every time they flashed.

Draco suddenly snapped back to attention when he heard his mother ask, "Hermione dear, tell me about your parents. What do they do?"

To Draco's surprise, Granger got an oddly closed expression on her face at this and said, "Oh they live in Australia. They run a shop there. We don't really keep up. They don't understand wizards, you know."

Draco could tell she was lying, and he suspected his mother could too, but to Narcissa's credit she took the hint and swiftly changed the subject. Draco, however, was intensely curious about this. He couldn't recall Granger talking about her parents very much at school, though he knew she may have just kept quiet around him. Then again, he was sure she had gone home for breaks. And she had always seemed well cared for. She never had an air of neglect like Potter or even second hand clothes like the Weasleys. Potter had mentioned in passing that she was an only child, and Draco remembered seeing her parents once in Flourish and Blotts. It was a distant memory, but he recalled they were rather posh for muggles.

*They aren't shopkeepers.* He was sure of that. But why were they living in Australia when their only child lived in England?

He turned this over in his mind for a few more minutes until he was pulled out of his thoughts by Granger standing. Automatically he stood as well, and he saw something stir in her eyes at it. He suspected she was thrown off by this behavior a bit, and he smirked a little. Draco knew from experience that Potter rarely did this around witches, and he suspected Weasley didn't either despite the fact that he was a pureblood.

His mother rose as well and bid Granger farewell, and Draco walked around the table to escort her through the door and purportedly back to the floo. But as soon as they exited he turned left instead of right, and he felt Granger falter.

"Erm, this isn't the way I came," she said a bit nervously.

"No, but I want to show you something before you leave," he said casually.

She gave him a sharp look. "I'm really not sure I can spare the time..."

He gave her an amused smile. “Not even for my family’s library?”

She inhaled, just as Draco knew she would. He was sure she was still that persistent bookworm he knew from school, somewhere deep down. Sure enough, a look of desperate longing crossed her face, and Draco could see she was debating this with herself. She clearly wasn’t certain about being alone with him. But it was the only way she would get to see the famed Malfoy library.

She chewed on her lip for another moment and finally her curiosity won out.

“Oh very well then, but just a peek.”

He smiled a bit and led her down the hall toward the doors of the library, which he opened with a flourish. She walked in and gasped. Draco felt his cock twitch at the sound, suddenly imagining her gasping for him.

*Down boy, he told himself. She was obviously skittish. He would have to go slow.*

Instead, he allowed himself to step back and watch her as she looked around with wonder on her face.

“Draco...” she breathed, as she stared at the enormous shelves of books.

Draco felt something inside of him lurch. She had never once addressed him by his first name when she was speaking directly to him. But she had just done it, almost unconsciously.

“Hermione,” he murmured. Her name felt a bit odd on his tongue. But it was softer than her last name. It was more feminine. It was a name he thought she had finally grown into.

She spun around to stare at him, and Draco sensed she had the same feeling he had just experienced, hearing her first name spoken by him. Something passed between them, and Draco realized that in that moment their relationship had fundamentally shifted ever so slightly. He kept eye contact with her, unwilling to break the spell. Finally, she looked away and turned back to the books.

“It’s extraordinary,” she said. Draco walked up behind her, standing a little closer than was strictly necessary. He thought he saw her shudder slightly, and he smiled to himself.

“We’ve been collecting for hundreds of years. It’s a magical room, you know. We will never run out of space.”

“Really?” she asked, turning to look at him again, and her eyes widened a bit when she realized just how close he was.

“Really,” he said, looking down at her. “We could fit the entire Hogwarts library in here if we wanted to. In fact, I’m pretty sure my grandfather Abraxas tried to do just that. He once offered a small fortune for the Hogwarts library. Of course the Board of Governors told him no. But he was mad for books.”

She smiled a bit at that. “I can relate,” she admitted.

Draco raised an eyebrow. “I don’t think anybody is as mad for books as Hermione Granger.”

“That’s probably true,” she said, stepping away from him and toward the books. He watched, a bit entranced, as she brushed her fingers along the spines. “Viktor first saw me in the Hogwarts library, you know. He kept coming back because I was there. Of course I was oblivious.”

“Does he like books then?” asked Draco.

Hermione shrugged. “I suppose. It was mostly an excuse to get close to me though. He certainly didn’t have anything like this.”

He watched for a few more minutes as she examined the shelves, until suddenly she turned to him. “You like books. And libraries.”

Draco cocked an eyebrow at her. “I do. But I’m surprised you know that.”

“Why?” she asked. “It was obvious at school. You were always in the library, at least until eighth year. Then you were usually holed up in your dorm with Blaise and Theo. But you still went to the library when I was in class.”

He stilled. *Did she watch me on Potter’s map?*

A bit intrigued by this, he said, “Well I figured the library was mostly yours.”

She shot him a look, as though he had just confirmed something for her.

“I wondered if that was it. You were avoiding me, weren’t you?”

Draco cocked his head and studied her. “Yes. I thought it would be easier if we weren’t forced to interact with each other right after the war. But I grew out of it. And in fairness, you’ve avoided me for years ever since. I know you’ve been offered France before. You’ve always turned it down.”

She gave him an uncomfortable squirm at this. “Well, you have a reputation, you know.”

Draco felt himself deflate. “You mean, because I’m a former Death Eater?”

To his consternation she rolled her eyes at him. “No. Just that you’re difficult to work with. Very difficult. And given our history, I thought life would be infinitely easier if we didn’t have to go toe to toe with each other professionally.”

Draco’s feelings of disappointment vanished in a moment, and he suddenly felt lighter than he had in ages. She hadn’t avoided him because she thought he was still a Death Eater. She had been avoiding him because she was afraid she would lose. This was the best news he had gotten in weeks. He thought it might even beat the news that Potter had nabbed Rowle.

He sauntered toward her, and he watched as her eyes got big. She backed away a bit, but hit a bookshelf. He had her right where he wanted her.

“Hermione Granger,” he said, reaching for her hand and raising it to kiss the back of it. “I’m flattered you think I’m that good.”

She flushed, and he smirked at her before turning her hand over.

“And frankly, I’m shocked that you would ever back down from a challenge.” Then he kissed the inside of her wrist again, just like he had during their dance. He lingered over it a bit this time, and he could feel her pulse thudding beneath his lips. He half expected her to yank her hand away, but she didn’t. She was frozen, eyes wide, and her breath caught as she watched him.

Finally, he decided to give her a break, and he released her hand and backed away.

“You’re welcome to use the library whenever you wish for as long as you wish. I don’t have to be here. Just send an owl to the house elves to let them know when you’re coming if I’m in Paris. We usually shut the floo when Mother and I aren’t in residence.”

“I... I... really?” she asked.

He gave her a charming smile. “Of course. And who knows, maybe we’ll even get some work done in here now and then. Somehow, I suspect I’m going to need every bit of leverage I can get when it comes to you.”

He saw her smile slightly at this, as she followed him out of the library and toward the floo.

“Giving me access to a private library is likely to give *me* leverage, you know. There’s no telling what I’ll find in those books of yours.”

“Hmmm, that’s what you think,” he said, raising his eyebrows at her.

He led her toward the main fireplace in the foyer and turned to look at her.

“Thank you for brunch, Draco,” she said. “And for the tour of your library.”

“Of course,” he said. He waited until she had thrown some floo powder into the fire and stepped into it before saying, “I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

She looked at him in surprise, but he just grinned and stepped out of sight as she shouted her address. He paused and listened, making sure her address was still the same as he remembered.

“452 Cadbury Square, London!” she said. Draco smiled a bit as he heard her woosh away.

*Game on Granger*, he thought.

## Chapter 9: Lunch

### Hermione

Hermione swore as she hopped on one foot, rushing to get her shoes on before floo'ing to the Ministry. She was running late. She had been up far later than she cared to admit, puzzling over the enigma that was Draco Malfoy.

She tried to set a professional tone for their new relationship, but he seemed determined to dispense with any professionalism whatsoever. She had asked around, and this was not how he had behaved with any of her predecessors. She knew he was toying with her, and it outraged her that he wasn't taking her seriously. So she got him back, or so she thought. She set the tone for their first meeting, first by rejecting dinner with him and then by arranging for his mother to be at brunch with them. And maybe she had implied she was dating Theo and Blaise. She thought it might annoy him, and she could see that it did. But then he turned the tables on her when he showed her the library.

*It was gorgeous*, she thought with a sigh. She knew she could get lost in there for hours. For once, she didn't want to go to work this morning. Instead, she wanted to go back to Malfoy Manor so she could poke around in their books. And he had offered to let her visit anytime she wanted, whether he was there or not. She had nearly swooned. She knew she shouldn't take him up on his offer. He was right that it would give him leverage. But she didn't know if she would be able to resist it. The Malfoy collection was rather famous, and she was dying for a closer look.

The whole thing was odd, she thought. It was almost like he was interested in her. He had even kissed her wrist, and her heart nearly beat out of her chest when he did it. But she knew that couldn't be right. He was a pureblood and still firmly entrenched in that world. She knew he had moved on from those prejudices, at least in public, but in his private life she thought he still cared, at least a little bit. She had been one of very few muggleborns at his birthday party. And he hadn't invited her, not really. Blaise had. She recalled the articles she had read about him over the years, and he had been connected with witches now and then, but they had always been purebloods, usually gorgeous and high in the instep.

So there was no way he would actually want *her*. It had to be that he was trying to disarm her so he could one up her when it came to her new job. They had a history together, and he was playing the same games he always had, only now he was an adult. The stunt they had pulled at his birthday party may have been a debt he felt like he was repaying. But everything since then was just a way for him to win.

She sighed, as she walked through the marble foyer of the Ministry toward the lifts. He was very handsome, and she had been attracted to him for years. She grimaced when she thought about it, but she couldn't deny that. And now that she had met him again, she was sure there was something about him that drew her to him, more so than Blaise or Theo. But she also

knew she couldn't trust any of it. He was acting this way for leverage. If he sensed even a hint of attraction from her, he would find a way to use it against her, she was sure of it.

She was lost in thought until she made her way into the wing of the Ministry that contained her department. She started to walk past the reception area when Belinda the welcome witch said, "Hermione, I went ahead and made reservations for you for your lunch meetings this week."

Hermione stared. "Pardon?"

"Your lunch meetings with Mr. Malfoy. He owled last week and asked to be put on your calendar."

Hermione felt herself gaping now.

"For which days?" she finally asked.

"The whole week," said Belinda. "He said you both have a great deal to discuss. He suggested a few places, so I made the reservations. Your lunch today is at the Savoy at noon. He owled this morning to say he would meet you there."

Hermione felt dazed. She didn't know what to say. The first thing that came out was, "But it's muggle."

"Yes," said Belinda. "It's a bit odd. All of the places he suggested were muggle. I had to go use one of those fellytones in the Muggle Relations Department to arrange it all."

She suddenly recalled that the restaurant she had met him in during that night in Paris was muggle as well. She had completely forgotten about that fact because she was so surprised to see him.

Not knowing what else to do, Hermione just nodded and went to her office, wondering what she had gotten herself into with Draco Malfoy.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione made her way toward the Savoy, still puzzling over the fact that Draco Malfoy wanted to meet her in muggle London. The notion was so odd, she was totally thrown off by it. She had almost refused to come, but eventually decided to let him have this one. Maybe they would finally discuss work, and it was the only way to satisfy her curiosity about the restaurant location.

She made her way into the lobby, suddenly remembering that the Savoy had several restaurants, and she hadn't clarified with Belinda. Sighing, she made her way from restaurant to restaurant until she finally found one with a reservation under Malfoy.

*That's odd, she thought. Belinda said she made the reservations.*

"Mr. Malfoy is already here," said the hostess. "He requested his usual room."

Hermione nearly stumbled. "He comes here often then?" she asked curiously.

"Oh yes, quite often. We are always pleased when he's here."

Hermione followed in silence, pondering this until the hostess gave her a teasing look.  
"Though he's never met a woman here before. Except for his mother of course."

"It's for work," said Hermione automatically.

The hostess didn't say anything to that, but just gave her a skeptical look as she led Hermione through the doors of a small private room.

Malfoy was there reading a newspaper. He rose when Hermione entered.

"Hermione," he said, and she felt her stomach flip over at his voice. He looked inordinately pleased with himself.

"Draco," she said as curtly as she could manage. To her consternation he walked around the table and pulled her in for a kiss on the cheek. She caught a whiff of his scent and felt slightly lightheaded.

*Bloody hell.*

She forced herself not to sputter as she heard him politely dismiss the hostess, and then he pulled out a chair for her. She lowered herself into it and watched him cautiously as he moved back around the table and sat down too.

"Now," he said. "I almost ordered you a gin and tonic, but I didn't want to presume. But please," and now he gestured toward a drink list.

She raised her eyebrows at him. "It's lunch."

"And?" he countered. "Don't tell me you've never had a drink at lunch before."

She pursed her lips for a moment but decided she really *could* use a drink to fortify herself for whatever was coming next.

Their waitress came in a moment later, and Hermione ordered a gin and tonic, pointedly ignoring Malfoy's amused smile.

"Now Malfoy," she started.

"Draco," he corrected.

She narrowed her eyes at him.

"I prefer Draco. It's so much friendlier don't you think?"

She huffed. "Fine. Draco. We should discuss the points of the previous proposal that..."

"No," he cut her off.

"Excuse me?" she said.

"I said no. We still need to get to know each other first. I tried this past weekend, but you thwarted me."

She stared at him. "Are you telling me you arranged this so we could..."

"Get to know each other better. Yes, of course."

"And lunch for the rest of the week is because...."

"You're a complex witch. I'll need lots of time with you first."

"This is unbelievable," she muttered.

"Believe it. Because *I* believe in knowing your opponent. So tell me, where did you get those earrings?"

"What?" she asked, totally nonplussed.

"Your earrings," he said. "You wore them yesterday too. They're obviously goblin made. At first I assumed Krum gave them to you, but you wore them two days in a row. So now I'm wondering if I was wrong about that."

"What on earth do my earrings have to do with anything?" she demanded.

Draco shrugged. "It's not that different than when you asked me my favorite color."

"Sure it is," countered Hermione. "An equivalent question would be coffee or tea?"

"But I know you drink coffee," he said.

"OK fine, then something like what's my favorite book?"

"It's *Hogwarts, A History*," he supplied.

Hermione stared at him in amazement, but she couldn't say anything about it because just then the waitress came by to take their order.

Once that was settled she said, "How on earth do you know my favorite book?"

He shrugged. "I just do. But what I don't know is where you got your earrings."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, but then sighed. "Fine then, it's not like it's a secret. Harry gave them to me."

Draco gave her a curious look now.

“Potter gave you goblin made diamond earrings?”

Hermione shrugged. “In a manner of speaking. They’re from his vault. I always liked them and finally got them out again after I ended things with Viktor.”

Draco gave her a sharp look. “You’ve been in Potter’s vault?”

Hermione shifted uncomfortably. This was not at all what she had pictured for their lunch today.

She cleared her throat. “Yes,” she said simply, hoping he wouldn’t ask any follow-up questions.

Her hopes were dashed as Draco’s eyes bored into her. “But how? You aren’t related. A family vault like Potter’s only opens for direct members of his family.”

Hermione nodded slowly, wondering if she should tell him this. She thought about it and decided it wasn’t *really* a secret. It just wasn’t well-known. Besides, maybe it would make him take her a bit more seriously if he knew just how close she was to Harry, even after all these years.

“Yes, and I am a member of his family. He adopted me after the war — as his sister, of course.”

Draco sat back, clearly stunned by this.

“But why?” he finally asked.

Hermione exhaled.

“Protection, mostly. You may not be aware, but Harry, Ron, and I broke into Gringotts to steal something that we needed to defeat Voldemort the day before the Battle of Hogwarts. The goblins were outraged of course, and after the dust settled from the final battle it eventually became clear they were going to take it out on me. They kept it to themselves while I was still under the protection of Hogwarts, but once I was done they were out for blood. Harry is independently wealthy of course. He’s a very important client and the Chosen One and all that. The Weasleys aren’t that wealthy, but they’re a prolific pureblood family, related to many other families who *are* wealthy, and one of their sons was a well-respected cursebreaker there at the time. But then there was me. Muggleborn. Parents... absent. All of my money was muggle, and a lot of it had been spent keeping Harry, Ron, and me alive during the final year of the war when we were on the run. I was an easy target, and once I was out of Hogwarts I was pretty much on my own.”

Draco sat back and gave her a considering look now. “Yes...” he said slowly. “I knew about the break-in of course. Mother inherited Bellatrix’s vault when she died the next day.”

Hermione cringed, but Draco gave her an amused smile. “It’s fine,” he said. “Mother has never blamed you three for it. We know it was necessary. But I can also see why the goblins would be pissed about it. And naturally they would have chosen you to take the fall.”

“Well, quite,” said Hermione, a bit relieved that he seemed to find their break-in humorous. “Anyway, Harry and Ron wanted me to have the same standing with the goblins as them. The easiest way for me to join a wizarding family would have been through marriage. But obviously I would never marry Harry, and even though I had dated Ron before, we had already broken up by then. Our breakup was mutual, and we went back to being friends almost immediately, but our relationship was still over. So Harry came up with this mad idea of sibling adoption.”

“How did you achieve it?” he asked with interest.

Hermione chewed on her lip a bit, but finally sighed. “It was a blood ritual.”

“Dark?” he asked, a curiously intense look on his face.

“A bit,” conceded Hermione. “But it was the only way to do it and have it be recognized by Gringotts. It wasn’t a parent-child adoption you know. It was sibling to sibling so we had to do it through a blood ritual instead of using the typical legal channels. In any event, I bonded with Harry because we *are* like siblings. We always have been. And it worked. So Harry is my brother, legally. Everything in his vault is also mine, and we never bothered to set up a separate vault for me. Of course I don’t spend his gold or anything like that. But I do wear the jewelry, and I’ve taken out a few of the books and pieces of furniture and things like that over the years. Harry doesn’t mind it, and Ginny doesn’t either. She knows I’m his sister, and there’s plenty for us to share.”

“Why did you wait until you dumped Krum to wear those earrings then?” asked Draco.

“Since they’re now yours and Potter and Ginny don’t mind?”

Hermione wrinkled her nose at this. “Viktor never liked it when I wore Potter jewelry, so I didn’t do it all that often while we were together. He used to think Harry and I were a couple, you know. The papers have written about us like that for years, so I suppose it’s not surprising. But it’s always been bollocks. Harry and I both reassured Viktor multiple times that there was never anything romantic between us, but he still didn’t like to see the jewelry and be reminded of our relationship. It’s a bit ridiculous, really. I mean, I’m Harry’s sister. I’m literally his sister. I couldn’t marry him even if I wanted to. That was the thing we gave up when we bonded with each other, you know — we could never have any romantic future together. But Viktor wasn’t rational about it.”

Draco studied her a bit with a small smile on his face. “So I take it you’re going to use this opportunity to raid the Potter family vault of its gems?”

Hermione couldn’t help but laugh at this. “Only the nice ones.”

He seemed to eye her earrings appreciatively. “You chose some nice ones to start, I’ll grant you that.”

Just then their food arrived, and they ate in silence for a bit until Draco said, “So what happened when the goblins found out that Potter adopted you?”

Hermione groaned. “They were *really* pissed.”

Draco smirked. "I bet."

Hermione gave him a reluctant smile. "I think we almost caused another goblin rebellion. But thankfully the Ministry intervened, and we got it sorted. The goblins still don't like me very much though. That's the reason I've never opened my own vault. The Ministry pays me in pounds so I use muggle banks for the most part. I only go into Gringotts when I need to convert pounds to galleons, and usually Harry or the Weasleys do it for me."

"You also go there to pick up jewelry," pointed out Draco.

"Well of course," said Hermione, with a smile now.

Draco suddenly got a look on his face as though he had just figured something out.

"When did this blood ritual take place?" he asked.

Hermione hesitated. "About six months after I graduated from Hogwarts. Around Christmas."

"So is that why you left the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures?" he asked.

"Bloody hell," muttered Hermione, but he just smirked at her.

She sighed. "Fine. Yes, that's why I left. It was part of the deal the goblins cut with the Ministry. They wanted me out of there, and I suppose I can't really blame them. It was unfortunate because I was working with the house elves and not the goblins, but there wasn't much I could do about it. It's worked out though. Luna Lovegood took my old job, and I have enjoyed the Department of International Magical Cooperation. So far at any rate," and she gave him a pointed look.

He just laughed. "I'll try not to break your streak."

Hermione smiled a little at this. "So is it my turn for a question then?"

"Fire away," said Draco.

"Why muggle restaurants?" asked Hermione. "It seems very out of character for you."

Draco shrugged. "They're more private. I'm anonymous here. So are you, for that matter. Rita Skeeter isn't buzzing around. This lunch won't be in the papers tomorrow."

Hermione considered this. "I suppose that's fair. When did you finally try them though?"

"After my dad went to Azkaban," said Draco. "He never would have approved, but Mum was feeling cooped up, and... somebody suggested we try muggle places. It turns out they're very good. They're better than many wizarding restaurants."

Hermione was surprised by this, but she supposed it made sense.

"Has it changed your views on muggles then?" she asked, a bit hesitantly.

Draco's eyes bored into her now. "I'd wager my views on muggles are rather different than what you think they are. My views changed gradually. Did the muggle restaurants help? Perhaps. But I had already softened quite a bit before I tried them. More than anything, they gave me exposure to the muggle world. And a reason to get one of these."

To Hermione's shock Draco pulled out a muggle mobile phone from his pocket.

"You have a mobile?" she asked, gaping at him now.

He chuckled. "Yes. I needed a way to make reservations. They don't take owls, you know. Of course, that also meant I had to have access to electricity. The wards at the Manor and our Paris property make it impossible. So I rent a small flat in each city that's muggle. It allows me to use muggle electronics."

Hermione knew her jaw had dropped, and Draco was chuckling at the expression on her face.

"Surprised?" he asked.

"Stunned," she said. "You're telling me you rent two properties so that you can use a muggle mobile phone to make restaurant reservations?"

"And watch the telly and play video games, yeah," he said.

"Oh my God," she said, and he just laughed again.

"Surprise, Hermione! I'm not a pureblood supremacist."

"I... can see that," she said finally. And it was true. But she didn't know what to do with this information. It ran so counter to everything she knew about him that she was absolutely baffled. Thankfully, she didn't much time to ponder this before lunch was over and Draco was settling their bill. After their conversation that day, she wasn't even surprised to see him pull out a muggle credit card. Of course he would have a muggle bank account if he was eating in muggle restaurants and renting muggle flats.

"Same time tomorrow then," he said. "Wiltons."

Hermione raised her eyebrow at this. "And I take it we still aren't discussing business tomorrow?"

Draco smirked. "I need at least a week with you. Perhaps more."

"Surely you aren't staying in England for longer than a week?" asked Hermione, a bit desperately.

Draco just gave her an innocent smile. "Oh but Wiltshire is so lovely this time of year. I plan to stick around for a while."

"Bloody hell," she muttered.



## Chapter 10: Dance

### Draco

Draco was finishing an early dinner, getting ready to head out of the Manor for the evening. After a full week of lunches with Hermione Granger, Draco had made a few important discoveries. First, she lived alone at her flat in muggle London, though she had gotten a floo connection for her fireplace as a special favor. Second, she opted to sibling bond with Potter instead of Weasley just in case she and Weasley got back together again. But she said they never had, and she insisted they never would. She thought they were too different, and both of them believed they worked better as friends. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, she had a standing engagement on Sunday evenings that she was awfully cagey about. She wouldn't tell him what it was or where it was, which ultimately told Draco everything he needed to know about it.

And this secret engagement was the reason Draco was heading down to the end of the lane of the Manor before crossing the gate and apparating to a familiar building.

*Madam Markham Dance* the sign read.

He smirked, as he let himself in through a backdoor that had always been unlocked when *he* took private lessons from her in prior years.

Draco had been enrolled in the same dance classes as every other pureblood child during his formative years. These were a given, along with etiquette classes and other deportment lessons that children generally found dull or boring. Draco had rather enjoyed his ballroom dance lessons, though he would never admit it to his mates. Madam Markham, however, had noticed and told his parents that he was more talented than most. She had encouraged more than the usual lessons for him.

Draco's mother had been in favor, as a lover of dance herself. Draco's father, unsurprisingly, had been opposed, insisting that Draco just needed the basics to be acceptable in pureblood circles. His parents had argued about it, and Narcissa had won, though the concession to Lucius was that lessons remained private. Draco had continued his lessons for several years, with brush up lessons during the summers off from Hogwarts. And while he didn't enjoy it as much as quidditch, he appreciated the confidence it gave him when he was forced to attend a pureblood party, which, ironically, had become a more frequent thing ever since his father went to prison and Draco started working with Potter.

He slipped in through the door and down the hall, straining to hear. Sure enough, the familiar sounds of Madam Markham and her husband were floating out from one of the studios, and Draco could hear Hermione Granger responding.

Grinning broadly now, he moved toward the studio and entered without hesitation. He saw Hermione's jaw drop out of the corner of his eye as he addressed Madam Markham.

"Madam Markham! I hope I'm not too late. Hermione was telling me all about her lessons, and it reminded me that I could use a refresher. Of course it's been too long since I've had a lesson myself, but I'm sure the movements will come back to me."

"Draco!" she said, with delight. "Of course dear, of course! I saw the picture in the paper of that rumba you both performed at your party a couple weeks ago. I must say your hand position was a bit unorthodox, but there's no doubt you two captured the chemistry of the dance perfectly. Now then, next to Hermione please so we can get started."

Draco glanced at Hermione now and saw she was glaring daggers at him. His eyes roved over her, seeing she was in some sort of muggle exercise clothes. They clung to her like a second skin, and he could see every curve. He smirked and extended his hand. Grumbling, she took it and squeezed hard, as though trying to break his fingers. He forced himself not to wince as he pulled her toward him.

They started with a basic box step to warm up, and Hermione looked at him with gritted teeth. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she hissed so that Madam Markham wouldn't hear.

He smirked. "I decided I could use a refresher. Seeing as how you were otherwise occupied this evening, I thought it was a good night for it."

"Bullshit," she whispered. "You're crashing my lesson. I want to know why."

"Don't tell me you're actually upset about that? Surely you want a partner other than Mr. Markham," he whispered back.

"Mr. Markham is excellent!" she insisted.

"You're taller than him in those heels. And he's nearly old enough to be your grandfather."

She narrowed her eyes. "That's never been a problem," she muttered.

Draco stared at her hard. "Now *I'm* the one calling bullshit. You and I both know you will never dance your best unless you're with a partner who turns you on. You have to have chemistry."

She glared at him again. "And who says we have chemistry?"

He just rolled his eyes at her. She could be so stubborn. "Most of the wizarding world at this point."

She narrowed her eyes, but she was chewing her lip now as though thinking about it.

He pulled her close and whispered in her ear. "Come on Hermione. You can't tell me you've taken lessons all these years and never wished for a different partner. Here's your chance. Dance with me."

She didn't say a word, but knew the moment he had won because he felt her become pliant in his arms. Up until that point she had been fighting him and doing the bare minimum

necessary so she wouldn't receive comment from Madam Markham. But at his words she melted, and Draco felt something spark.

Draco knew he had been right about this because for years he had felt the same way. He enjoyed his lessons with Madam Markham. But she was decades older than him, and after Draco advanced beyond the standard group lessons he had never had another partner but her. She used to insist that he needed to put more emotion into his dancing, but how could he when she was his partner?

When he danced with Hermione at his party it was like lightning struck, and he finally understood what Madam Markham had been talking about for all of those years. So he had come tonight not only to spend more time with Hermione, but also to see if he could recreate that moment on the dance floor in Paris.

It was a bit different in a studio, he had to admit, but he caught flashes of perfection: his hand on her back, a glimpse of desire in her eyes, their hips in sync with each other. He listened to Madam Markham just enough to catch her commands, but otherwise his entire attention was focused on Hermione and the feeling of their bodies together. Just as he remembered from Paris, they were perfectly matched, and again she turned control over to him and allowed him to lead, something she hadn't done since that night.

It heated his blood, and though they barely spoke to each other, they didn't have to. Their bodies were communicating perfectly well without words. Just as he expected, she was fiery, her movements sharp and precise. As for Draco, he was taking liberties, he knew, by pulling her closer than necessary and allowing his hand to linger whenever he had a chance to touch her body. Surprisingly, Madam Markham didn't correct him, but instead seemed to be nodding in approval, with a small smile on her face.

*It's chemistry*, he thought. Yes, they had performed a stunt in Paris, but the chemistry had been real then, and it was real again now. Draco could feel it, and he hoped she could too, as he communicated it to her through every touch and movement of his body against hers.

By the time they reached the end of the lesson, Draco knew he had grossly miscalculated by coming here. He knew how she felt in his arms now. He had seen the curves of her body and felt them under his hands. He knew her scent and watched how her eyes glowed when they connected in this way. She was getting into his head, and he knew he wouldn't be able to get her out of it until he had taken her. What had started as casual interest that first night in Paris had very quickly snowballed into something he feared he wouldn't be able to control. He had never been so fascinated by a witch, and he had never wanted one so badly.

*Fuck, I need to wank*, he suddenly realized, quickly moving away from her as Madam Markham's parting words washed over him. It was ludicrous. He was acting like a hormonal teenager. But he couldn't help it. He shifted his stance to hide the bulge in his pants, as he forced himself to pay attention.

"That was truly wonderful, the best I have ever seen from either one of you. Draco, you must continue to join Hermione's lessons. I absolutely insist upon it."

Draco glanced at Hermione and saw that she looked nervous. He was also nervous, now that he realized he never should have come. More of this would be torturous if he couldn't have her too. But he already knew what his answer would be. It couldn't possibly be anything else, not when it had been like that.

"Of course, Madam Markham. I would really like to get back into it, and it seems to me that Hermione and I should take our lessons together. It's only sensible."

"I quite agree, don't you Hermione?"

Hermione looked like she did not agree, but she said, "Yes, of course. That was... very different."

Draco caught her eye and raised an eyebrow. To his delight she turned crimson.

*Maybe I haven't screwed this up after all,* he thought with relief. If she was as affected by it as he was, maybe he could make her crack.

They packed up and started to leave, and Draco saw that Hermione wasn't meeting his eye. That was not good. He couldn't leave it like that.

"Come on," he said to her, catching her hand as she started to turn away. "Let's get a drink."

She looked at him in confusion. "But it's Sunday night."

"And?" he rolled his eyes. "I'm sure muggles drink on Sunday night."

She hesitated and then looked down at her clothes. "I should change..." she started, but he shook his head.

"Nah, just throw on your jacket. We'll find something casual. Come on."

She eyed him cautiously, but nodded and he turned and apparated them to an alleyway in central London. He grabbed her hand, and he saw her look down at it out of the corner of his eye, but she didn't pull away as he walked a couple blocks until he found something that looked promising.

"Let's try this," he said, as they entered a pub filled to the brim with people. He pulled Hermione to the bar to order, and soon they were pushing their way through the crowd to find a small table.

"I didn't think this would be your scene," said Hermione, looking around in amusement.

"I'm a man of many surprises," he said.

"I'll say," she muttered, and he just grinned at her as they sat down.

"You have to admit that partnering with me was better than making sweet love on the dance floor with old Markham," he said, as he took a sip and studied her over the rim of his glass.

She gave him a wry smile. “You’re right of course. Though I wasn’t expecting it to be so...” she trailed off.

“Hot,” supplied Draco. She glanced at him and gulped, but nodded.

Draco gave her a teasing smile. “You’re welcome.”

She looked at him askance. “Excuse me! I think I was just as responsible as you for any hotness that occurred tonight!”

“Ah, but you weren’t leading it,” he said, a bit imperiously. “That was all me. Though I’ll admit I found your performance inspiring.”

She just glared at him now, and Draco couldn’t help but tease her. He was probably going to dig his own grave with this, but he couldn’t seem to stop.

“What? It’s a compliment. And I’m almost certain you have a praise kink. You should be feeling very good right now.”

Her jaw dropped. “What are you talking about a praise kink? That is so... so...”

“Accurate?” he asked.

“I truly have no notion of what you’re talking about,” she sniffed, though Draco could see her cheeks turning red.

*In for a knut, in for a galleon,* he thought.

“Don’t you? You’re telling me you didn’t like it when Krum would tell you how good you were in bed?”

Her jaw dropped again, and he just grinned at her.

Then she rolled her eyes. “This is *so* inappropriate.”

“Why? We’re off duty,” he said.

“Because we’re supposed to be working together!”

“So? Would your boss really care if he heard us talking about this? Or if he knew we were spending time together outside of work?”

“I....” she hesitated but finally looked defeated. “No. He probably wouldn’t care.”

“Well then,” said Draco brightly. “Tell me, am I right about the praise kink?”

Hermione groaned and mumbled something.

“What was that?” he asked.

“I said fucking fine! You’re right!” and she gave him such a baleful look at this he couldn’t help but laugh.

“Don’t you dare laugh at me, Malfoy! I swear I am this close to hexing you!”

Draco laughed harder. “I can’t help it,” he said. “You’re so fiery, but you’re so embarrassed about sex!”

“I am not embarrassed about sex!” she exclaimed. “I just don’t think it’s appropriate to talk about it with a colleague!”

“But I’m *not* your colleague, not really,” insisted Draco. “If anything, I’m an adversary. And Merlin, Granger. We’re in our mid-twenties now. I’m sure we’ve both had fantastic sex. It’s not a big deal.”

The truth was, Draco didn’t really want to think about Hermione having sex with other blokes. But he couldn’t help but tease her, and it was so easy to get a rise out of her like this. Besides, Draco needed to know what he would be up against if she ever gave him the slightest hint that she was interested.

She pursed her lips and didn’t say anything. For some reason Draco’s heart leapt at this.

“Wait, am I wrong? About the fantastic sex I mean.”

She wrinkled her nose. “It’s just been a long time.”

“What do you mean?” he asked, now intensely curious. Maybe his competition wasn’t as stiff as he assumed.

“Viktor and I.... We never....” said Hermione, turning scarlet now.

Draco felt his brain misfire. “You’re a virgin?” he asked incredulously.

“No! Not me. But Viktor was. Or is, I suppose,” said Hermione.

“You’re joking,” said Draco in disbelief.

Hermione shook her head no. “He’s very traditional about some things. That was one of them.”

“So you haven’t....” said Draco again.

“I have, but not in a really long time. I was with Viktor for a couple years.”

“Goddammit, Hermione,” muttered Draco. “How did you survive?”

She shrugged and then blushed. Draco grinned. “Yes...?”

She glared at him a bit and finally said, “Lots of self-care. And Viktor was willing to do some stuff, just not everything.”

Draco gave her a satisfied smirk. “Self-care, huh? Is that what we’re calling masturbation these days?”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Hermione. “You’re going to have to get me another drink if I’m going to talk to you about this.”

“Coming right up then,” said Draco.

“Oh my God, I was joking!” said Hermione, a bit desperately, but Draco ignored her. He left for a few moments and got her another drink before bringing it back to the table and plopping it in front of her.

“Bottoms up, then, so we can continue our conversation.”

“And *why* do you want to talk about this?” she asked a bit grumpily, but she took a sip.

“It’s fascinating. Here we have Hermione Granger, the former lover of an international quidditch star, except apparently not because said quidditch star was too much of a prude to go there. Tell me. Did he know about you? Or did he think you were pure too?”

Hermione sighed and finished her first drink before picking up the second and speaking. “He knew. Eventually. It was... a point of contention in our relationship.”

Draco frowned at this, but she shrugged.

“He had this romantic notion of saving himself for marriage. And he assumed I would too. When he found out I hadn’t, well.... he was very disappointed. But it’s not like I could do anything about it, even if I had wanted to. I told him he could either accept it and stay or decide it wasn’t what he wanted and break up. He decided to stay.”

Draco studied her a bit. “Who was it then? Weasley?”

Hermione nodded. “Yes. And it was lovely in a way of course. He’s one of my best friends. But it was also a bit odd. We didn’t get to that step until after Hogwarts. I mean, we kissed for the first time in the middle of the Battle of Hogwarts for heaven’s sake. Both of us thought we were about to die. Then right after the war we were both busy with funerals, and the Ministry, and Australia....”

Draco froze, but Hermione didn’t seem to realize what she had just said. He filed this away for later.

“... and of course I hardly saw him that year at Hogwarts because he didn’t return like I did. So when we finally did it... Well, the newness of our relationship had worn off, and the fear of dying had worn off. It was nice, but there was no real spark. I think that’s how we both knew it would never work between us. We only did it a few times before we ended things. It was mutual.”

“So how many were there between Weasley and Krum?” he asked.

She blushed and just shook her head.

“Fucking hell Hermione, that’s depressing.”

“It is not! I don’t really sleep around, you know. That’s not really my scene, and even if I wanted to.... if the press ever found out... well, let’s just say I have a hard time trusting random wizards not to call Rita Skeeter to brag about bedding the Golden Girl.”

Draco grimaced in acknowledgment of that point. The press would absolutely crucify her if there were rumors that she was having casual sex outside of a committed relationship. And she was correct that many wizards would simply view her as a trophy, more than anything. It wasn’t fair, but she was right.

“Alright, I’ll grant you that. But now that you’ve ditched Krum, I think it’s time you find somebody who *will* satisfy that part of a relationship for you. Or rather, you need somebody to introduce you to that part of a relationship. It sounds like what you did with Weasley wasn’t that satisfying.”

To his surprise she gave him a little smile with a calculating look. “Are you volunteering then, Malfoy?”

Draco stared at her. A frisson of awareness passed between them, and he gave her a slow smile before raising an eyebrow at her. “I feel pretty confident that I could make you satisfied.”

She inhaled, but he refused to break eye contact. Finally she narrowed her eyes and said, “You may be right. But what would that do to our negotiations if you had that sort of leverage over me? Besides, you aren’t really the type to commit after you’ve gotten what you came for, are you? I mean, how many times have you been photographed with some pureblood model for *Witch Weekly*? ”

Draco felt a surge of annoyance at this. Did she really think this was all about having leverage? Did she think he was being insincere about how interested he was, and this was all because of work? It wasn’t, not with her. He didn’t give a shit about things like trade deals.

And as for his lack of commitment, she was right of course. But most of the dates he had been on in the last eight years had simply been an excuse to get in with the right circles for information on former Death Eaters. He rarely went on dates because he was actually interested. Of course she wouldn’t know that, and he couldn’t tell her that without blowing his cover.

*Goddammit.*

“I’m not as much of a playboy as you seem to think,” he finally said a little curtly. “Yes, I go on dates. But most of them don’t work out for one reason or another.”

“You haven’t really been in a long-term relationship since Pansy though, have you?” she asked. “Or at least, not a public one.”

He felt a muscle twitch in his jaw. “That’s true. But it’s not because I’m disinterested. Every witch I take out is just....”

“Shallow,” she supplied.

“Yes,” he said.

“And they’re purebloods,” she added.

Now Draco cocked his head at her. “Do you think I wouldn’t date a half-blood or muggleborn?”

Hermione shifted a little uncomfortably. “Well you never have, not really. What am I supposed to think?”

Again, she was right about this. But Draco stuck to purebloods because he had to for Potter. He scrambled for a way to excuse this.

“You may be right, but it’s only because I socialize with purebloods more than half-bloods or muggleborns. You might be surprised, but most half-bloods and muggleborns don’t want anything to do with me, not really. And getting intimate with one... well, they would see my Dark Mark. Not to mention the scars from that spell Potter cast on me in sixth year and a few others from the Dark Lord.”

Draco was improvising, but he seemed to strike the right note. Hermione inhaled, and her eyes widened.

“You still have the Mark?” she asked quietly.

“It’s just a regular tattoo now. The magic doesn’t work anymore. But yes, you can still see it. I don’t imagine most muggleborns would be too keen on it, do you?”

“Oh...” she said a bit quietly, and she looked like she was having some sort of revelation. “No, I suppose you’re right. I mean, it’s just a symbol isn’t it? There’s nothing inherently scary about it. But most muggleborns were terrified of it. Half-bloods maybe less so, but yes I can see how that would still make them uncomfortable.”

Draco stared hard at her now. Until this very moment, he hadn’t even considered how Hermione would feel about his Dark Mark. He had spent enough time working with Potter that he felt like he had redeemed himself somewhat and moved past it. He now viewed his Mark as a tool to convince skeptics that he was still loyal to pureblood ideals in private, even if he couldn’t behave that way in public. But he suddenly realized he cared about her opinion of it. He cared a lot. And it sounded like it wouldn’t scare her.

“I have scars too, you know,” she added. He looked at her curiously.

“Some burns. Some cuts. My worst one is on my stomach and ribs. Dolohov got me good in the Department of Mysteries in fifth year. I nearly died.”

Draco felt a dull thudding in his ears. Dolohov had killed Teddy’s father. And now Draco found out that he had nearly killed Hermione. Draco wanted to make the bastard pay more than ever.

Draco realized she was looking at him a bit nervously, waiting for him to say something. He thought quickly. “Scars don’t mean anything.”

She exhaled a bit, clearly relieved. “Yes, well, not everybody views it that way. The few wizards who have seen my scars other than Harry and Ron have had a lot of questions about them. My scar from Dolohov is unsightly, and it’s been a... thing. Even Viktor was bothered by it. I suspect an awful lot of witches would see your tattoo and scars and think it means that you’re evil. And I *know* plenty of wizards would see my scars and think I’m damaged, assuming they could even get past how ugly my scars are in the first place. Most of the wizarding world stayed neutral in the war. They don’t really know how it affected those of us who were in it or what we’ve had to do to move past it. I try not to be embarrassed by my scars. I earned them. But it’s hard to bridge that gap with people who didn’t experience the same thing.”

He watched her, warmth building as he listened to her. Despite his work with Potter — or maybe because of it — he knew that she was right. The war had shaped them both and left its mark. He suspected that neither one of them would be satisfied with a partner unless that person understood what the war had done to them and the steps they had taken to move past it.

“Tell me then,” he said. “Do you think I’m evil?”

She rolled her eyes at him, but smiled a little. “I think you’re a prat. But no, you’re not evil. And you never have been, not really.”

He grinned broadly at this and raised his glass to her. “Cheers, Hermione.”

# Chapter 11: Quidditch

## Hermione

“So have you shagged him yet?” asked Ginny matter-of-factly.

“Ginny!” squealed Hermione.

“Well it’s a perfectly reasonable question,” said Luna serenely. “Theo said Draco moved back to England for you.”

Hermione just gaped at her two girlfriends. Hermione had canceled on Draco for lunch claiming that she hadn’t had a lunch date with her friends in ages, and they were overdue. Hermione snorted when she read his response back.

*Fucking fine. But only because (i) Ginny is my favorite Weasley too and (ii) Theo wants to shag Luna.*

Very professional, that Draco Malfoy.

Hermione, Ginny, and Luna had a few favorite lunch places, all muggle of course. Though Ginny and Luna were both purebloods, they had no trouble adjusting to muggle restaurants and shops, especially when it became clear that they wouldn’t be accosted by members of the press there. For years they had had a standing Wednesday lunch date, which had been canceled for various reasons the last few weeks.

*Well, not for various reasons. Just one reason: Draco Malfoy.*

Between Hermione’s trip to Paris, the change in countries at her job, and then Draco’s insistence on taking every lunch slot she had available for the past couple of weeks, it had been nearly a month since Hermione had seen them both together. Yes, they were overdue. But now Hermione was having second thoughts.

“He did *not* move back to England for me.”

“If you say so,” said Luna, shrugging her shoulders as she picked at her pasta. “But Theo said he hasn’t spent this much time in England since the end of Hogwarts.”

“He’s just helping me transition the file, that’s all.”

“Oh is that all?” asked Ginny, now smirking at her. “Because according to Belinda he’s taken every lunch slot available on your calendar until further notice.”

"Shit," muttered Hermione, biting her lip as she thought about this. Then she gave Ginny a hard look. "Why are you gossiping with Belinda? You don't even work at the Ministry!"

Ginny gave her an incredulous look. "Well no, but all my friends do. And Belinda knows everything. Surely you've learned that by now."

"Ginny's right," said Luna. "You know Bernard Lorraine is having an affair with Amelia Bones."

Hermione gaped. "Pardon?"

"She is," confirmed Ginny. "Belinda told me."

"So it must be true," added Luna.

"Good God," said Hermione. Then she thought about it for a moment and her curiosity got the better of her. "So what has Belinda said about me recently?" she asked in what she hoped was a casual voice.

"That Draco Malfoy is actually bribing her to get on your calendar. And that you seem to be oblivious to his advances," said Ginny.

Hermione's jaw dropped.

"You're the smartest person I know, so I was skeptical when Belinda said you're oblivious," added Ginny. "But if you really haven't shagged him, then I can see Belinda is right, yet again. I never should have doubted her."

"Bloody hell," muttered Hermione before glaring at her friends who were both giving her teasing smiles.

"Well no, we haven't shagged. I mean, yes I've seen a lot of him, but..."

"If you want to shag him," said Luna, "you should."

"But I have no idea *how*," said Hermione.

"Well you get undressed and open your legs and..." started Luna as Ginny doubled over in laughter.

"Yes, yes I know *how*, Luna," said Hermione, as she cringed a bit. "I mean I don't know how to make it clear that I might be... possibly... erm..."

Luna just raised her eyebrows in mild curiosity. "Well you can always just tell him of course. I plan to tell Theo this weekend."

Hermione gaped at her. "What, you're going to say, 'Hey Theo, would you like to shag me?'"

“Yes, of course,” said Luna calmly. “Though I may ask him to get me off with his hands or tongue first. He’s rather skilled at that.”

*God, even Luna’s getting more action from hot Slytherins than I am.*

Hermione immediately started to kick herself for her uncharitable thoughts toward her friend. Luna had just as much right to be getting action as Hermione did. In fact, she had even *more* of a right since Theo wasn’t working with her. Yes, that was Hermione’s problem. She suddenly grasped at this.

“The problem is I work with Draco. Or rather, we work against each other. I can’t just shag my counterpart at the French Ministry.”

“Why not?” asked Ginny bluntly. “It’s pretty obvious he’s into you.”

“It’s unprofessional. It’s not *rational*. And I really think all of his supposed interest in me is feigned. He’s using it to get leverage over me in our negotiations. It doesn’t matter if I might be attracted to him, I won’t be used like that.”

To Hermione’s consternation, both of her friends just snorted at this. “I disagree. He’s not using you. He’s into you. He’s *really* into you.”

“I’m telling you, he’s not. He’s doing this because of the job.”

“Fine, then I want to see his behavior in action,” said Ginny. “You’re in the middle of it, and that makes your judgment unreliable. I want to draw my own conclusions.”

Hermione was momentarily offended by this, but Ginny just gave her a hard look.

“I do too,” chimed in Luna. “Theo has made me very curious. We’re all going to a Falcons match on Saturday. You should come, Hermione.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows. “You’re going to a quidditch match Luna?”

“Oh yes,” she said. “I don’t mind quidditch you know, and Theo is mad for it. I’m certain if I do something nice for him, he’ll do something nice for me later on.”

*Bloody hell, Luna is just as Slytherin as Theo is.*

“You should come too, Hermione,” said Ginny. “Draco will be there.”

Hermione looked at her friends skeptically.

“Oh come *on*,” said Ginny. “I need to see this first hand.”

Hermione rolled her eyes. “Fine! Fine.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione reassured herself that she wasn't going to the quidditch match to satisfy her friends' curiosity. She was going to the quidditch match to discuss France. That was the only reason. She knew Draco would be there, and she hoped that after a long afternoon watching his favorite sport and eating stadium food he might soften toward her a bit and actually consent to discuss work.

So that was how she found herself climbing the stands to the box Ginny had secured for them as a member of the press. She was the last to arrive, and she saw Draco, Theo, and Blaise rise to greet her as she walked in. Harry just smirked at her from the corner, and she gave him a grimace back.

"Hermione! Luna said you would be coming," said Theo, and he stood up and gave her a small hug in greeting.

"Yes, it's so lovely to see you again," said Blaise, who strode forward and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

Hermione smiled back at both of them, though she couldn't help but notice Draco glowering at Blaise as he moved away.

She saw Ginny watching with glee, and she mouthed, "*Jealous*" to Hermione behind Draco's back. Hermione tried not to react.

"Long time no see," said Draco, now moving toward her to pull her to a seat at the very end. He sat in the seat next to her, effectively cutting off Blaise or anybody else for that matter.

"Not since lunch yesterday, that's true," said Hermione with some amusement.

Draco didn't seem at all put out by this. "I was surprised you were willing to come."

"Luna asked, so I had to come," said Hermione.

Draco gave her an unholly look of glee at this, which confused Hermione for a moment.

"So Luna asks you to come... and you come?"

"Errr, yes? She's one of my best friends. I always come when Luna says to come."

Malfoy licked his lips, and suddenly Hermione's face reddened.

*Oh surely not...*

"Does Theo know that you come when Luna says to come?"

"Oh you are the *worst!*" she hissed, as he started to laugh.

"What's wrong with it? I think it's refreshing that you come on command."

“Oh my *God*,” she muttered, as he continued to laugh. She narrowed her eyes at him. “Fine. Well Luna comes when I say come too. Maybe I’ll let Theo know, and the three of us can try coming together.”

At this Draco immediately stopped laughing, as he narrowed his eyes at her. “Not funny.”

“Oh I think it’s hilarious,” she said, smiling sweetly now. “I’m sure Luna would be into it. She just loves love.”

Hermione couldn’t help but notice that Draco was shifting in his chair a bit as he glared at her.

*Don’t look at his lap. Don’t look at his lap.*

She glanced down at his lap and saw a suspicious bulge there. She knew it was inappropriate, but she couldn’t help but grin with her small triumph.

Unfortunately Draco noticed her looking, and he raised an eyebrow at her.

“Think you’re funny do you?”

She shrugged. “You started it. Maybe you’ll think again before starting something you can’t finish.”

“Oh I assure you, I’ll be finishing it,” he said, now giving her a very serious look.

Hermione bit her lip and noticed Draco’s eyes flick down for a moment to watch as they darkened ever so slightly. He leaned in a shade too close and whispered in her ear.

“In fact, I think I won’t be the only one. I know that in my imagination you’ll be finishing too.”

Hermione gasped a little, as he pulled away, looking rather smug indeed as he turned back to the game.

*God Hermione, get a grip.*

He was too much. He was really, *really* too much. He never failed to make Hermione feel completely out of her depth every time he sparred with her. Hermione’s knickers were uncomfortably moist, but he didn’t seem even remotely abashed by the rather public erection he was having at the moment.

*Don’t look, Hermione.*

Hermione looked. The erection seemed to be going down.

Draco caught her looking again, and he just smirked as Hermione’s cheeks burned.

She checked her watch, wondering how long she had to stay before she could politely excuse herself.

“You have to stay until the snitch,” said Draco, answering her question for her.

Hermione groaned a little, and Draco looked directly at her and spoke quietly. “For fuck’s sake, if you make noises like that then the finishing will be happening *before* the snitch.”

Hermione’s eyes widened, but he just stared at her sternly for a moment before turning back to the game.

*Don’t look.*

She looked. It was back.

Now *that* was interesting. Hermione chewed on her lip as she contemplated this.

“Stop it,” muttered Draco. “That’s fucking distracting.”

“*You’re* fucking distracting!” whispered Hermione. “Why can’t you just... I don’t know, *adjust* something?”

To her consternation Draco smirked at this. “Why would I want to do that if I’m able to distract you so well just like this?”

This was the very problem Hermione had with Draco Malfoy. She had no idea which one of them was ahead at this point. He kept moving from offense to defense and back to offense again. Hermione was getting whiplash.

“Oh so you’re allowed to distract me, but I’m not allowed to distract you? Is that it then?”

“Brightest Witch of the Age, right here,” he said. “I knew you’d get it.”

“And why is that?”

“Because you need something to entertain you at this quidditch match. Seeing as how you decided to come and all.”

“Bloody hell,” she muttered, and he just smirked again before settling in for the game.

What felt like an eternity later, the seekers were finally racing toward the snitch, and everybody but Hermione was on their feet to watch. Hermione stayed in her chair and couldn’t help but notice it gave her a rather excellent view of Draco’s arse right in her face. His trousers were exceptionally well-tailored.

“GO! FUCKING GO!” shouted Draco, as the Falcons’ seeker caught it, and Draco and his friends cheered while Ginny and Harry groaned at the other end of the box. Luna just looked passively interested, and Hermione was still staring at Draco’s arse.

*Dammit Hermione, stop looking!*

But she had been looking the whole game. The bulge in Malfoy’s pants had disappeared an hour earlier and hadn’t returned, though his smirk had become practically affixed to his face

as he caught her glancing down at his lap a couple more times.

He suddenly turned around to look at her, and Hermione wrenched her gaze from his arse up to his face. His expression turned practically gleeful as she realized he had caught her *again*.

This time he moved in front of her and leaned down, placing one hand on either side of her armrests, effectively pinning her in place.

“Caught you,” he whispered, his mouth far too close to her ear. Hermione felt herself shiver, and he gave a wicked chuckle. “It’s OK. I’m so glad you could come today. Maybe you’ll come next time too. And it looks to me like you’ll have plenty to finish tonight. I think we both will.”

He pulled away and gave her his sexiest smile, as she just glared at him and huffed. “You’re lovely when you’re all hot and bothered you know,” he said in a normal volume, causing a couple of their friends to spin around to look at them with wide eyes. Ginny was practically hopping up and down now.

Hermione just bit her lip, but refused to say anything more. Draco shook his head and shuddered a little as he watched her. “Damn. And there you go again. I’ll see you tomorrow, normal time,” he said, as he gripped Blaise by the shoulder and pushed him firmly to move away.

Hermione wrinkled her nose as Ginny came over the moment he left, practically squealing.

“What’s tomorrow?” she asked eagerly. “What does he mean?”

“I....” but she was eyeing Theo, who was still there, listening intently.

Theo just gave her an amused look. “If you don’t tell me, Draco will,” was all he said.

Hermione huffed. “Fine. He’s been crashing my dance lessons. You know I still take private ballroom lessons.”

Everyone’s eyes widened, and even Luna looked surprised.

“I didn’t realize that,” said Ginny slowly.

Hermione just shrugged. “Yes, I’ve never stopped.”

“And Draco’s crashing?” asked Theo, with a look on his face like he was plotting something.

Hermione just nodded.

“Oh I can’t *wait* to bust his balls for this,” said Theo, now smiling broadly. “He’s been trying to play it cool around Blaise and me, but you have him good, Hermione,” he said.

Hermione just shook her head and rolled her eyes. “I doubt it. He’s trying to butter me up so that when we finally talk about France he has something to use against me.”

Theo's eyes widened. "You still haven't talked about France?"

Hermione shook her head slowly. "No. He said he wanted to get to know me first."

Theo's lips quirked in amusement. "I'll say."

Hermione looked around, and Theo, Luna, Harry, and Ginny were all wearing identical looks of glee at this.

"*What?*" she asked.

"I'm sure you'll figure it out eventually, Hermione," said Harry with a small smile. "After all, you're the Brightest Witch of the Age."

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione was sitting in the conference room, jiggling her leg. She was waiting for Harvey Cooper to join her to discuss the status of France.

Hermione had called the meeting, feeling the need to come clean to her boss. Draco had been in England for three weeks now, and so far he had taken her to lunch twelve times and brunch once. Of course there had been that completely inappropriate quidditch match, and he had shown up to her dance class three times, which always involved drinks afterwards. They had spent hours together discussing everything under the sun, including some things that were definitely not safe for work. But they still hadn't discussed France.

After drinks the previous night and her friends' reactions at the quidditch match, it suddenly occurred to Hermione that perhaps she was dating Draco Malfoy. She couldn't be sure though. Other than the occasional kiss on her cheek or hand, some heated looks, and inappropriate comments he hadn't actually tried anything with her. Nor had he suggested they do anything together in the wizarding world that might imply they were more than colleagues. Draco, it transpired, knew muggle London almost as well as she did, and he used it almost exclusively when spending time with her. Only their very closest friends had any inkling of how often they saw each other.

As baffling as her relationship with Draco was — whatever it could be called — it was no less baffling than Draco himself. She was getting the impression that he was remarkably blasé about his job, and it wasn't just his treatment of her that led her to believe that. He mentioned that he was being forced to go to the Netherlands at the end of the week for some meetings, and he had groused about it and rolled his eyes, as though it was a total waste of his time.

She had to admit, his disinterest in his job was the thing that started to undercut her theory that his interest in *her* was just an act. It would be odd for him to spend that much time

getting leverage over her if he didn't care about his job in the first place. Then again, she still wasn't certain. It would be rather Slytherin of him to get her off her guard in this way too, and Draco was nothing if not a Slytherin.

Then there were the questions he asked her when he wasn't flirting with her. Between Ron and Viktor she had gone on a string of dates with other wizards, and they were always the same. By the end of the second date the wizard in question was pressing her for information about Harry and the war. Harry and her. Harry and the aurors. But mostly, just Harry. Ron, of course, had never asked — but he had never needed to, since he was there himself. Viktor *had* asked, but it had been different. Viktor's questions revolved around Hermione's role in everything. And while she didn't answer many of Viktor's questions, the fact that he was more interested in her than Harry had been the thing that attracted her to him in the first place.

Draco Malfoy, for whatever reason, seemed disinterested in all of it. Other than their brief conversation about scars, they had never really discussed the war again. She thought it might have something to do with the fact that he was a former Death Eater. Perhaps he just didn't like to talk about it. And she knew his relationship with Harry used to be fraught, though evidently they had reached some version of a cordial stalemate in recent years. Andromeda had reconnected with Narcissa and now Luna and Theo were together, so he and Harry had learned how to coexist. But it was still odd that he didn't act even the slightest bit curious about Harry or Hermione's role in everything. He was intensely curious about everything *else* about her, but not the war. It was almost as though he already knew everything she had done, but she was sure that couldn't be true.

But then that led her to consider all the things he *did* know about her. She had quickly realized he was a very observant person. He made mental notes of all her quirks, and not just the obvious ones like her favorite drink. By their third lunch together, she noticed that he always let her sit facing the nearest point of entry to whatever room they were in. Ever since she had nearly died in the cafe fighting Rowle and Dolohov after Bill Weasley's wedding, she never sat down with her back to a doorway if she could help it. Draco had evidently picked up on this and arranged things so she could face the doorway without ever discussing it with her.

But there were also things he knew about her that she couldn't place. How did he know that her favorite book was *Hogwarts, A History*? How did he know how she took her coffee when he poured her a cup at brunch that one morning? How did he know that her cat was named Crookshanks? She was sure she had never told him any of this, but he knew these things anyway. In fact, it seemed as though he knew almost everything about her, even though he was still a great mystery to her.

All of these things about him didn't add up, and Hermione had become intensely curious about him. So she had consented to continue to see him in an effort to try to work out the puzzle that was Draco Malfoy. The problem, of course, was that she had spent so much time with him that she found she liked him, and now she was even starting to fall for him. She knew this could compromise her work at the Ministry, so she had called the meeting with Harvey. There was nothing for it but to own up to the last few weeks with Draco.

"Hermione, good morning," said Harvey, as he walked into the conference room.

Hermione rose to shake his hand, and then she sat down nervously as he opened a notepad and looked at her expectantly.

"Sir," she began, "I wanted to discuss the status of France with you."

He raised his eyebrows and waited for her to continue.

"Erm... as you may know, Draco Malfoy has been in England for the past three weeks. We've met frequently, but he isn't willing to discuss work. In fact... it's possible I'm dating him."

Harvey stared at her for a moment and finally said, "Don't you know?"

"Well..." said Hermione, "it's complicated. I mean, it started as just a get-to-you-know sort of thing. We were acquainted at Hogwarts of course, but our relationship was never very good, and he proposed some lunches to make sure we understood each other. But I've seen him an awful lot, and he still isn't willing to discuss work. I realized last night that he's been taking me out on dates. I doubt the French Ministry is getting an expense report for any of it."

To her consternation Harvey's lip twitched in amusement. "And how many dates did he take you on before you figured this out?"

Hermione hesitated. "Well there was brunch at the Manor of course. Then lunch twelve times I believe. And we met up at a quidditch match, though that was through mutual friends. Then he figured out when I was having my dance lessons, so he has shown up three times to partner me, and then he's taken me out for drinks each time afterwards. He always pays."

Harvey started to chuckle, and Hermione looked at him, feeling a bit horrified. "He's never said anything about it directly! I didn't realize it until it was too late... and obviously that compromises my job!"

"No," said Harvey, shaking his head firmly now. "It doesn't."

"What?" asked Hermione in confusion. "Of course it does!"

Harvey shook his head again and said, "It really doesn't. This entire job is about relationships. You know that."

"Well yes, but not *that* type of relationship!"

Harvey just waved her off. "Hermione, Draco Malfoy clearly likes you. That's more than I can say for any other person he's worked with. You know I've rotated France every six months since he joined the French Ministry because he's been impossible to work with."

"Well he's *still* impossible to work with!" she insisted.

"That may be true, but the difference this time is he likes you. He's never liked any of the others, that was always very obvious. And if he likes you, odds are better that you will succeed where others have failed with him."

"So what... you're suggesting I date him and maybe even sleep with him because of my job?" asked Hermione, now feeling very put out and even a bit offended.

"Of course not," he said calmly. "I would never ask you to do that, and I've already told you that if I had my preference your relationship with him would stay platonic because romance can muddy things if there is ever a break up. But that being said, a romantic relationship with Draco Malfoy does not necessarily compromise your job. And he's been so difficult to work with that we really have nowhere to go but up. He's willing to give you his time and attention when he's never been willing to give it to any of the others. If you succeed in getting something out of him, that's wonderful. If you don't, then we're no worse off than we would be with anybody else."

Hermione sat back, feeling a bit deflated. There was a part of her that wanted Harvey to pull her from the file so she could spend time with Draco without mixing business. But evidently that wasn't to be.

*At least I told him*, she thought, a little glumly. She didn't have to feel guilty about hiding anything from her boss.

"So do you suggest I just let him take the lead then? I continue to date him — or whatever it is we're doing — and we just wait and see if he's willing to talk business at some point?"

Harvey considered this. "I want you to keep raising it with him. And eventually you will need to press him on it," he said slowly. "But you are new to the file. And it's not like we've gotten anywhere meaningful with him over the past seven years. I'm willing to be patient, as long as you are trying."

Hermione took a deep breath and exhaled. "Very well then. I'm not sure what he's after, but I'll keep seeing him. And I'll keep asking him to talk about France."

"Excellent," said Harvey, now standing up and starting to walk toward the door. "And Hermione..."

She looked at him questioningly.

"I do hope you enjoy yourself," said Harvey, with a twinkle in his eye.

Hermione groaned and put her face in her hands, as he chuckled and walked out of the conference room.

## Chapter 12: The First Night

### Hermione

Hermione's eyes flew over the short note Draco had just sent to her, a broad smile starting as she read.

*Hermione,*

*I'm leaving for the Netherlands this evening, so I won't be able to discuss business with you this week. However, I'll be back in London this weekend in time for our lessons. We can meet Monday night if that's acceptable to you. Come by the Manor around 8 PM, and we'll have drinks and discuss.*

*Draco*

*PS: I'll keep the floo open while I'm gone in case you'd like to drop in for a visit.*

Hermione quickly jotted back a response to let Draco know she would be there, and then she sat back in her chair and breathed a sigh of relief. She doubted she would get very far with him during their first meeting, but at least he was finally willing to talk to her about it. That was something, at any rate.

Hermione eyed the postscript and bit her lip. He had all but invited her to use the library while he was gone. Hermione had desperately wanted to visit the library again, but she really wanted to do it alone when she would have the luxury of time. Perhaps this was her opportunity. Hermione checked her calendar and saw she was meeting Ginny for lunch on Friday, but perhaps she could reschedule for Saturday. Otherwise, her Friday was clear.

Hermione pulled out a piece of parchment and scribbled a note to Ginny asking if they could meet Saturday instead and proposing to spend the day together. Then she went to find Belinda to let her know that she was going to be out Friday and Belinda shouldn't schedule any meetings for her that day.

By the time Hermione was packing up to head home for the night, she had her response from Ginny, who said she would be happy to meet on Saturday instead. Hermione smiled slowly. She would have a day all to herself in the Malfoy library.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione stepped out of the fireplace at Malfoy Manor and was soon greeted by a small house elf named Topsy, who told her that they had been expecting her.

“Master Draco told Topsy that Miss would surely be coming to visit!” squeaked the tiny elf in excitement. Hermione wrinkled her nose at this, but she supposed she was rather predictable when it came to books. She allowed Topsy to lead her to the library, where Topsy told her that lunch would be served, and she was welcome to stay for dinner as well if she wished.

“Master Draco instructed Topsy to take excellent care of Miss!”

Hermione paused at this.

“And did Draco tell you anything specific?” asked Hermione, in what she hoped was an offhand voice.

“Oh Master Draco told Topsy that Miss may go anywhere in the Manor that she chooses. And Master Draco asked Topsy to make sure a room was ready in case Miss chose to study very late and needed to spend the night. Topsy has made sure that all of Miss’s preferences have been taken into account!”

Hermione stared at the tiny elf now.

“Actually Topsy, before we get started, do you mind showing me the room?” she asked.

Topsy wiggled her ears in excitement and led Hermione up a large staircase and down a corridor to a room that overlooked the gardens, decorated in blues and creams. She saw a handsome four-poster bed on one end of the room, and a dresser with a mirror near the window, featuring a crystal vase filled to the brim with cut hydrangeas.

Hermione walked over to examine them. She had always loved hydrangeas, especially the blue ones.

“These are beautiful,” she said.

“Master Draco told Topsy they is your favorite Miss.”

Hermione just spun around to stare at the little elf in confusion. He was correct, and Hermione did love hydrangeas more than most any other kind of flower, but Hermione was pretty sure she had never told him this. She supposed it was possible Ginny or Luna had told him this at the match, but Hermione sat right next to him the entire time. She didn’t see them talk to each other very much after she arrived.

Taking a deep breath, she stepped back and continued to look around the room, noticing a door to an en suite bathroom. She poked her head in curiously and came to another halt as she saw what was sitting in the shower.

*It was her shampoo.*

She ran through all of her recent memories with Draco Malfoy, and she was absolutely certain, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that there was no way for him to have known this. It was a muggle brand she found when she was on the run with Harry and Ron, and she had continued to use it ever since. She doubted even her girlfriends knew what she used. They rarely stayed over, and when they did they used a small guest bathroom. Hermione bought a more generic product for the guest bathroom. Hers was awfully specific for curly hair.

*How on earth had he known?*

Feeling a bit overwhelmed now, Hermione left the bathroom and thanked Topsy for showing her the room, allowing the little elf to lead her back to the relative safety of the library.

Still preoccupied by what she had just discovered, Hermione spent some time roaming the shelves, trying to learn the layout of the library and its contents. The Malfoys, she saw, had a rather astonishing collection of books on dark magic. There was also an entire shelf on blood magic and, to her surprise, a whole section devoted to charms.

She lingered over the charms section for a bit, reading the spines of books, until she came to several in a row that were all about memory charms. Hermione hesitated, but then pulled the books off the shelf and brought them over to a table in the middle of the room to read.

The hours flew by as Hermione studied the books, barely noticing when Topsy came by with lunch and then later on that evening, dinner. Hermione ate as she continued to read, fully absorbed in the texts she had found. They were different from anything she had found in the Hogwarts library, and though she didn't dare to hope, a small part of her knew that she would never give up on finding a spell that would restore her parents' memories in full.

When Hermione obliterated her parents, she knew it might be irreversible. She had to make it very strong in case she died during the war. And when she located them in Australia the summer after the war ended, all of the simple reversal spells Hermione tried failed. She was hesitant to risk much more in case their minds were damaged, so she left them alone and returned to Hogwarts for further research. But she hit a dead end there and eventually stopped looking, while telling herself that at least her parents were safe and happy, even if they would never remember her.

Now though, she knew her search had just started all over again with the Malfoy library at her disposal.

Hermione read late into the night until she could barely keep her eyes open. The words on the page started to run together until slowly she found herself drifting off to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione started to stir, and the first thing she recognized was that bone deep satisfaction of waking up after a night spent with the world's most perfect mattress. She shifted a bit, realizing the sheets felt softer and silkier than what she was used to as her eyes fluttered open. She sat up and looked around the room she visited the day before.

She looked out the window and saw the sun was just rising, as she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to remember the night before. She stayed in the Malfoy library late, reading the books on memory charms, when she must have fallen asleep. She had been partially roused in the middle of the night by strong arms carrying her upstairs and placing her in the bed — but she had been so drowsy she had fallen right back asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow.

Those arms though... she struggled to remember, but she knew they must have belonged to Draco. She wondered why he didn't just levitate her or let Topsy do it. But she was sure it was him, and he actually carried her. She thought she remembered a hand brushing her curls out of her face before she drifted off again, but she couldn't be certain.

She looked down and saw she was still wearing her clothes from the night before. She breathed a sigh of relief at that. She glanced over the edge of the bed and saw her shoes there, and to her surprise, the books she had been reading were on the side table.

She grimaced a bit, realizing that Draco must have seen what she was studying, but she hoped he wouldn't ask her about it. She wasn't sure if she was ready to share that story with him just yet.

She shifted out from under the covers, and as soon as her feet hit the floor Topsy arrived with a *CRACK!* causing Hermione to jump violently.

"Miss is awake early!" squeaked the little elf. "Is Miss wanting anything?"

"Erm," said Hermione, "is Draco here?"

"Yes, Miss! Master Draco arrived home late last night!"

"Oh..." said Hermione, her heart starting to pound as she realized that she was correct about the night before.

"Miss is welcome to stay for breakfast with Master Draco once he is awake!" added the elf.

Hermione grasped onto this.

"Draco's still asleep then?" she asked quickly, and the elf nodded.

"In that case, Topsy, I had better go. Please tell him thank you for me. I'll be spending most of the day with my friend Ginny, but I'll see him tomorrow evening at Madam Markham's."

Topsy's ears drooped a bit at this, but she nodded anyway and said, "Master Draco says you is welcome to take any books with you, Miss!"

Hermione thought about this for a moment, but decided that if she took them it would be too obvious that she was researching something. Perhaps if she left them behind she could just play it off as mere curiosity if he asked her about it. She was sure he would be returning to France again at some point. She could continue her research when he wasn't home.

"No, that's OK, Topsy," said Hermione. "They can stay here. I was just reading them because I had never seen them before."

Topsy gave Hermione a highly skeptical look, but she nodded anyway and gathered the books from Hermione's nightstand.

"Very well, if Miss will follow Topsy to the floo then?"

Hermione rose, put on her shoes and gathered her handbag that she saw was on the dresser next to the hydrangeas. She took one last look at them before leaving the room, following Topsy down the corridor and the grand staircase until she reached the fireplace in the foyer.

"Topsy, thank you for everything yesterday," said Hermione. "I greatly appreciate it."

Topsy grinned at her. "Of course Miss! Topsy wishes Miss would visit more often!"

Hermione smiled at this, and then threw the floo powder into the fireplace before making her way home.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

He had missed her.

Topsy sent him an owl as soon as Hermione arrived at Malfoy Manor the day before to let him know that she was there. Of course it took half of the day for the owl to reach him in the Netherlands, but he finally received it in the early afternoon, and he immediately made plans to return back to the Manor that night.

Unfortunately, he was forced to wait until he was through a late dinner with a colleague, and then he was further delayed when re-entering Britain at the Ministry. By the time he finally got to the Manor it was after eleven.

To his surprise, Topsy informed him that Miss was still in the library, and Draco walked in to find her fast asleep on some books that she had spread out over the table. He dismissed Topsy and told her to turn down Hermione's bed, while he took his time observing her as she slept. Her cheek was resting on one arm while her other hand was pointing to a passage of an open book. She looked peaceful and younger like this. Draco had seen her fall asleep in the Hogwarts library a few times over the years, and he was forcibly reminded of the times he had come across her when they were at school.

Draco walked over slowly, hesitant to disturb her. He glanced down and furrowed his brow when he saw the books she was studying.

*Memory charms?*

He wondered about this. He couldn't think of any reason why she would be researching this, but if there was one thing about Hermione Granger that he had learned over the past few weeks it was that she had layers. She was more than just the swotty know-it-all who was Potter's best friend. There were sides to her he was still discovering, and he sensed that this was yet another mystery he needed to unravel.

He considered waking her up, but he dismissed it before the thought was ever fully formed. He wanted her here with him, even if they weren't sharing a bed. Then he considered levitating her, but the temptation to touch her was too strong. So instead he had gathered her into his arms, and he felt her snuggle into him as he pulled her close and carried her up the stairs to the room he had set aside for her.

Draco glanced around as he walked in, noting that everything was exactly as he had ordered. He placed her in the bed, and she settled in, her eyes fluttering for a moment before falling back asleep. His heart pounded as he looked at her in bed, wishing for nothing more than to join her. But instead he settled for a brush of his hand across her cheek and then again across her forehead to move a stray curl off her face.

As he was leaving he found Topsy and ordered her to put the books Hermione was reading on her nightstand before he made his way to his own room, where he laid down and thought about the witch asleep down the hall. As had started happening more and more often over the last few weeks, his hand crept down to his pants, and he closed his eyes and stroked himself as he remembered the feel of her in his arms and the way she looked in bed.

Faster and faster he pumped, as his imagination took over, and he thought about his lips and hands on her, pleasuring her, tasting her, consuming her. He imagined her head thrown back, her body arched, and her eyes glowing as she climaxed for him. He grunted as he reached his own peak, spilling himself all over his hands and pants, as he flopped back down on the bed, before grabbing his wand and cleaning up his mess.

He laid there for a time, still thinking about her, until he finally drifted off to sleep with the knowledge that she would be there in the morning, as vague plans about how to approach her circled his mind.

But when he woke up the next morning, Topsy informed him she was already gone, off to meet a friend named Ginny with whom she was spending the day. Topsy said that Miss was grateful and that she would meet Master Draco the next evening for their lessons. And most curiously, Miss had left behind the books she had been studying so hard and so late that she had fallen asleep in the first place.

Draco sighed. Holding onto Hermione Granger was like holding water in the palm of his hand. She had slipped through his fingers yet again, and now it would be a couple more days before he saw her.

Thinking about what to do next, Draco pulled his galleon out of his pocket and tapped it.

*I heard Ginny and Hermione are spending the day together. Meet at my flat?*

A moment later his galleon burned, and he knew he had Potter's attention.

*News?*

*Video games.*

*Even better. I'll come by as soon as Gin leaves.*

Draco rolled out of bed and quickly got ready before grabbing some coffee and a pastry from Topsy and walked to the end of the lane past the wards, where he apparated directly into his muggle flat.

He looked around and pulled out his mobile phone to plug it in. Then he sat down at the small table to eat while he waited for Potter.

A few minutes later Draco heard a *CRACK!* and looked up to see Harry Potter standing in the tiny kitchen.

“Anything new?” he asked as he walked over to the sofa.

Draco followed. “I got the new Super Mario Brothers,” he said.

Potter nodded, and Draco loaded the game while they sat back and started to play.

“So why aren’t you in the Netherlands?” asked Potter.

Draco bit his lip. He and Potter always did this while playing video games. The screen was a good distraction to avoid having to look each other in the eye. They had had a surprising number of heart-to-hearts like this over the years.

“I came back late last night.”

“So how did you know Ginny and Hermione had plans then?”

“Hermione went to my library yesterday. She mentioned it to Topsy.”

Potter was quiet for a long moment as they played.

“What was she doing in your library then?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “Please. Like Hermione Granger *ever* needs an excuse to visit a library.”

He glanced sideways and saw Potter smile at this a bit, but then he said, “That’s true. So she’s the reason you came back early?”

Draco didn’t respond to this.

"I'll take that as a yes then," said Potter with a satisfied smirk.

"Enjoying this, are you?" grumbled Draco.

"Well Ginny and I have a bet going you know," said Potter.

Draco turned to look at him fully, causing his game to go awry.

"Fuck," he muttered as he got back to the game.

He heard Potter laugh next to him.

"So what's the bet then?" asked Draco.

"How long it takes you to shag her," said Potter.

Draco raised his eyebrows, curious despite himself.

"And?"

"I'm betting on after Halloween, if you can stand to chase her that long. Ginny says it will be before that."

"But you're both betting I will?" asked Draco, feeling suddenly more optimistic about his chances with her.

"If you keep doing whatever the hell you're doing, yes. According to Ginny, she hardly knows which way is up when it comes to you. That's the fastest way to catch her."

Draco thought about this for a moment.

"I'm surprised you don't mind," he said carefully.

He saw Potter shoot him a quick look out of the corner of his eye.

"You suit her a lot more than Krum ever did. I would have set you two up years ago if there had been a way to do that without making her suspicious."

This was surprising, but rather gratifying. "What makes you say I suit her better than Krum?"

Potter was quiet as he thought about it. "Hermione is a force of nature. Obviously she's brilliant, but she's also intuitive. She's good in a crisis. She knows her own mind. Once she makes a decision she sticks to it, regardless of what the rest of the world thinks."

Draco nodded a bit. He knew all this already.

"The thing is, she intimidates wizards. Most just run the other way because they realize they will never have something to offer her. They could never go toe-to-toe with her. But Krum didn't run. He's an international quidditch star. He's not a bad sort really, but he knows he's hot shit. So Hermione's fame and talent didn't necessarily intimidate him. But her

independence did — her drive to always be herself. He tried to mold her into a partner for him, and it doused her fire just a little bit. It happened slowly. Ginny, Ron, and I didn't even notice it at first. But eventually we realized she was going out of her way to make him happy. It was stupid stuff, you know. Drinking wine instead of liquor. Keeping her distance from me and Ron. Wearing her hair differently. Things like that."

Draco narrowed his eyes as he thought about this and was forcibly reminded of the diamond earrings he had seen her wear quite a few times now. He could tell she loved them, but she had avoided wearing them because they gave Krum a complex about her relationship with Potter.

"With you though..." and Potter hesitated, "I don't think you'd try to stop her fire unless you had a really good reason for it. If anything you'll push her to be more like herself. And you're not intimidated by her, nor by me and Ron and our relationship with her. You two will drive each other mad, but I also think you will bring out the best in each other."

Draco didn't say anything, but felt oddly touched by Potter's little speech, and he hoped Potter was right. Draco really didn't want to change anything about her. Her fire turned him on. He wanted to see more of it, even when it drove him crazy.

"Besides," and Draco could hear the smirk in Potter's voice. "Apparently she's been getting off to thoughts about you for ages. She's my sister, and I love her. I want her to have whatever she wants, especially if it's a bloke I actually like."

This piece of news was sufficiently distracting to cause Draco to drop his controller and stare at Potter in amazement.

"How on earth do you know that?" he demanded.

"Drunken confession to Ginny after your birthday party. Ginny's pretty sure she doesn't remember it. But Gin said that's one of the reasons she was so cautious around you, especially at first. She didn't even like you, but she was still getting off while thinking about you. It gave her cognitive dissonance. Hermione doesn't do cognitive dissonance."

"Goddamn," breathed Draco, now grinning broadly. This changed *everything*.

"She's still skittish around wizards though. She's been burned so many times trying to date, and she goes slow. She doesn't trust most wizards not to shag and tell, and she doesn't believe that most wizards even want her in the first place. She's told me before that most of them just want to talk about me by the second date and aren't that interested in her. The ones that are interested become intimidated once they get to know her a little better. So she doesn't always trust her emotions, nor whatever initial spark of attraction she might feel to make her say yes to a wizard in the first place. And with *you*, she seems half convinced it's all an act because you two are on opposite sides of the negotiation table. You're going to have to win over her head and prove yourself first if you want a chance with her."

Draco felt himself deflating as he realized Potter was right.

He gave Potter a hard look. "Will you help me then?"

Potter looked at him incredulously. "I thought I already had. You should know her almost as well as I do. You've seen her in my head often enough."

Draco bit his lip, knowing Potter had a point. "Yeah but most of the stuff I've seen was from years ago. You've been able to block my legilimency for a long time. And everything you've shown me since then has all been mundane stuff to distract my attempts. She's always just reading in those memories."

"Well she reads a lot," said Potter, and Draco smiled a little at this.

"I know, but my point is you've occluded everything important for years. Like the fact that you two apparently performed a blood ceremony so you could adopt her as your sister."

Potter looked at him sideways. "She told you about that then?"

Draco nodded. "Yes, I saw she was wearing some goblin made earrings, and I asked her about them. It kind of went from there."

Potter snorted. "That was the thing I really disliked about Krum. He never really believed us that our relationship has always been platonic. But I literally adopted her as my sister. I couldn't be with her like that even if I wanted to be. And I don't. I never have."

Draco was nodding at this. He had been in Potter's head enough to know the truth of this. He would have believed it even without the blood ceremony.

Draco said, "Well yeah, but that's my point. You've been able to keep stuff like that from me for years. So most of what I see whenever you have me look is useless."

Potter seemed to be weighing this. Eventually he said, "Alright then, what do you want to know?"

Draco thought for a moment and asked, "Why do her parents live in Australia?"

Potter was silent for a long time. Finally he said, "I take it she hasn't told you?"

"No. I haven't pressed her on it, but it came up a few weeks ago, and I could tell she was lying."

Potter sighed. "She'll tell you when she's ready. That's her secret to tell, not mine."

Draco grunted.

"Anything else?"

"What did Dolohov do to her in fifth year?"

He glanced at Potter and saw a dangerous look cross his face. "He hit her with some dark curse in the Department of Mysteries. We think he invented it. We aren't sure what it was, but it caused all sorts of internal bleeding and collapsed one of her lungs. She took a direct hit on her chest and stomach. It's a miracle she survived."

Draco felt a kind of rage he had never experienced before unfurl inside of him as he struggled to recall Potter's memories of that night. "Did someone in the Order save her then?" he asked. "I think she was with you and Longbottom right after you all left the Hall of Prophecy, but at some point she disappeared and you two kept fighting."

Potter just snorted. "Hermione really saved herself. She silenced Dolohov right before he cast the spell. If he had done it verbally it would have been a lot stronger, and she would have died before anybody could heal her. I think Remus eventually pulled her out of the Department and brought her back to Hogwarts once Dumbledore showed up. But she was down for a while before she got help."

"I want him gone," said Draco. "Dolohov. I want him dead."

Potter nodded his head at this. "We can do that. And we'll get him."

They were silent for a bit longer and then Draco said, "Why doesn't she sit with her back to doorways?"

Potter gave him an odd look. "You've noticed that?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "I notice everything."

Potter looked like he was thinking and said, "Dolohov again, I'd wager. He and Rowle attacked us in a muggle cafe the night the Ministry fell. She had her back to the door, and they snuck in disguised as workers and attacked her from behind."

Draco inhaled. He remembered that memory from Potter's head too.

"Yes of course," he muttered. "Weasley tackled her so she wouldn't be hit, and then you three fought them off. Then she obliterated them."

"That's right," said Potter. "It really scared her though. Muggle London was supposed to be anonymous so that's why she took us there. Later on we found out they tracked us with the taboo they put on Voldemort's name, but we didn't know it at the time. It was like they just found us out of thin air. It made her feel like nowhere was safe."

Draco exhaled as he thought about this. The fact that the encounter with Dolohov had scared her enough to affect her behavior eight years later made Draco's blood boil.

"I'm going to find him," said Draco fervently. "Dolohov. I want him more than I ever wanted any of the others."

"I know," said Potter. "You'll do it."

Draco nodded and picked up his controller as he resumed his game.

## Chapter 13: The Informant

### Draco

Draco watched as Hermione walked into his library, her heels clicking on the floor. She was carrying a folder with some parchment, and she was dressed in a well-cut, professional dress. Topsy was leading her in, looking inordinately excited that Miss was back in the Manor.

*She's wearing her battle armor,* he thought affectionately as he surveyed her.

The day before he had shown up to her dance lessons and, taking his cue from her, he didn't mention the fact that she had spent Friday night at the Manor. He knew Potter was right, and he would have to win over her head if he stood any chance of actually making good on some of his darker fantasies with her. He had continued to avoid the topic when he took her out for drinks afterwards, and he watched as Hermione quickly relaxed again once she knew he wasn't going to comment on it.

And now here she was, ready to fight him about France. But he didn't plan on making it easy for her. He needed her to keep coming back to him.

"Draco," she said, but he cut her off.

"Care for a drink?" he asked.

"I hardly think this is the time..." she started, but he waved her off.

"Of course it is. It's late, and nobody is apparating tonight. So what will it be?"

She harumphed, but consented to her usual gin and tonic. He fixed it for her from the bar cart and handed it to her as he led her over to a sofa near the fireplace in the library.

She lowered herself on it, now looking uncertain as he sat down next to her.

She cleared her throat. "Now then, Draco, I know you disliked Bernard's last proposal, but I really think it's the best place to start so I can understand your objections to it."

Then she pulled out a copy of the thick ream of parchment that Draco had summarily dismissed weeks ago.

"I really want to discuss this at a high level first before we drill down on..."

"No," said Draco, taking a sip of his own drink and watching her carefully.

"Draco," she huffed. "You promised we would discuss this."

"And we can," he said easily. "But not Lorraine's proposal. I've already rejected it. I told you we would be starting from scratch."

"But I really feel it's most sensible to..." she began, but Draco reached over and plucked the proposal from her hands and then threw it in the fire.

"Malfoy!" she gasped as it burst into flame.

"I said we're starting from scratch," he said.

She just gaped at him, and he took the opportunity to sit back down on the sofa very close to her.

"Now then. Why don't you tell me what you want?"

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Well if you had bothered to read the proposal, the terms of the trade deal were..."

"Bullshit," said Draco calmly.

Hermione looked outraged. "Excuse me? It's not bullshit!"

"Sure it is," said Draco. "You don't give a fuck about any trade deal. Neither do I. Who cares if we lower the tariff on brie by a knut per kilogram? That was Lorraine's idea, and I don't give two shits about it. I want to know what *you* want."

She stared at him in amazement, and he studied her with a small smile on his face. Then he leaned forward and raised his hand to stroke her cheek. She inhaled, and he watched with satisfaction as her eyelids fluttered just a bit before she opened them again and looked at him with a dazed expression on her face.

"Think, Hermione," he whispered. "Use that brilliant mind of yours and ask me for whatever you want."

"I..." she started, and she leaned her head into his hand just a little. "I need to think," she finally said.

"Of course," he replied, now dropping his hand from her face. "Take as much time as you need. Use the library if you need some inspiration."

She nodded and rose. Draco stood as well and slipped his arm around her waist. Her eyes were huge as she looked up at him.

He leaned in to kiss her cheek. Then he put his mouth against her ear, and he felt her shudder. "I want your imagination to run wild," he said quietly. She was breathing heavily now, and Draco felt himself harden. He sensed she was starting to break. Maybe, just maybe, she was beginning to believe that this really wasn't about the job for him, other than the fact that he wanted her wishlist for France. If she would give him that then he could start to fulfill it. And Draco *wanted* to fulfill it. Because he knew Hermione Granger's wishlist would be just as extraordinary as she was.

He pulled away and saw her eyes were dark. He smiled a little at this and then grabbed her hand and walked with her toward the fireplace in the foyer. When they got there, she stopped and looked at him.

“Draco,” she said quietly. “Those hydrangeas. Why?”

He gave her a small smile and simply said, “Inspiration.”

He saw her blush at this before giving him a small smile in return, and then she threw some floo powder into the fireplace and was gone with a whoosh.

Draco turned around to find Topsy, holding out a letter for him. “Master Draco, this just arrived,” she squeaked.

He turned it over to find an unfamiliar return address. Then he opened it and read.

*Dear Draco,*

*My brother and I would like to invite you to our home at the end of August. We enjoyed your special hospitality in Paris several weeks ago and wish to return the favor. We are having a small get together that evening, and we think you will enjoy the company.*

*If you are able to join us, please let us know by return owl, and I will send you our direction.*

*Yours most truly, Andrei Popa*

Draco felt a slow smile begin as he read the note a second time. Then he fished his galleon out of his pocket and tapped it with his wand.

*The Popas have made contact.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Hermione**

*She was pinned down, arms over her head while he slowly explored her body, his hands firm and demanding. His lips burned as he kissed her first before sucking on her nipples, and she arched to bring him closer to her.*

*She wanted that sinful silver tongue of his all over her, exploring every crevice.*

*“Use your imagination,” he murmured to her, as he sat up and spread her legs for him.*

*She moved her hands into his hair, but he was leading, and somehow she knew he wouldn't let her go until he was done with her. She shuddered in anticipation.*

*He sat back and the hands she knew from her lessons - strong and purposeful - gripped her thighs as he lowered his head to her center and gave one long lick. She felt something inside of her start to burn as he laughed, and she caught a flash of eyes the color of mercury watching her intently before his face transformed into a smirk.*

*"There's my perfect girl," he said. "Give me more, just like that."*

*He lowered himself again and then....*

Hermione sat straight up, breathing hard. She took stock of herself and realized it had all just been a dream, though a highly realistic one. She glanced at the clock on her nightstand and saw it was still very early. She laid back down and closed her eyes as she tried to hold on to the dream, but it was slipping away from her now, leaving behind frustration and soaked knickers.

Knowing that she would never be able to concentrate like this, she closed her eyes and reached under the covers, one hand circling a nipple, the other making its way down to her folds, which were slick with want.

She pictured him, as she had done so many times before with shame. But this time, for the first time, she wasn't embarrassed by the attraction she felt for him. She sensed something was changing between them, and for the first time she had the impression that he wanted to work *with* her and not against her. She was finally prepared to own the fact that she liked him. She *really* liked him. She stroked and touched and allowed herself to really imagine him having her, directing her, telling her she was so perfect for him.

She was close now, and she remembered a flash of her dream, a long hard lick on her clit that helped her reach her peak, and she gasped as she felt herself shatter and slowly drift back down to earth.

Hermione collapsed, breathing hard and wondering how much longer she could take this slow seduction he was using against her. He told her to use her imagination, but the only thing she could imagine right now was being taken by him, gently at first and then rough.

She shuddered again as she thought about it. He would lead, she would follow. He was stronger than she was, and she would be soft and supple for him. She instinctively sensed he would like that. He had guessed correctly in Paris that it was something she enjoyed too, or at least she thought she would if she was ever with a wizard who would do it for her.

"Damn," she muttered, as her hand drifted back down between her legs.

This was truly impossible. This need she felt was so strong she was going for round two, which was entirely unprecedeted.

She glanced at her clock, assuring herself that she had time for one more — *but only one more Hermione, dammit you have to get it together* — as she closed her eyes and began again.

She came again faster and harder, this time imagining him bending her over the bed and entering her from behind. She had never once done it like that the few times she and Ron had had sex, and she had no idea why it was appealing. But he was so much larger than her, and she knew from her dance lessons with him that he was warm, strong, and he drove her mad. Something about being in that position, where she could do nothing but let him take control until he was through with her made her hot, as her insides liquified.

Hermione collapsed, her senses truly scattered now, as she breathed hard and groaned. She had meetings today. She had work to do. She would have to push him out of her mind to focus.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione was wrapping up one of the most distracting days she had ever had while working at the Department of International Magical Cooperation. She forced herself to focus as best as she could on her meetings with the Italian Ministry, but unfortunately she had seen Blaise during lunch and spent most of the meal thinking about his best friend. Blaise, of course, was everything that was charming, and his eyes twinkled when he asked about her new assignment with France.

Try as Hermione might, she couldn't help but dwell on Draco's invitation to ask him for whatever she wanted. This could be interpreted two different ways of course. Hermione was forced to admit that she wanted *him*. But the things she wanted from France were harder to pinpoint.

If she was being honest with herself, she knew the things she really wanted were probably out of reach. Draco had influence at the French Ministry to be sure, but she knew she couldn't ask him to change domestic laws for her, especially when some of the changes she wished to see hadn't even been accomplished in Britain yet. Still, she had spent the day dreaming about her true wishlist that was something more than tariff reductions, and she knew she needed to talk to Draco about it as soon as possible. She needed to better understand the limits of what he could and would give to her. His proposal the night before had blindsided her, and she hadn't had the presence of mind to ask him these things.

As soon as she could reasonably leave her desk for the day she packed her bags and made her way to the lobby of the Ministry. She reached the floo and hesitated for a moment, debating whether she should really do this. She had been going around in circles most of the day about it, but he had given her an open invitation to visit. Surely she didn't need an appointment.

Decision made, Hermione threw some floo powder into the fireplace and called, “Malfoy Manor!” as she felt herself being wooshed away. When she stopped spinning, she saw the familiar foyer in front of her, and she stepped out onto the marble floor, expecting Topsy or another house elf to greet her. To her surprise, none appeared.

“Hello?” she called tentatively, but there was no answer.

*That's odd,* she thought. She was sure Draco was still in Britain. *Maybe he has plans for dinner.* This thought made her feel more morose than she cared to admit, but she knew she didn't have a monopoly on his time.

*I'm not his girlfriend. I don't have any right to know where he is.*

As she mentally regrouped, she decided she might as well visit the library while she was here. It seemed that Draco and all the house elves were gone tonight, so it would be a good opportunity to continue her research on memory charms.

She slowly made her way toward the library, and to her surprise she saw the door was cracked and the lights were on. She started to open the door when she heard voices and paused.

“So you don't know who else will be there?” said a male voice that sounded an awful lot like Harry Potter.

*What on earth is Harry doing at Malfoy Manor?* Hermione wondered. She knew she shouldn't eavesdrop, but she was too curious. She strained to hear.

“No, but I'll see the twins, and they mentioned other friends,” said Draco's voice.

“Death Eater sympathizers do you think?” asked Harry.

Hermione froze. *Why are Harry and Draco discussing Death Eaters?*

“Possibly. It's either going to be that or muggleborn women, based on the last conversation I had with them. I'm hoping for the former, obviously,” said Draco.

Hermione felt like a lead balloon had just dropped into her stomach.

“What will you do if it's women?” asked Harry.

“The bare minimum,” said Draco. “Just enough to convince them. You know I'm not interested.”

Hermione was totally confused now. *What were Harry and Draco talking about?*

“I don't suppose you have a family tree for them somewhere in these books, do you?” asked Harry.

“I have some, but the twins don't appear on any of them. That's why it's taken us so long to break into these circles. I don't know who is related to whom. Our connections are all new.

It was just good luck I met the twins last spring in Stockholm,” said Draco. “But they’re definitely pureblood supremacists like we thought. My hope is the others will be as well.”

“This is really just information gathering,” said Harry. “It may take a few more trips out there before we know where he is.”

“I expect so,” said Draco. “I think we should approach this one like Yaxley.”

Hermione inhaled. She knew Harry had caught Yaxley a few years ago. It had been a huge success, and he was found hiding in Spain. *Had Draco helped?*

“Agreed,” said Harry. “You should take the cloak. Use it to walk the house and get a feel for the layout and the wards.”

Now Hermione was more surprised than ever. *Harry was going to let Draco use the invisibility cloak?* Hermione didn’t know that Harry had ever told Draco about it, let alone allowed him to use it. But then again, clearly Harry knew Draco much better than he had ever let on.

“I will,” said Draco. “And if I play my cards right, I may be able to poke them with some legilimency. I’ll have to wait until they’re distracted, but if I get a chance I’ll take it.”

“Be careful with that,” said Harry. “When you used it on Rosier’s nephew he nearly caught you.”

*Rosier too?* Hermione realized her jaw was hanging open.

“For fuck’s sake Potter, must you bring this up every single time?” asked Draco, and Hermione could tell he was rolling his eyes. “I was nineteen when I did that. I’ve had a lot of practice since then.”

Hermione felt like she was barely hanging onto the thread of conversation. Draco Malfoy was an accomplished legilimens. He had been working with Harry since he was at least nineteen, tracking down Death Eaters. It was ludicrous, and yet...

It made an odd sort of sense as she thought about it. And it explained an awful lot about him — why he was in the Department for International Magical Cooperation in the French Ministry when he didn’t need a job, why he continued to work there even though he obviously didn’t care about it, how he knew so much about her, why he never seemed even remotely curious about her role in the war...

Hermione felt her head spinning as she considered the implications of this.

“Well you’re not as good at it as Voldemort was,” said Harry in a teasing voice.

“*Nobody* is as good at it as the Dark Lord was,” said Draco. “But I’m close enough.”

“Especially when your target’s drunk,” added Harry, laughing now.

"I'd like to point out that I'm letting you drink my good scotch right now," said Draco. "And I also let you play my video games. You should be nicer to me."

Hermione was almost as amazed to hear the friendly banter between them as she was to learn that Draco was evidently tracking former Death Eaters.

"And *I'm* letting you date my sister," said Harry. "We're square."

Hermione felt her stomach clench.

"Gods if only," sighed Draco. "I'm hardly getting anywhere with her though."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. She felt she had come a rather long way in a short period of time. But evidently Draco wanted more. Something warmed inside of her as she thought about it, but she was still hesitant.

"She'll come around," said Harry. "I told you, she's skittish."

Hermione's jaw dropped. *I'm not skittish, am I?* She almost walked in to tell Harry he was being ridiculous, but then she remembered she was eavesdropping, and they couldn't know she was here.

"I'm going to keep working on it," said Draco quietly. "She's hard to crack though."

They were silent for a long moment and then Harry finally said, "Have you thought about bringing her into this one?"

"Absolutely not," said Draco. "We've talked about it before, and it's too dangerous. You know that."

Hermione heard Harry sigh. "I know you're right, but she knows that part of the world much better than we do."

"It doesn't matter," insisted Draco. "She can't be involved. Dolohov would kill her without thinking twice."

*They were after Dolohov.* Hermione's heart was pounding now.

She heard Harry groan. "Fine, you're right. I just hate shooting blind. You know that's why we haven't gotten him yet. There's been nothing useful that's come out of Eastern Europe since Voldemort fell."

"Until now," said Draco. "You know I can break in. The hardest part is done."

"Just be careful," said Harry. "You've never been so unconnected before. You're going to have to do all of it from scratch this time."

"I know," said Draco. "But you know I can play the game."

"You're right. You're the best there is."

Hermione was holding her breath, waiting to hear what else they would say when suddenly the door to the library opened, and she was staring at the green eyes of Harry Potter.

Hermione squeaked in fright as she looked at her best friend.

“Hermione!” he exclaimed, and he grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into the library. Hermione glanced at Draco, who had gone pale and gotten to his feet.

“What did you hear?” demanded Harry.

“I... I...” started Hermione.

“Tell me!” he demanded.

“A lot,” she said quietly.

Draco swore and finished his drink in one gulp before slamming down his glass and stalking over to her.

“Let me make sure I understand. You came over tonight to use my library. And instead of announcing yourself, you decided to eavesdrop when you heard Potter and me discussing things that are classified. Is that correct?”

Hermione felt tears well in her eyes, but Draco didn’t flinch. She nodded dumbly.

“Fine,” he muttered. Then he looked at Harry. “We’re going to have to obliviate her.”

“No!” said Hermione desperately. She grabbed onto Draco’s arm, and he gave her a cold look. “Please!” she added. “Don’t do that. You know I won’t tell anybody!”

She thought she saw something flicker in his eyes for just a moment, but then they hardened again.

“It’s not about telling people voluntarily,” Draco ground out. He looked at Harry again, who had a very conflicted expression on his face. “She’s not an occlumens is she?”

Harry shook his head.

Draco looked back at her. “Then there’s no choice. It’s too risky. You could compromise everything if somebody peeks into your head.”

“No, please... don’t take my memories!”

Hermione was terrified. After seeing her parents lose all of their memories of her, she couldn’t bear to think that she might lose any of hers. And Draco and Harry were both so agitated she was sure they would overdo it.

She turned a pleading gaze on Harry. She knew he was aware of how she felt about this.

“Harry,” she whispered. “Please, don’t do that to me.”

Harry looked so torn, as he stared between her and Draco. Finally he said, almost gently, "Hermione, Malfoy is right. It's too risky for you to know anything about this."

Hermione shook her head frantically. "No, please, you can't..."

But both wizards were staring at her now like they very much could. And would.

Making a split second decision, Hermione suddenly turned and sprinted back through the door to the foyer.

"HERMIONE!" Harry bellowed.

She had seconds, if that, and it wouldn't be enough time to get through the floo or down to the foot of the lane to apparate. They were both much larger and faster than her if they decided to give chase.

She ran to the other side of the foyer and wrenched open a door and flung herself through it just as she heard Harry and Draco running into the foyer behind.

"See if she left through the front door! I'll go through the floo," said Harry's voice, and a moment later she heard the front door open and then Harry shout her address into the floo.

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. She had maybe a minute now before Draco got to the end of the lane and determined she wasn't there. She could floo to the Ministry and apparate from there.

She moved toward the door and glanced back behind her as she started to approach it, and then froze. She felt like she had just been plunged into a bucket of ice as she stared at the room she would never forget.

It looked different from the rest of the Manor, which had been updated since the war. This room hadn't been touched. The walls were still that dark plum color with mahogany paneling below, and the two large sofas were still that same shade of deep emerald velvet that she had stared at while Bellatrix tortured her.

The chandelier was gone, but she could see deep gashes in the wood in one section of floor. That was exactly where she had been standing when she passed out. She was already unconscious when the chandelier fell on her, but Harry and Ron told her what happened. She thought she saw some stains on the floor. Stains that looked like...

"Blood," she whispered, as she sank down to the floor, with tears coursing down her cheeks.

She felt herself shaking and her breathing getting labored. She knew she was moments away from a full-blown panic attack. Or maybe she was going into shock. Or both. She had never expected to see this place again. Besides, after seeing all the changes in the rest of the Manor she *certainly* didn't expect it to look exactly the same as the day she was tortured over eight years ago.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and tried to breathe. In and out. In and out. In and out. She didn't even hear the voices in the foyer. She couldn't see anything else. She just

remembered Bellatrix's wand on her and Draco's terrified face as he stood there and watched.

*In and out.*

## Chapter 14: Departure

### Draco

Draco was furious with Hermione for eavesdropping. She should have known better. She should have announced herself the moment she arrived. Explaining Potter's presence there would have been awkward, but they shared Teddy. They would have told her that Potter was supposed to take Teddy that evening, but something urgent came up at work, and he needed to know if Draco could fill in instead. It was mundane. They had arranged that cover story years in advance in case they were ever caught together.

But instead, she listened in, and then she ran when he suggested obliviation. She actually *ran* like she thought he and Potter wanted to harm her. Draco felt like a monster as he sprinted to the end of the lane only to discover she wasn't there. Either she hadn't come that way at all or she had already disapparated.

Draco grimaced as he realized they hadn't even asked what she heard. She just told them she heard a lot, before she panicked and left.

He turned and made his way back up the lane. He had never really thought she would go this way. Floo was faster, though he was a bit surprised she managed it in the time she had.

He made his way back through the front door to find Potter re-emerging with a grim look on his face. "She's not at her flat. She must have disapparated as soon as she went through."

"Her flat's not warded?" Draco asked, a bit incredulously.

"Not much," said Potter, shaking his head. "She uses muggle electronics. Her wards are light so that they'll work. Antiapparition wards interfere."

"Goddammit," he muttered.

Potter nodded. "I'm going to camp out at her place. She will come back soon enough to feed her bloody cat. His bowl was empty."

Draco nodded. "Alright. Let me know when you hear."

"I will. And Malfoy..."

Draco looked at him. Potter appeared very uncomfortable. "I'm not oblivious her. I just... I can't do it to her."

Draco gave a resigned nod. "Me neither," he muttered. "Not if it scares her that much."

Potter looked relieved. "Alright. We'll just take other precautions then. She can't have heard *that* much."

Draco grimaced. "I'll need to go back to France."

Potter gave him a knowing look. "Are you sure mate? We could do this another way."

Draco shook his head. "No, it's for the best. I just... I became careless being so close to her. I was hoping... well it doesn't matter now. It's too risky for all of us."

Potter gave him a hard look. "Alright," he said slowly. "But if you change your mind..."

Draco didn't say anything to that. He couldn't. He felt like something was dying inside of him just a little bit.

Potter just sighed and turned back to the floo. "I'll message you when she's back."

Draco nodded and watched as the fire turned green and Potter stepped back through it.

He leaned against the wall and put his head in his hands.

Yes, he was furious with her. But mostly, he was furious with himself.

A part of him had always known that she was risky. More than any other witch, she was the one most likely to discover his secret if he became involved with her. She was too close to Potter, and she was too ruddy brilliant. She would ask questions. She would find the inconsistencies in his story. She would dig. So of *course* she had listened in at the door. It was entirely in character for her. She wanted to unearth the secrets of Draco Malfoy, and hearing him talking with her best friend was so tempting she couldn't resist.

Draco knew he had been arrogant. He wanted her so much that he told himself he could keep her contained. He was skilled at what he did. He had been playing that role for so long that he was sure he could keep that side of himself away from her.

But he had underestimated her. He had invited her to visit his library of course, but he never would have imagined she would take him up on it while he was there without contacting him first. He was sure she would at least send him a note. When she hadn't, Draco had no qualms about inviting Potter over. The Manor was far more comfortable than his muggle flat, and they had a lot to discuss. Like every other visit with Potter, he had dismissed the house elves, and they had the place to themselves, or so they thought. Draco was kicking himself now that he hadn't invited Potter over to his flat. Sure, it was barebones compared to the Manor, but nobody but them knew where it was. Even his own mother had never been there. Draco had been careless, and now he was paying for it.

And then there was her reaction to obliviation. If it had been *anybody* else Draco would have ignored their protests and just obliterated them without a second thought. The safety of him, his mother, and even Potter were all riding on it.

But for some reason he couldn't do it to her. She looked so terrified when he suggested it that he knew there was no choice but to find some alternative solution. He realized that there was something odd about her fear of obliviation. He knew she had performed the spell herself – he had seen her do it in Potter's memories. But she was petrified when he suggested

they do it to her. The fact that he couldn't do what he needed to do meant he cared too much. It made the situation between them even more precarious.

He briefly thought about teaching her occlumency like he had taught Potter, but he dismissed it. There wasn't enough time. He had a few weeks before meeting the Popas again, not months. And the training for it took months. His mother had started training Potter as soon as she moved into Grimmauld Place while Draco was finishing eighth year. It was her one condition when she agreed to stay there with him. Draco had taken over the training when he was done with school, and he had honed his legilimency skills on Potter. In return, Potter had learned legilimency by practicing on Draco. They were both very good at occlumency and legilimency, having practiced on each other for years now. In fact, they *still* practiced now and then to stay sharp. Draco had spent so much time in Potter's head that he knew Potter almost as well as he knew himself.

Teaching Hermione occlumency was tempting, but their timeline didn't allow for it, at least not yet. She would never be good enough to keep his secrets from a moderately accomplished legilimens before he was neck deep with the Popas. And Draco had to prepare for the Popas. He had to research. And when he wasn't doing *that* he needed to appear to be doing his job. He couldn't spare the time it would take to spend hours a day training her, as much as he wanted to.

No, the only reasonable option was to push her away. He would go back to France. She would stay here and keep her mouth shut. He would work with her via correspondence, like he had with all of her predecessors. If anybody asked, he could excuse their frequent meetings early on as being necessary for the file transition due to their very negative history with one another. But once he was back in France and working the way he always did, nobody would bother to dig further than initial inquiries.

And then someday, when Dolohov was gone, maybe...

No. No, she would have moved on by then. He had only been pursuing her for a few weeks, and he didn't know if he had made much progress in that time. He was sure that whatever strides he *had* made would have completely vanished by the time Dolohov was handled.

She wasn't his. She would never be his. It was best if Draco just accepted that now.

He exhaled as he dropped his hands from his face and opened his eyes. He found himself staring at something curious that forced his brain to kick back on, despite the dark thoughts he had been having about Hermione.

A door that was supposed to be sealed was cracked.

Narrowing his eyes now he drew his wand and crept silently toward it. As he reached it he heard a small sound inside. He took a deep breath and then flung the door open with his wand scanning the room, before he looked down and found Hermione huddled in a ball, shaking like a leaf.

"Fuck," he muttered. He spared just a moment to pull out his galleon and tap it to alert Potter.

*I found her. She's in my drawing room.*

And then he sheathed it and crouched down with her.

"Hermione?" he said softly.

She flinched when she heard his voice and huddled into herself even harder.

Draco recoiled like he had been slapped. He looked around the room, and shut his eyes to force his own memories back. He had only been in this room a handful of times since his mother shut the door after the war and ordered that nobody enter it.

He knew Hermione must be in the middle of a panic attack, and she was terrified of *him*. Whether it was because she was having flashbacks or because she thought he was going to obliviate her, Draco didn't know. But he felt sick and totally helpless as he stared at her.

Suddenly he heard a noise, and he saw Potter's head peer around the door, a dark look crossing his face as he took in the room and Hermione.

"She's scared of me," said Draco a bit helplessly, and Hermione flinched again. Draco shot a desperate look toward Potter before running his hands over his face to try to compose himself. Potter gave him a sympathetic grimace before crouching down too.

"Hermione," he said firmly, as he grasped her arms. "It's Harry. Look at me."

Draco watched as she slowly raised her head to stare at Potter. Her entire attention was focused on him, and she looked haunted.

"You're the real Harry?" she whispered.

Potter narrowed his eyes at this, but nodded. "Yes, I'm the real Harry."

She gave him a hard look, as though she didn't trust him. "What did I do when I went home after Dumbledore's funeral?"

Potter hesitated and cast an awkward look at Draco, who was staring back in confusion. He had no idea what she was talking about. This was something he had never seen in Potter's head.

"Hermione, are you sure you want to..."

"What did I *do* Harry?" she asked harshly. "If you're the real Harry, then you know. And I want to hear you fucking say it!"

Her voice had risen by the end of this, and Draco's eyes were huge now. She was nearly hysterical, but also terrifying. He had *never* seen her lose control like this.

*Well except that time she slapped me in third year,* he was forced to acknowledge.

He sensed her magic tingling, as Potter just gave a resigned sigh and started to rub her arms a little bit. Apparently *he* had seen Hermione behave this way before. Not for the first time Draco was chagrined to discover there were even more things about her he had never seen in Potter's head during their occlumency and legilimency training.

"Fine," he said quietly. "After Dumbledore's funeral, you went to your parents' house and obliterated them. You removed yourself from their memories and made them think that moving to Australia was their greatest ambition. They still live there, and they still don't remember you."

Draco felt like lead dropped in his stomach.

"Goddammit," he muttered, as he put his face in his hands again. He really *was* a monster. It was no wonder she panicked when he suggested obliviation.

"Don't obli-viate me Harry," she whispered.

"I won't. We won't," he said firmly. "Now let's get you out of here."

She didn't say anything to that, but she allowed Potter to help her up and lead her out of the room. Draco followed a bit cautiously. He saw her halt as she got to the floo. She turned and looked at him with some confusion, as though just now noticing he was there.

"Draco?"

Draco knew he shouldn't do it, but he couldn't help himself. He closed the distance between them in two strides and reached out for her. She went to him willingly, and Potter released her as Draco gathered her into his arms with relief. Whatever had happened in the drawing room, she was past it enough that she was no longer frightened of him.

"Don't obli-viate me," she whispered.

"I won't," he whispered back fervently, hoping she would hear the truth. "I would never. Now that I know. I... never, darling."

The term of endearment just slipped out, but Draco didn't regret it. He sensed her relax just a fraction when she heard it.

"Can I stay here? In my room. Floo just..."

"Of course," he said quickly.

Merlin, he knew he shouldn't let her. This was *not* a good way to put distance between them. But she had gone through hell, and she called it *her* room, as though she belonged in this place that was his, even though she had been tortured here. How could Draco say no to that?

"She wants to stay here," he said to Potter over her head.

Potter looked surprised, but just nodded and followed them as Draco led Hermione up the stairs to her room.

*It is hers, Draco thought. I'll be damned if anyone else sleeps there, ever.*

Not that the Manor often hosted overnight guests. The wards Draco had enhanced after the war made the Manor a veritable fortress. The list of people who could visit was very small. Still, something settled inside of him to think of that room as Hermione's, knowing that she thought of it that way too.

When they arrived she slipped off her shoes and then immediately nestled under the covers. Draco left for a minute to get her some dreamless sleep potion.

"Here," he said, as he sat on the edge of her bed. "You should take it."

She nodded. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

Draco bit his lip and sighed. "Probably not. I need to go back to France."

She looked a bit hurt by this, but didn't say anything. She just nodded and looked down. Draco thought he saw tears starting, but he resolved to be strong enough to do this.

"I'll come by in the morning, and we'll talk," said Potter.

"Crookshanks?" she asked suddenly.

"I fed him," said Potter. Then he turned to Draco. "Malfoy, can you have one of your elves let me know when she's up?"

Draco nodded and nudged her. "Take the potion Hermione."

She sighed as she took it and a few moments later drifted off.

Once he was sure she was asleep he stroked her cheek before he rose and turned to Potter. He saw Potter was giving him a knowing look.

"Malfoy, are you *sure*..."

"Yes," he said shortly. "This is just... she's too distracting."

"Fine," sighed Potter. "I get it. You know I did something similar when I was hunting horcruxes."

Draco swallowed hard and nodded. He remembered. He had seen a lot of memories of Potter watching Ginny Weasley on the Marauder's Map during that year. Potter had been utterly miserable. Draco just hoped he wouldn't feel the same way. Potter had been with Ginny longer than Draco had been with Hermione before he pushed her away.

*And I'm not with Hermione, he reminded himself firmly. Not really. I never have been. I can do this. I have to.*

"Don't tell her too much," warned Draco.

"You know I won't. But we need to find out what she heard. And she's going to need an explanation about some of it. She'll start investigating things herself if I don't give her that."

Draco sighed and nodded. "Fine. Let me know, will you?"

Potter agreed, and they both turned to leave Hermione sleeping there.

"You head on," said Draco. "I'll call the elves back, and then I'll head to France tonight."

Potter clapped him on the shoulder and headed toward the floo.

"Malfoy," he said before he threw the powder in the fireplace.

Draco just looked at him.

"If you change your mind, let me know. We can figure out something else if we need to. I'll back up whatever you want to do."

Draco was grateful and tried to give Potter a smile, but he thought it came out more as a grimace. Potter just nodded and threw some powder into the floo.

"12 Grimmauld Place!" he shouted as he spun away.

Draco exhaled as he climbed back up the stairs to Hermione's room. He knew he should stay away. And he would. He would leave tonight. But he wouldn't see her again for a long time after this, and he couldn't help but take one last look at her now that they were alone and she was asleep.

He slipped back in her room and sat on the edge of her bed again and studied her.

She was lovely. He knew this of course, but he rarely had the opportunity to observe her without interruption or concern that he would be caught. Her skin was smooth with hints of peach and rose. Her lips were lush and parted ever so slightly as she slept. Her hair, which had been so bushy as a younger child, was tamed into tight ringlets. Draco reached forward and tugged on one. It was surprisingly soft as it straightened and then sprang back into place. He choked back a humorless laugh and buried his hand in her hair while he traced the planes of her face with his other hand.

Merlin but she had done something to him. It was ridiculous and senseless and dangerous. He shouldn't care about her this much after only a few weeks with nothing substantial to show for his efforts. But for some reason he *did* care. He cared a lot. Maybe it was because she didn't just fall into his arms like every other witch he pursued. Maybe it was because he thought he knew everything about her from Potter's memories, only to discover he had barely scratched the surface. Or maybe it was because she was the first witch in eight years he had gone after with no ulterior motive. Even the purebloods he actually liked had always had an ulterior motive attached: he sought them out for their social ties, as dates to events, or to get in with the right people to find Death Eaters. He *always* had an agenda. But with Hermione he didn't. He just liked her. He was intrigued by her and very attracted to her. She was the

first witch since he had been Marked that he had pursued *despite* his job with Potter and not because of it.

And now it had blown up in his face.

He sighed as he passed his thumb over her lips. He felt himself harden despite everything that had happened tonight. That was his cue. He needed to break away.

He released her and stood.

“Topsy!” he called.

His elf appeared with a *CRACK!* and gave a squeak of surprise when she saw Hermione.

“Is Miss alright?” asked the elf with concern.

“She’s had a rough evening and took some dreamless sleep. When she wakes in the morning will you let Harry Potter know?”

“Yes Master.”

“Thank you. I’m off to France tonight. Keep me informed about Hermione will you?”

The elf gave him a knowing look, and Draco tried not to wince. Topsy could always see straight through him.

“Does Master wish for Topsy to follow her?” asked the elf carefully.

Draco hesitated. The offer was tempting. *So* tempting. He would know where she was. He would know if she started seeing other blokes. He would know...

But no. He had to be strong. He had to make a clean break or he would go mad.

“No,” he said. “Just let me know how she is in the morning and if she comes back to the Manor at some point.”

“Yes Master.”

Draco nodded and cast one last glance over her before steeling himself and turning away. He made his way down the stairs and toward the fireplace in the foyer. He threw some powder into it.

“Ministry of Magic!”

He felt himself spinning away, back toward his home for the past eight years and away from the witch he wanted more than anything.

# Chapter 15: Revelations

## Hermione

Hermione woke up with a groan. It took her a few moments for the memories of everything from the previous night to wash over her: the conversation she had overheard, her escape into the drawing room of her nightmares, her panic attack, making Harry talk about her parents, the shuttered look on Draco's face when he said he was going back to France...

*Oh God, what did I do?*

She knew she deserved it. He may have called her 'darling,' but he had practically ended the thing – whatever it was – with her last night. He did it gently. He seemed to do it a bit reluctantly. But he had done it because of what *she* had done. She wondered if she would ever see him again.

How had she screwed up so badly? How had she let herself listen at the door for so long? And how on *earth* was this wizard she had known since she was eleven years old a bloody spy?

Because that's what Draco Malfoy was: he was a spy, and Harry was his handler. That much had become abundantly clear the previous night. Sure, he might not be spying in an active war. He wasn't spying the same way Snape had spied. But he was still doing it, and evidently he had been doing it for a really long time – years, in fact. Some of the Death Eaters she now suspected he had helped put away were nearly as dangerous as Voldemort had been.

It explained so much about him, not to mention Harry's remarkable streak at catching members of Voldemort's inner circle. But it was also so extraordinary that she *still* had a hard time processing it.

And the worst part about it was it made her like him even more than she already did. She had been fighting her feelings for him as she told herself he was just trying to find a way to disarm her with her job. But now she knew for certain that his job was just a cover, and she realized he actually meant it. The flirting had been real. The few kisses on the hand and cheek had been real. He had actually taken her on real dates with no motive except to get to know her. She had already acknowledged that she liked him, but the stronger feelings she had been fighting for the last few weeks suddenly hit her like a bludger.

He was funny. He was brilliant. He was obviously handsome, and that air of danger about him was bloody hot. And more than that, if she ever questioned his feelings about his role in the war or muggleborns, she no longer doubted him. Why else would he have been doing this for so long if he hadn't had a true change of heart?

Hermione teared up as she realized she had just let her dream wizard slip through her fingers thanks to her own stupidity.

“Damn...” she whispered.

There was nothing for it. She would have to face the music with Harry. Her feet hit the floor and immediately Topsy appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Miss is awake!” squeaked the little elf.

“Hi Topsy. I don’t suppose Draco is still here?” she asked hopefully. Maybe, just maybe...

“No Miss, my master returned to France last night.”

Hermione’s heart sank.

“Very well. You can let Harry know I’m up. Just give me fifteen minutes to get ready.”

Topsy gave a little bow and then disappeared with another *CRACK!*

Hermione sighed and padded into the bathroom to perform her morning routine and fifteen minutes later she was heading down to the foyer to wait for Harry.

She checked her watch and saw she was already late for work, but she didn’t care. She would claim some personal emergency this morning. Hell, it was the truth.

A moment later the floo activated and Harry stepped through. He gave her a grim look and motioned for her to follow him to the library. Topsy put out some coffee and refreshments and then bowed out of the room to give them privacy.

“I need to know what you heard,” said Harry without further preamble. Hermione got the impression that his gentleness from the night before had waned, and he was no longer feeling particularly charitable toward her.

She bit her lip and relayed what she heard. “So I know you’re after Dolohov. And Harry, I can help. I really...”

“No,” he said curtly. “No, I think you’ve done enough.”

Hermione just stared at him. “Harry, please. You *know* I can help! I know that part of the world better than either one of you!”

“Tell me, Hermione, how exactly do you intend to blend into pureblood circles without exposing either yourself or Malfoy?”

“I....” and her face fell.

“Exactly,” said Harry. “Malfoy and I discussed this months ago. We aren’t bringing you into it. It’s too dangerous.”

"Harry, I'm not saying I should be sent in to do... whatever it is that Draco does. But I can help with information. I can dig. You *know* I'm good at that."

"Hermione, we have a system that works. He's extremely capable, and he does things his way. In exchange for his information I back up his decisions, and I keep his secrets. That's all there is to it."

Hermione's heart sank again. She could read between the lines of what Harry was saying: it was *Draco* who didn't want her involved. And Harry was not going to intervene for her, even if it could help them.

"He's really that good? He's so good that you let him call all the shots?"

Harry raised an eyebrow. "Yes," he said simply.

Hermione felt herself grasping at straws now. Harry was clearly not going to cave on this. "Can you answer some questions for me then? If you won't let me help... just so I have some context, I mean."

Harry studied her. "You can ask. I may not answer. And if I don't, it's for your safety and his, and you need to leave it alone, Hermione."

She pursed her lips.

"I'm serious," he insisted. "We are already taking a huge risk by allowing you to keep the memories from last night. Please respect our boundaries on this."

She sighed. "Fine. In that case, where do you think Dolohov is?"

"I can't tell you that," he said.

Hermione forced herself not to roll her eyes.

"OK, then how long has he been doing this? He said something about being nineteen."

Harry studied her for a moment and finally said, "It started during Christmas break of your eighth year."

Hermione's eyes widened. "How many?"

"I'm not telling you that."

"So I don't suppose you'll tell me who?"

"No," he said.

She sighed. "Fine. I take it you're actually friends with him then? And it's not just through Teddy or Luna and Theo."

Harry inclined his head. "Yes, we're very good friends."

Hermione thought about how to ask her next question. “Are you the reason he knows so much about me then?”

Harry thought about this. “In a manner of speaking. I didn’t tell him directly.”

Hermione’s eyes narrowed as she considered his words before widening again. “Legilimency?”

Harry nodded. “It’s a byproduct of the fact that he trained me in occlumency. He knows nearly everything about me from my first eighteen years. So that means he knows a lot about you and Ron too. A few things about you two never came out, like your parents, but that’s because I wasn’t there for it. So yes, I’m the reason he knows so many odd things about you. He’s seen it all in my head, and he has an incredible eye for detail and an excellent memory. He never forgets anything.”

Hermione’s eyes were wide. “He trained you in occlumency?”

Now Harry looked at her seriously. “Yes. It’s rather hard to measure these things, but Draco Malfoy is arguably the best occlumens to come out of England in the last century, if not longer. He’s the only person I’m aware of who occluded from Voldemort, Dumbledore, Snape, Bellatrix, and any number of other purebloods on a regular basis. And he was doing it when he was sixteen. Basic training in occlumency is rather common in certain pureblood circles, but he’s truly gifted. He fields legilimency attacks all the time in his work for me, and that’s why you can’t be involved. You aren’t an occlumens.”

Hermione realized her jaw had dropped, and she abruptly closed it.

“So you’re an occlumens too.”

Harry inclined his head.

“I had no idea.”

He shrugged. “It’s a standard part of auror training. But Malfoy’s methods are... unique. I’m the best occlumens in the department, though Malfoy is even better at it than I am. Occlumency training was part of our deal when he agreed to work with me after the first Death Eater. I had to learn it so I could guard his secrets in case I’m ever caught in the field. Then I taught him to duel in case *he*’s ever caught on one of his missions. He’s practically an auror, though his brand of occlumency and ability to blend into pureblood supremacy groups is the thing that makes him unique. There are no aurors in the department who could do what he does.”

Hermione nodded slowly. “And he’s a proficient legilimens too.”

“He’s an exceptional legilimens,” said Harry. “Voldemort was slightly better, but I would put Malfoy up against anybody else.”

Hermione bit her lip. “Do you think he ever used legilimency on me?”

Harry looked thoughtful and then shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. There were things about you he didn’t know. He asked me about them, so I know he was curious. If he had wanted to find out badly enough, he could have searched your mind. You wouldn’t have been able to stop him since you aren’t trained. And you can feel it when he joins your mind. His touch is extremely light. It’s almost unnoticeable if his target is distracted. But you’re magically sensitive enough that I think you would have noticed it, and it becomes more obvious if he actually goes searching for something instead of just watching passively.”

Hermione exhaled.

“He asked you about me?”

“Oh yes,” said Harry, smirking now. “He’s fascinated by you.”

Hermione bit her lip. “I ruined it,” she whispered.

Harry sighed. “Look, I know Malfoy as well as I know anybody.”

Hermione gave him a skeptical look.

“Truly,” insisted Harry. “I do. I’ve spent hours, *days* in his head, and he’s spent even more time in mine. We duel each other often enough that he actually beats me sometimes. And we’ve worked together for eight years. I know how he thinks, I know what makes him tick, and I know what drives him. He’s a true Slytherin. He’s a master at identifying opportunities and leveraging them for his own benefit or for his mission. He has no trouble whatsoever using people and discarding them to get what he wants. But he also has a keen sense of loyalty to a select number of people and a protective streak a mile wide. There aren’t many people he cares about, but he will go to the ends of the earth to protect those who are on his shortlist. He will do anything — literally *anything* — for them.”

Hermione frowned. “I don’t understand how this relates to me.”

Harry looked at her squarely now. “It relates to you because up until a few weeks ago, Malfoy’s shortlist consisted of six people: Narcissa, Andromeda, Teddy, Theo, Blaise, and me.”

Hermione raised her eyebrows in surprise to hear Harry include himself on this list.

“It’s true,” said Harry. “If Malfoy had to commit murder to help me, he would do it without a second thought. And knowing him, he would probably smile while it was happening.”

“Merlin,” muttered Hermione.

“Quite. But that’s who he is. He is very, *very* committed to his shortlist. And a few weeks ago, I’m pretty sure his list expanded to seven, and your name was added to it.”

“Oh surely not...” she said.

Harry shrugged. “It’s possible I’m wrong, but I don’t think I am. I know him well enough to identify the signs. And the thing is Hermione, if that’s true then you will be on his list until

further notice. But he will also dig in his heels and do everything he can to protect you, even if you don't like the way he chooses to do it."

"So you're saying..."

"That he's going to push you away until he decides he no longer has to or no longer can. There is absolutely nothing you will be able to do to change his mind about it. He's incredibly stubborn about that sort of thing."

Hermione's heart was sinking again. "He sounds like you."

"Yes, we're a lot alike in that way."

"Couldn't I just learn occlumency? Not to be involved but so..."

Harry shook his head. "He and I... communicated about that last night. The training takes too long, and he will be in the thick of it again before you have any hopes of completing it. It certainly doesn't hurt to read up on it and try some techniques, but it won't bring him back to you. Not for a long time, at any rate."

"What would?" she asked softly. "Is there anything that would?"

Harry gave her a sympathetic look. "Changed circumstances. Things you can't necessarily control. Do you remember what it took to bring me back to Ginny?"

"The war ending," she said dully. She felt dead inside. If that was how Malfoy was going to behave then it could be months or years. She couldn't, *wouldn't* wait that long for him.

Harry nodded. "Yes. We aren't in a war, so I'm not saying it would have to be anything *that* dramatic for Malfoy. But as long as the thing he's doing to protect you and the others on his list seems to be working, he's not going to change it."

Hermione felt her eyes filling, but she just nodded. Harry rose and squeezed her shoulder as he moved out of the library.

"Hang in there Hermione."

\*\*\*\*\*

Three weeks.

She hadn't heard a peep from him in nearly three weeks. He had skipped their last two dance lessons, much to Madam Markham's dismay, and Hermione had sent him a couple of owls that went unanswered by him. He was communicating with her about work through his secretary.

Hermione asked around, and this was exactly how he behaved with her predecessors. There was very rarely any personal touch. He tended to dictate letters or allow his secretary to respond on his behalf. He was distant and uncooperative.

Hermione's heart was broken, and she started to wonder if she had ever really meant anything to him after all. Harry assured her that she did, but her confidence was faltering. Maybe she had just been an amusing diversion for him until she discovered his secret. She could scarcely believe he'd be able to cut her out so thoroughly if he really cared about her.

It was odd because it hurt so much more than her failed relationship with Viktor, with whom she had invested a couple years. Her fling with Draco — if it could even be called that — had lasted all of a month before he pushed her away. And yet, it hurt. She couldn't believe how much it hurt. She hadn't even kissed him for heaven's sake, and yet she cried herself to sleep at night.

It was becoming intolerable, and she knew she had to find some way to move on. If she didn't, she would go mad.

"Can we go to a club tonight?" she asked Ginny and Luna at an emergency brunch the third Saturday after Draco disappeared. Hermione knew he would be skipping her dance lesson the following day too, and she could hardly bear to think about it. Her friends glanced at each other and then looked back at her.

"We can..." said Ginny slowly. "But why?"

"I need to get over Draco. I just... I screwed it up. But he's not coming back, and I need to accept it. I just need a night to let loose. Find some handsome, nameless bloke I can snog or maybe even shag. I need to get him out of my system."

"You still won't tell us what you did?" asked Ginny.

Hermione shook her head. Ginny and Luna had been trying to get it out of her ever since their weekly lunch that happened to fall the day after Draco left for France. They had immediately been able to tell that something was very wrong. Hermione hadn't given them details of course, but she had explained that he had left, and it was entirely her fault.

"Theo says he's rather forlorn," said Luna serenely. "He's been moping."

Hermione felt a twinge at this but pushed it back.

"It doesn't matter. I've apologized, and he's not bending. And it's fine, really. I don't blame him for it. What I did... well it was unforgivable. But I need to accept that he's pushed me away for good and move on. He obviously didn't care about me the same way I did about him, and it's time I stopped fighting it. I can't keep dwelling on it."

"And you want to move on with a one-night stand, is that it?" asked Ginny skeptically.

"Yes. No. Maybe. Hell, I don't know. But I need a distraction Gin. Would it really be the worst thing if I shagged some nice looking bloke I never have to talk to again? I haven't had

a shag of any sort in *years*. I mean, Draco never even kissed me. I want to know that somebody actually *wants* me, and that it's not just some game to them."

"It's just a bit out of character for you," said Luna.

"Everything about this situation with Draco is out of character. Look, will you both go with me? And help me find somebody? Please?"

They were both quiet for a moment as they looked at each other, and Hermione got the impression they were having a silent conversation without her. Finally, Ginny's eyes narrowed as she turned to look back at Hermione.

"Fine. We'll go with you. And if you really want to, we will let you go home with somebody, provided he's not a creep."

Luna nodded in agreement. "Sometimes a shag will clear the nargles from your head."

"I can only hope," said Hermione, feeling optimistic for the first time since Draco left. "Tonight then. The Red Door. It's a single's club, and surely I can find *somebody*."

"Tonight," said Ginny, with Luna nodding along.

# Chapter 16: Red Door

## Draco

Draco was walking down Rue Saint-Rustique in Montmartre before turning and walking through what looked to be a solid wall to enter wizarding Paris. He was supposed to meet Blaise and Theo for dinner, though he didn't want to be here. He knew what this was: an intervention.

It had been nearly three weeks. Three fucking weeks, and Draco was miserable. He had only shown his face in the office a couple times because his mood was so foul his colleagues kept commenting on it.

*At least they weren't talking about Hermione.*

But it was a small consolation, and Draco eventually gave up the office as a bad job. He had been spending all of his time working from home, and Narcissa had called in Theo and Blaise a couple times now. She kept hoping they would snap him out of his mood, but Draco knew it was no use.

He shouldn't like her as much as he did. But he couldn't help it. He had always been a bit fascinated by her from a distance, and then it had morphed into something uncontrollable as soon as he was in close proximity to her as an adult. He needed to move past it, but he simply couldn't.

To make matters worse, he was getting reports that she was miserable too. Luna told Theo that Hermione was desolate, and even Potter was giving him reports that Hermione was very upset. It was unbelievably frustrating to discover that she actually *did* have some feelings for him, now that it was too late for him to do anything about it.

Draco felt terrible. He felt guilty for making her feel so bad, but he also knew he had to hold firm on this. He wouldn't be able to bear it if she was in danger because of him. Besides, it couldn't last forever. She would eventually move on, and then Draco would be the one left behind, forever comparing every other witch to her.

Draco was pulled out of his thoughts by the sight of Blaise blowing rings of cigarette smoke outside the restaurant they were meeting at. Theo was rolling his eyes at Blaise. Draco grimaced at them.

"Long time, no see," said Theo, now looking cautiously at Draco as he approached.

"It's only been a week. And I've had a lot going on," said Draco shortly.

"I'll say," muttered Theo, and they all walked in and took a table. Soon a waiter came over and took their orders, and then Draco turned to look at his best friends, who were sitting next

to each other across from him.

To Draco's consternation, they both crossed their arms and gave him knowing looks.

"What?" said Draco.

"You're a fucking idiot you know that?" said Blaise without any preamble.

"What?" asked Draco. "You *know* I can't..."

They both rolled their eyes at him.

"Bullshit," said Theo. "You're mad for each other and miserable without each other. So get over whatever the hell happened and go be with her."

Draco pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Look, it's not that simple," he said. "There's a conflict with work if I'm with her. It's unresolvable."

Both of his friends looked at him suspiciously.

"I don't believe you," Blaise finally said.

"And what makes you say that?" asked Draco, not even bothering to hide the note of frustration in his voice.

"Lots of things," said Blaise. "First, you've never cared about your job very much. Not really."

"Second," chimed in Theo, "Hermione blames herself for it. I think Luna's exact phrase was 'self-flagellation.'"

Draco winced at this.

"Third," added Blaise, "this kind of thing has happened before. Not with you, but with others. I'll admit there's a bit of a conflict of interest there, but sometimes the best deals are struck between the sheets. Everybody knows it, so everybody looks the other way when it happens."

"Fourth," added Theo, "Hermione was given explicit permission from her boss to date you. Apparently she went to him to tell him she thought she might be dating you, though somehow you were so fucking vague about it that she wasn't quite certain. He said it was fine. He didn't even feel the need to check with *your* boss before he said grace over it."

Draco's eyes widened at this.

*Fuck.*

“And finally,” said Blaise, “you say it’s because of the job, but you’re separated now. And you guys still haven’t announced any new deals or agreements, so it’s clearly a bullshit excuse. I can tell you’re so far gone you’d give her just about anything she asks for. If it was really about work then you would have the framework for something in place by now. Besides, I saw Hermione this week, and she’s incredibly distracted.”

Draco was squirming uncomfortably through this litany, but he was suddenly curious, despite himself.

“She’s not doing her job?” he asked.

“Oh she is,” said Blaise. “She’s still Hermione Granger. She can rattle off our trade deal terms in her sleep. But when she wasn’t on call, she looked fucking depressed. She was listless and miserable and refused to even look my way most of the time. The one time I caught her she actually teared up.”

Draco felt truly wretched now.

“The only explanation for all of this is that something happened,” said Theo. “It’s not related to your job, not really. And you got angry with her about it, and now you’re too stubborn to take her back.”

His friends finished their little speech and then looked at him expectantly.

Draco sighed. “It’s not that.” He caught the looks on their faces. “*Really,*” he added.

They glanced at each other. “You’re not pissed at her for whatever she supposedly did?” asked Theo in an incredulous voice.

Draco opened his mouth to say something and then paused.

“Maybe?”

He winced slightly at the question in his voice. He knew his friends would press him now until they were satisfied with his answers.

“What the fuck do you mean, *maybe?*” asked Theo in an appalled voice. “You’re putting both of you through all this shit, and you don’t even know if you’re angry with her?”

“I just...” Draco sighed. There was nothing he could do but tell them about it, at least a little bit.

“It’s hard to explain. Look, I don’t want to get into details, but let’s just say she dug into my background a bit. More than I was prepared for. I don’t really blame her — I mean, she’s Hermione Granger for fuck’s sake. I was just as much to blame for it as she was, and I was an idiot to think she would leave well enough alone. But she still shouldn’t have done it, and it just... clarified things for me. She’s a distraction I can’t afford right now. Maybe in the future, but not right now. And she will move on.”

To his slight surprise both of his friends narrowed their eyes and then widened them again at exactly the same time.

“Oh,” was all Theo said.

Not for the first time Draco wondered if his friends suspected his double life. He had never told them. They had never asked. They were both moderately proficient occlumens like many purebloods, and they were Slytherins to boot. If they ever suspected what he did they were smart enough to make sure they had no memories with Draco that confirmed it for them.

Blaise bit his lip. “Even so, I still think you’re being stubborn about it.”

“No doubt,” said Draco shortly. “But it’s for the best given current circumstances.”

At that moment an owl Draco didn’t recognize swooped down and stuck out its leg. Draco furrowed his brow as he pulled the note off.

*Draco,*

*Luna and I are taking Hermione to a club tonight for the express purpose of “getting over you.” Luna and I haven’t gotten the whole story about what happened, but Hermione seems to think it’s all her fault and that you’re never going to look her way again. She has decided to find some bloke who WILL give her attention, at least for one night. She’s open to everything — dancing, snogging, shagging — all of it. She wants to forget you.*

*Normally I wouldn’t interfere like this, but I suspect the truth is more complicated than Hermione has led us to believe, and she’s acting out because she’s hurt.*

*Luna and I don’t intend to stop her. Her heart is broken, and she needs to know she’s worth something to somebody, because she’s questioning whether she was ever worth anything to you. But on the off chance you’re willing to get your head out of your arse and see the amazing witch right in front of you, we also won’t stop you from intervening tonight.*

*We will be at The Red Door in London starting around 8 pm. It’s a muggle club. The decision is yours.*

*Ginny Weasley*

Draco felt all the blood drain from his face as he read it.

“What?” asked Theo in alarm. “What happened?”

Draco said nothing, he just shoved the letter toward his friends who read it quickly.

They looked up at him cautiously.

“But this is what you expected, right?” asked Blaise carefully. “You said she would move on.”

“But not like this!” insisted Draco. “Hermione doesn’t do one night stands. She doesn’t just shag random blokes! She doesn’t even snog them! I would know – I never got that far with her!”

Theo and Blaise were both giving him pitying looks.

“Mate, you can’t have it both ways,” said Theo gently. “She may have crossed some line with you, but what you’re doing to her is going to push her away from you. Permanently. You can’t push her away and then expect her to wait for you. And you also can’t complain about how she chooses to move on. You have no right.”

“But how could she think...” said Draco quietly, as he read the note again. He felt sick.

“How could she think what?” prodded Blaise.

“How could she think that she was never worth something to me? Does she think I don’t care about her? I mean, fuck... the entire *reason* I’m doing this is because I care too fucking much!”

Draco dropped his face in his hands, and he sensed his friends were having a silent and possibly frantic conversation without him.

“Then you need to tell her that,” chimed in Blaise. “It’s not over yet. Ginny has given you a chance to fix things. Or at least clarify things.”

“Blaise is right,” said Theo firmly. “This right here?” and he pointed to the note. “This right here is a fucking gift from heaven. Mate, this sort of thing *never* happens. You broke her heart, and her best friends are *still* willing to let you take one more shot with her.”

“But I *can’t*,” insisted Draco. “It’s not that I don’t want to. Trust me. I do. I want it more than anything. But I *can’t*!”

Both of his friends were staring at him hard now. “How did you leave it with her?” asked Theo suddenly. “Tell us. What exactly happened, and how did you leave it?”

“I....” Draco closed his eyes. That night was so horrible.

“I caught her doing... the thing that made me angry. We fought, and she panicked and fucking ran from me, right into the room where she was tortured by Bellatrix during the war. Eventually I found her having a full blown panic attack on the floor, and she was terrified of me. She didn’t even recognize me, not really. It took awhile to calm her down, and she spent the night in one of our guest rooms after I made her take dreamless sleep. She asked if I was going to stay, and I told her I was going back to France that night. That was it. She’s sent some owls, but I haven’t responded. I... I’ve tried to make a clean break.”

Both of them were looking at him in horror now.

"Did you tell her?" asked Blaise suddenly. "Did you tell her that the reason you left is because of this mystery thing she did, but that you still care about her?"

Draco opened his mouth to respond before promptly shutting it, his stomach sinking as he realized he never did. He slowly shook his head.

"You need to go tonight," said Theo. "Even if you can't be with her right now – and I have serious doubts about that, but I'll take your word for it – you need to explain yourself to her. You need to tell her you care about her. It is the only chance you have to fix this in *any* way that keeps things salvageable for the future."

Blaise was nodding fervently, and Draco suddenly felt his heart leap. They were right. And the thought of her shagging some other bloke tonight was like a poison. He had been telling himself she would move on, but now faced with the reality of it he couldn't bear it. He couldn't let her do this. He *wouldn't* let her do this.

"Yes. Yes of course. I need to go. I need..."

"Go," was all Theo said. "We've got your tab, just go."

Draco nodded and stood up before turning on the spot and apparating to the French Ministry. He groaned when he saw the line to the floo. He checked his watch. It was already 8:30 in Paris. Draco knew he would gain an hour when he made it to London thanks to the time zone change, but that still only gave him thirty minutes to get there.

Twenty minutes passed before Draco was finally able to floo to the British Ministry, and then he had to clear security there too, which took another half an hour.

"Fuck..." he muttered as he strode to the apparition point. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

He got to the apparition point and turned on the spot, arriving in his muggle flat where he wrenched open the laptop he kept there and turned it on.

"Come on, come on, come on..." he muttered. Finally it booted, and he opened a browser to search for The Red Door. He found it on a map, and he was surprised to see it was only about a fifteen minute walk from his flat. He considered apparating closer but he couldn't find a good apparition point quickly, so he stared at the map to memorize the route while he quickly yanked off the coat he had worn to dinner, rolled his shirtsleeves up, unbuttoned his top buttons, removed his tie, and then mussed his hair so he'd look appropriate enough for a club.

He strode out the door and into the night, walking as quickly as possible. As he approached the club, he saw there was a long line to get in. Draco pointed his wand through the extended pocket in his trousers and quietly confunded his way toward the front before confounding the bouncer at the door to let him in.

He checked his watch and saw it was now nearly 9. It wasn't that late. *Surely* they wouldn't have left yet.

Draco glanced around quickly, ignoring the interested looks from several women who had seen him walk in, and finally he spotted them, talking to a couple of blokes in one corner.

Draco's eyes roved over her and took in the black, sparkly minidress and heels. He sensed determination in her as she made herself smile and laugh with the two men who were hovering near them. She looked amazing, and Draco felt a deep rush of jealousy as he watched.

Without even hesitating he touched the mind of the bloke who was closest. He was tall with dark hair. Draco watched him rub his head for a moment, but he didn't seem to think anything of it, and Draco suddenly could hear their conversation as though the volume had just been turned on.

"... in London, yes," said Hermione.

"I just moved here, but I have a nice place nearby. I've been getting to know the neighborhood."

"I know this area well," said Hermione. "Maybe I could show you around sometime."

"How could I say no to that?" he asked with a charming smile. Draco wanted to curse the smile right off his goddamn face.

"Well then, care to dance, and we can talk about it?" asked Hermione.

Draco watched as the man smiled and grabbed Hermione by the hand as he led her off to the dance floor, leaving Ginny and Luna behind to talk to each other as his friend sidled off. Draco stared at the man as he turned Hermione to face him, and they began to dance.

Draco was nearly breathless with rage as he watched the truly depraved and dangerous thoughts cross through that other man's mind as he touched the woman Draco wanted more than anything. Hermione's hips were swaying, and she was laughing flirtatiously as the man named Carl pulled her closer for a moment before spinning her around so he was behind her. Draco watched as he placed his hands on her hips, and he stepped back to take a long look at her arse. The things he wanted to do to Hermione crossed his mind again, and Draco saw red.

Draco didn't even realize he was doing it. He strode toward them and glanced to the side to see Ginny and Luna smirking at him. As he watched they high-fived each other, and then nodded to him as though giving him permission to rip Carl's head off of his fucking neck. Draco didn't smile back, but he nodded in acknowledgement before zeroing in on Hermione again. He put his hand in his pocket as he approached and sent such a strong confounding spell toward Carl that he stumbled backwards and turned his ankle as he tripped and fell.

Draco trod on him as he slipped in right where Carl had been. Hermione's back was still turned, and she hadn't seen him yet. Draco's fingers gripped her hips, relishing the feeling of her under his hands after weeks away, and he pulled her tight against him as he began to move behind her too.

He needed to say something to her. He would in a minute. But first, he wanted to dance.

# Chapter 17: Torch

## Chapter Notes

TW: reference to date rape drugs

### Hermione

Hermione had second thoughts about this idea the moment she walked into the club, but she couldn't take it back now. She had a plan tonight. She was going to find a bloke to dance with and snog and possibly shag if she got lucky and had the courage to do it. She immediately fortified herself with a stiff drink – not too much of course, but one round of liquid courage was welcome for what she had planned tonight – and then she scanned the room.

“There,” she muttered to Ginny and Luna, and Hermione grabbed them and made a point to walk past a table with some attractive-looking men, and she smiled flirtatiously at them. Sure enough, a few moments later, several of them rose to approach, and then the introductions started.

The two groups felt each other out at first, and several of the men were disappointed to learn that Ginny and Luna were not single. But Hermione was, and she was the one here in the sparkly dress and high heels to display her single-ness to the room.

Before long there were two or three blokes vying for her attention, and she soon narrowed it down to Carl.

Carl was attractive. He was the opposite of Draco in nearly every way. He was a brunette to Draco’s blond. He had brown eyes instead of Draco’s gray. He was open and easy to read compared to Draco’s mind fuckery.

Speaking of fucking, she was pretty sure Carl wanted to fuck her. She decided she wouldn’t be opposed to it. He was new in town and worked in the financial district as an “analyst,” whatever the hell that meant. But he was clean cut and friendly enough and clearly wanted to fuck her.

Did she mention that Carl wanted to fuck her? There was very little question about this in Hermione’s mind, and she found it rather refreshing.

Hermione decided she wouldn’t play hard to get, but she would dip her toes in with a few dances first before she snogged him on the dance floor and then went back to his flat, which he said was nearby. Hermione had her wand in a small bag she had left with Ginny, and she

would be taking it with her before she left. Carl was a muggle, and her wand gave Hermione everything she needed to help herself if she had somehow misjudged this.

Her first impression of Carl on the dance floor was that he didn't dance like Draco. But then again, few danced like Draco. Or maybe she was so used to dancing with Draco she expected a certain *something* from a male partner. Carl didn't quite have that something, but he was happy and open and had made his intentions known when he told her he was out "looking for some fun and somebody to have fun with." That was what Hermione really needed tonight. She could forgive Carl if his hands on her waist weren't as strong and directive as she liked. It would be fine if she had to lead him instead of him leading her. She could get over it.

But then Carl spun her around, and Hermione complied with delight. Maybe Carl *wasn't* such a bad dancer after all. Perhaps Carl had more potential than Hermione had imagined. Maybe, just maybe, she could get off with Carl tonight and *not* have to think about a blonde Slytherin between her legs instead of the man she was actually with.

After a moment Carl's hands left her waist briefly, and then suddenly she felt his hands on her waist again, firmer and stronger than before.

Oh Carl had *real* potential. Hermione was thrilled. She had managed to gauge this perfectly. His first few minutes on the dance floor were clearly just a warmup. Now that he was settling in, he was getting better - *much* better.

In fact, Carl was pulling her so tight against his body that Hermione could feel every plane. And something about it felt achingly familiar to her. She felt like she had been here before, once in Paris and then a dozen times since in Madame Markham's dance studio.

Granted, she had never danced with Draco like *this*. But movement was movement, and she felt like Carl was channeling his inner Draco Malfoy so perfectly that Hermione could almost believe it was the real thing.

Rationally, Hermione knew it couldn't be Draco behind her, because Draco was in Paris, and Draco had left her heartbroken. He had made his position clear, and she intended to give him up tonight.

And yet, Carl's hands sure felt like Draco's. She looked down, and while it was hard to see in the dim light she thought they even *looked* like Draco's. And Carl was actually *leading* her now. Hermione didn't even know it was possible to lead so authoritatively in a dance like this, but he was doing it. He was commanding her hips to rock against him in a certain pattern in a way that made Hermione's blood heat.

Hermione couldn't *wait* to shag Carl tonight.

Suddenly he released her and pushed her forward just a bit, and instinctively Hermione put her hands on her knees and popped her arse. Carl pulled her back to him and settled her arse deep into his lap, where Hermione felt a hard something pressing into her.

Carl had an erection. Carl was showing her his erection. Hermione had done this to Carl, and it made her feel beautiful, powerful.

Hermione ground her arse into Carl's lap, and he pressed her tight against it and held her there with firm hands. A part of her wanted to look behind her to see Carl's face, but she hesitated because she had a growing suspicion about Carl. She didn't know if she wanted it to be true or not. Did she want it to be Carl who was pressing his manhood into her bum, or did she want it to be Draco? As long as she was facing away from him, she wouldn't know for sure, and she could pretend it was one or the other. Or even both.

*Don't look Hermione. Don't do it.*

Hermione looked.

Why did Hermione look behind her? Why did she do it? She knew better.

Because when Hermione looked behind her, she didn't find Carl. Instead, she found Draco, watching her arse move in his lap as he bit his lip and furrowed his brow and coaxed her to grind into him to the beat of the music. He looked positively feral.

Carl did not have an erection, but Draco sure did.

*Fuck.*

Suddenly his eyes flicked up from her arse, and found hers, and he immediately pulled her upright and spun her around to face him. He was holding her so close and so tight that Hermione really had no choice but to slip her arms around his neck as she moved with him. There was no other place for them to go.

He used his knee to spread her legs just a bit so their fronts were pressed flat together. And then she heard him in her ear.

"Do not go home with Carl. Do not go home with any other fucking bloke, Hermione. I can't stand it."

"How did you know...?"

"I know," he said shortly. "I know why you're here, and I know exactly what he wants to do to you. I know he'd even spike your drink to do it if you're unwilling. I saw it all in his head. When we're done here, you're going to go home, alone, and you will *not* do this again. Do you understand me?"

Hermione felt herself starting to swell with rage, as she realized he had done legilimency on Carl. Granted, the things he said suddenly terrified her, but *still*.

"You have *no* right...!" she started.

"I know I don't. Believe me, I know. You should hate me. I hate myself. But promise me Hermione. Promise me you'll go home alone tonight, and you won't do this again."

Hermione felt her defenses weakening. "I need to get over you," she said softly into his ear. She felt him tighten his grip on her. It was like he was clinging to her, and she sensed a desperation from him.

"Please don't," he begged. "Please, *please* don't. If there's any small part of you that might like me or care about me or want me at all... please don't let it die. I know it's not fair. Truly. But Hermione... *please*."

Hermione's heart was breaking yet again, but she couldn't say no. She was in too deep.

"Do you care then? Do you actually care about me? Because I started to think you did, but then I heard nothing from you for *weeks*."

He gave a hollow laugh. "I care so fucking much I'm practically a shell of a person right now. This right here? This is the only thing that's made me feel alive since I left England."

"Then why won't you *act* like it?"

"Hermione, I can't do the things I want to do just yet. I owe it to Potter and Teddy and you to finish a few things first."

"You don't have to! You don't!"

"I do," he said firmly. "And I will. And I know I'm not being fair to you. I do know that. But please give me a little more time before you give me up. And if you do give me up, don't do it like this – don't give me up for some meaningless shag with a muggle who would drug you to get what he wants."

The rawness of his words made Hermione's own emotions feel flayed wide open. But she knew what her answer would be for now. Hell, she knew she would probably wait for him for God knows how long, feeling unsatisfied and miserable. But he had shown up tonight and was clinging to her, and she couldn't say anything else.

"OK," she whispered.

She felt Draco sigh in relief, and then he spun her around again to face away from him. He pulled her tight against his body with one hand and used his other hand to flatten her palm against her own body. He covered her hand with his and guided her hand along the top of her thigh, up over her hip and abdomen and finally over one of her breasts before he brought her palm to his lips and kissed it. Then he started the pattern in reverse, her palm flat against her body and his hand over hers as he moved it across all the places he wouldn't touch her directly.

Hermione was impossibly turned on now, as her head fell back on his shoulder, and she felt him put his face against her neck, but he didn't kiss her. They danced like that for a while longer until finally the music changed, and he gently pulled away.

"I need to go back," he said softly, as he took her hand and led her off the dance floor back toward Ginny and Luna. "Please remember what I said."

Hermione just nodded, as she felt like she was in a dream or maybe even a nightmare as he handed her off and slipped back toward the door.

"Well?" asked Ginny hopefully.

"He's pulling a Harry," Hermione said.

Ginny furrowed her brow in confusion.

"Draco," said Hermione, "is pulling a Harry. There's something... he feels he needs to do first. He doesn't want me to get over him, but he also won't be with me right now. It's exactly what Harry did to you during the war."

Ginny's eyes widened for a moment and then she sighed and wrinkled her nose. But she didn't say anything else.

"His aura looks better now, Hermione," said Luna serenely as he exited through the door. "It was nearly black with pain and anger when he arrived, but it's back to his normal blue again. It's dimmer than usual, but at least it's the right color. You brought him back."

"I..." Hermione felt a sob choke her, and both of her friends moved in to hug her. As usual, Luna had a way of saying the thing she needed to hear, even if it hurt.

*I brought him back, but he's still not mine.*

"I think we're done here," said Ginny after a moment. "Let's go back."

Hermione nodded, and all three witches made their way out of the club and into the night air. They walked a couple blocks until they reached an alley, which they slipped into to apparate. Ginny and Luna gave her one last encouraging smile as all three turned on the spot, and a moment later Hermione found herself in her dark flat.

She sighed as she opened her bag to flick her wand and turn on the lights as she slowly made her way to the bedroom. She felt drained. She couldn't believe Draco had shown up tonight. Obviously her friends had contacted him because neither one looked remotely surprised to see him there. She should be annoyed at them for interfering, but she was so wrung out that she couldn't spare the energy for it.

He wanted her feelings to stay intact. He wanted her to carry a torch for him for as long as it took to finish Dolohov, without a scrap of affection from him while he worked on his task from a different country. It wasn't fair at all. She knew that. Hell, even *he* seemed to know that. But how could she not give him at least a little more time after all that? She knew she wouldn't wait forever. She couldn't. But she had to admit that a revenge shag like she had planned tonight was also not well-thought out.

She hadn't even managed to pick up on how creepy Carl actually was. Her friends hadn't either. She liked to think that she would have been smart enough not to accept a drink from him or truly drop her guard around him. Her training from the war hadn't completely vanished, and she knew that sort of thing happened. But she still hadn't sensed it from him. That rather put her off of future attempts.

She briefly considered that maybe Draco had been lying about what he saw in Carl's mind, but she dismissed it nearly as soon as she thought about it. She felt something dangerous and dark in him when he described it to her. She thought about what Harry had said — that

Draco could kill and smile while he did it. She got her first taste of that tonight. He had been telling her the truth. Carl was probably lucky to be alive.

Hermione sighed and yanked her dress off before throwing on an oversized T-shirt that Ginny had nicked from one of her brothers as she moved to the bathroom. She went through her nightly routine as if on autopilot and then moved to the bed. She would read for a bit before she fell asleep. It was the only way to settle her mind. She reached out for her book on the nightstand and then paused. It was in a slightly different place than she remembered.

Her exhausted brain ground back into motion as she reached for her wand and studied the other things on the nightstand. Her lamp was moved a bit to the left. The box of earplugs she kept near her bed to drown out her noisy neighbors had shifted slightly too. She looked down and saw the drawer on the nightstand was cracked.

Her heart started to race as she spun around and looked at the rest of the room cautiously. “Crooks?” she called, as she realized she hadn’t seen her familiar when she walked in. “Crooks boy, it’s me. Where are you?”

She heard a faint meow, and peered under the bed to find Crookshanks looking back at her with wide eyes, his fur standing on end. Hermione was immediately transported back to some of her earliest memories of him. The last time she had seen him looking like this had been in third year when he sensed Peter Pettigrew.

“Crookshanks, come out and show me. Can you show me, sweet boy?”

Her cat stood and slowly slunk out from under the bed as he led her toward a small cabinet in her bedroom where Hermione kept her work files when she brought work home with her. Crookshanks started to hiss and spit at it, and Hermione raised her wand to run a series of detection spells over it. She sensed nothing so she gingerly opened the cabinet to find it completely empty. All of her files were gone.

Hermione’s heart was pounding out of her chest now. She knew there hadn’t been much in it. She made a point not to leave work at her home for very long because the Ministry was far more secure than her flat. And she only brought home copies with her, so the originals were always in her office. She tried to remember what she had brought home with her for the weekend, and then she had it: it was her file on the Italian trade deal and a dossier on her counterpart in the Greek ministry. He was brand new, and she hadn’t met him yet or even read up on him. She had been planning to do it this weekend. That was all.

She straightened up and looked at Crookshanks. “Crooks, we’re leaving. Stay here please.”

Her familiar obeyed and watched as Hermione cast some spells over her dresser before waving her wand and packing a duffle bag for herself. She grabbed her laptop and mobile, along with her muggle ID and bank cards and shoved them in the bag too. She skipped most of her products in her bathroom, except for the face wash she had just used before bed. She didn’t know if anything had been tampered with, and it would take too long to find out. Most of her things were muggle anyway, and they could be replaced easily enough.

She hesitated for a moment but then cast some detection spells over her nightstand, which came up negative, before opening the drawer and pulling out the small, beaded bag she had used with Harry and Ron when they were on the run. She let out a sigh of relief to see it was still there. It had been nearly eight years since she had last used it, but she kept it because it was too hard to replace. It was the only undetectable extension charm she had ever cast. They were illegal, and she was lucky to have gotten away with it when she did. She was sure the only reason why nobody caught her was because she did it right before Dumbledore's funeral, and most of the Ministry had been in attendance that day. The bag was worn and the fabric slightly faded, but she had always kept it nearby in case she ever needed it again.

Steeling herself now she shoved her duffle bag into it and then turned to Crookshanks who gave her a baleful look. "Crooks boy, I know you don't like it in there. But we need to go, and the muggles can't see you. Look, I'll give you some extra treats." Hermione went to the corner of her bathroom with the magical litterbox and placed it in the bag, along with his food and water bowl and extra treats. She arranged it just like she had that year when they were on the run. Even the boys had no idea she had brought Crookshanks with her. He had lived in her bag for much of that year, coming out only at night for comfort.

Crookshanks gave her one last unhappy meow before walking forward and disappearing into the bag. Hermione gave a sigh of relief as she closed it and then straightened up. She cast one last look around her bedroom before turning on the spot and apparating into the night.

## Chapter 18: Golden Girl

### Hermione

Hermione had to come up with a plan for Draco Malfoy.

Memories of that night in the club had been swirling in her head for a couple of weeks now, and Hermione thought she was going truly mad. He had danced with her like she was the only woman in the room. He had sounded terrible and raw when he spoke to her. And then he disappeared again without a further word. They were communicating through each other's secretaries again.

Hermione felt almost dead inside. She no longer wanted to find a casual shag to move on. She knew she *wouldn't* move on until she got some closure from him. And he had left the door open – or rather, he asked *her* to keep the door open.

So instead she spent the next two weeks apparating between whatever Muggle hotel she was staying in that night and the Ministry of Magic. Work and sleep. Work and sleep. That was all she had done, except for the occasional round of self-care during her truly weak moments and her dance lessons. She kept going to those in the hopes that Draco would appear again, but of course he hadn't.

She made up excuses to avoid her friends. She still hadn't told anybody that her flat had an intruder the night of the club. She knew both of these things were wrong, but she couldn't deal with the fallout. If her friends saw her right now, they would try to stage another intervention. And if she told Harry about her flat, he would go around the bend and probably alert Draco too. She swore to herself that she *would* have reported it, consequences be damned, if anything about France had been stolen. But it hadn't. Draco was safe enough, and Hermione could live in a hotel for a couple of years before it became a financial burden for her. Nobody had to know about it just yet.

But she also knew she couldn't keep on like this forever. She couldn't stand the infernal silence from him, and she couldn't cut everybody out permanently. Eventually Ginny would probably show up at her work and physically drag her to lunch and then interrogate her about what the hell was going on. Hermione had to think of *something* that would make Draco crack and return to England before then, but until she did she was going to be stuck in this routine indefinitely.

Maybe that was why Hermione threw herself back into her work. It gave her something to think about that wasn't Draco Malfoy, and it gave her brain a bit of a break. Besides, between her time spent with Draco earlier in the summer and the Italian trade deal, she had been neglecting many of her other countries.

She finally decided she would write to her Romanian counterpart to get caught up with him. He had been requesting an in-person visit with her to discuss some new security

arrangements between their two countries for weeks now. He also wanted her to meet several new colleagues who had been hired into the department. She had put him off, but knew she couldn't do it forever, and there was no time like the present to work on things that weren't French.

As Hermione thought about it, she decided to see if he would be open to a weekend visit in Bucharest so she could have an ironclad excuse to avoid her friends for another week.

She reached out to him early on a Tuesday, and she had a response from him that evening confirming that a visit on that upcoming Friday through the following weekend should be sufficient to accomplish everything they needed to get through. Relieved that her plan had worked, Hermione spent the next couple of days preparing for her visit, before finally floo'ing to Bucharest Friday morning.

She stepped out of the floo and found her counterpart walking toward her, with a broad smile on his face.

"Hermione," he said warmly.

"Florin," she replied, sticking out her hand to shake his. To her surprise, instead of shaking it he raised it to his lips and kissed the back of it. She narrowed her eyes at this a bit and felt an uncomfortable squirm in her stomach. Her dossier on him stated that he was a pureblood, so she supposed this type of behavior wasn't entirely unexpected. Still, he had never done that the few times they actually met each other in person.

He dropped her hand and escorted her through the international check-in point before leading her to his wing of the building, introducing her to people as they went.

Hermione forced herself to stay present as she shook hands, sat through meetings, and took notes on the new security arrangements Romania was requesting from Britain. Florin continued to make reference to Hermione's relationship with Harry on this latter point, and Hermione acknowledged that she would probably have to coordinate with him on it, while mentally thinking that Harry would never agree to some of it. She also hoped beyond hope that when she *did* discuss it with Harry, Draco would somehow come up in a casual way, and she could pump Harry for more information about him.

*Stop it. We aren't solving your Draco Malfoy problems today.*

As the day wore on, Hermione couldn't help but notice Florin's eyes lingering on her. And when the day came to an end, he asked her to meet him for drinks to continue their discussions. Hermione begged off, claiming she was exhausted from her long week at work. Florin dropped it, though she could tell he wasn't happy about it. So when he asked her to join several of his colleagues at a networking event the following night, she didn't feel like she could say no. She did, however, have a few questions.

"What kind of networking event?" she asked.

"A gala. We just had our election, and the new Minister is expected to drop in to thank a few donors in person. Several of the higher-ranking officials at the Ministry will be there,

including myself. We simply must have you attend. I'm sure he will be thrilled to meet you."

Knowing she really had no choice now, she said, "Very well. But I'm afraid I'll have to make a short trip back to London first. I did not come prepared for a gala!"

Florin nodded his assent to this and agreed that her schedule for the next day would be rearranged to allow for it.

Hermione gave him a tight smile and left the Ministry to walk the few blocks to the muggle hotel she was using for the weekend.

She checked in and made her way to a well-appointed room with a rather shockingly luxurious bathroom. It had a dressing area that she knew she would make use of the following night, with a separate shower and soaker tub. She noted there was a sample of muggle bubble bath on the counter, and she suddenly had the urge to indulge in an effort to do something for herself for once. Her flat didn't have a tub, and none of the hotels she had been staying in for the last couple of weeks did either.

First though, she ordered room service and turned on the TV to watch the muggle news as she waited.

She frowned as she watched the news. The anchor was reporting that several rather high profile individuals in the muggle government had disappeared without a trace. There was an ongoing investigation, and there was concern that there was foul play.

*Muggle officials disappearing without a trace?*

Hermione felt a trickle of unease at this. It sounded awfully familiar to her fourth and fifth years at Hogwarts, as Voldemort was rising and the British Ministry was failing to acknowledge it.

*But surely not,* she thought. Romania had been stable even through the war with Voldemort. And thinking about this made her think of Draco, and she *definitely* wasn't going to think of Draco.

She pushed it out of her mind as her dinner arrived, along with a gin and tonic and glass of wine.

Hermione nursed her gin and tonic through her dinner, after changing the channel and watching something in Romanian she only half understood. She didn't want to be thinking about muggle disappearances tonight. She wanted to turn her brain off.

After she finished dinner, Hermione stepped into the bathroom and donned a robe as she began to fill the tub with water. About halfway through she poured some bubble bath into it and then sipped her wine as she watched the suds fill to the top.

Ready now, she let the robe fall, and she slipped into the water, nearly groaning at the feel of the warmth enveloping her from the bath. She closed her eyes and tried to savor it, while

pointedly *not* thinking about Draco Malfoy.

But of course it was futile. She had nothing else to think about except for his maddening protective streak and the way he danced and his hands...

Almost unbidden, her mind began to fill with him, and she knew it was no use now. A moment of weakness had come upon her, and there was nothing for it except to get it over with. She closed her eyes, as her hands drifted down under the water. She began the familiar strokes as she remembered the feel of her arse in his lap and the look on his face as he was getting her to do it. It had been so hot, and she knew it would drive her fantasies for weeks, if not months. She wished for all the world that the warmth she was feeling was really him.

It didn't take long before she found herself reaching her peak. She threw her head back, the curls on the nape of her neck damp from the bath, and she rubbed slowly as she let herself come back down to earth. She closed her eyes, and she was drifting now and found herself nearly nodding off. She allowed herself to enjoy that place between wake and sleep for a few moments longer until she finally sighed and sat up, draining the rest of her wine and rising from the bath.

*Sodding Draco Malfoy.*

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione was grimacing a bit as Florin led her into the dimly lit foyer, the sound of music, laughter, and clinking glasses spilling out from the doors ahead of her. The gala was in the ballroom of one of the nicest wizarding hotels in Bucharest, and Florin told her that everybody who was anybody would be there to celebrate the new Minister's win.

To her surprise, Florin had crammed her schedule full that day, giving her just a two hour break at the end of the day to go back to London to get a dress and ready herself for this gala. Hermione knew that checking in and out of the British Ministry on its own could easily take an hour, but she had lucked out and managed the journey with just enough time to swing by Gringotts before stopping at her flat after a great deal of waffling. She finally decided she had no choice, and she burst through the front door, sweeping her wand in a great arc and moving as quickly as possible to grab one of the black gowns she owned for events like these before leaving again.

It had been some time since she had worn this dress, and it was one that Viktor didn't particularly care for because he felt it wasn't flashy enough for the press. Hermione, however, loved the simplicity of it with its sweetheart neckline and sheer layers of fabric. It was a dress that was the perfect backdrop for the necklace she had chosen out of the Potter vault. It was delicate, but stunning, with diamonds that fanned out from the center.

So few people knew that she was Harry's sister that she was sure nearly everybody would assume this was a gift from Viktor, but she didn't care. Viktor had dissuaded her from wearing either the dress or the necklace for far too long. She felt that if she had to go to this event she might as well feel good about herself while she was there. This was a bit unexpected because Hermione hadn't had the desire to feel good about herself in weeks. Now that she finally had the inclination again, she decided she needed to lean into it.

Besides, she had to admit she hoped the necklace might keep some of the keener wizards away if they thought it was from Viktor. Sure enough, she noticed that Florin eyed her dress appreciatively but then frowned as he took in the necklace.

*Good, thought Hermione. I won't correct him.*

Florin pulled her through the doors, and immediately he began introducing her. Hermione's mind tried to catalog names and faces, remembering the profiles she had studied from her dossiers. Many of the guests here tonight, she realized, were purebloods, though there was a meaningful number of half-bloods and muggleborns too. The new Minister, Florin had told her, was a big proponent of muggleborn rights.

It didn't take long before Florin maneuvered her toward the new Minister, and soon he was bowing over her hand and complimenting Florin on his foresight to invite the enchanting Hermione Granger to this gala. Hermione felt her smile become fixed in place as she listened to them talk, and before she knew it, her mind was wandering. As usual, she found it drifting back to Draco and wondering what he was doing and how on earth she was going to make him crack. Her mood started to grow a bit dark as the familiar questions began to swirl in her head, until she forcibly pulled herself out of it and tried to concentrate on who she was speaking to.

Suddenly Hermione's brow creased, as she heard a familiar voice.

*It couldn't be, she thought.*

But then the crowd parted, and she found herself staring at the blonde head of Draco Malfoy, almost as though her thoughts had summoned him there. She immediately realized he had a tall, dark witch draped around him, and as she watched he whispered something in her ear that made her give a throaty laugh. Hermione wondered if her heart was truly breaking all over again right there in the middle of the ballroom as she stared at the sight. The lovely witch, whoever she was, appeared to be glued to him. She was holding his attention, and he was looking at her the same way he had looked at Hermione whenever he was flirting with her.

*Who was she? And what was he doing here?*

Hermione was torn between pain and rage.

*I thought he wanted me, and he was just being noble by pushing me away. I was so sure he wanted me after the club. That's what I've been clinging to.*

Just then, Florin grabbed her arm to lead her away from the Minister, when Draco's eyes lifted and met hers across the room. She watched as a whole array of emotions flashed across his face. She thought she saw fear, guilt, desire, jealousy, and then it all disappeared into a look of studied indifference.

Something about that last expression was so odd that it made her pause. Draco had looked at her in many ways over the last couple of months, but it had *never* been with indifference. Not once. It was almost like he had forced the expression on his face.

*He's occluding*, she realized with a jolt.

Only then did she look at the other people in the group around him as she recognized a man she remembered was called Luca Popa. He had introduced himself to her at Draco's party, and Draco had warned her about him.

Now the fear she had just seen in Draco's eyes and the person he was with and the conversation she had overhead between Draco and Harry about Eastern Europe all clicked into place.

*Oh shit*, she thought, coming to a complete halt, which caused Florin to stop moving too.

Draco watched the realization wash over her, before he turned back to the group he was with, clearly trying to distract them from the fact that Hermione was there. But just then Luca Popa looked up and saw her too, and he said something to the others before he started to make his way toward Hermione. She saw Draco move to follow, and the woman he was with followed close behind as well.

Hermione steeled herself, and then to her surprise she felt something touch her mind. It wasn't terribly soft – it was more of a jolt, as though the thing touching her mind wanted to let her know it was there. But once it touched she felt a sensation in her head that was almost familiar. It was a presence she would recognize anywhere. She realized Draco had just broken in, and he was paused there, waiting for something.

Hermione had no idea what was going on or why he was doing this without searching her memories too, but she knew she had to trust him with this. Whatever was happening, however much he might have hurt her, she knew that he was the *only* one in the room she really trusted. She accepted his presence and allowed herself to bask in it for just a moment before her mind finally stilled. Remarkably, when her mind stilled his did too, and it almost felt like his presence vanished. But she knew it was still there, lurking somewhere, waiting to see what would come next.

Hermione took a deep breath and mentally prepared to turn the reins over to Draco.

He would lead, and she would follow.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

Draco was almost certain Hermione Granger was going to kill him. The cause of death, however, was an open question.

The first possibility was Draco's overwhelming need to say, 'fuck it,' and just have her. He had wanted her for weeks which had turned into months, and the urges had not diminished with time. If anything, they had grown stronger.

The moment he settled himself behind her body in the club and began to dance with her, he knew he was fucked. Touching her again after weeks apart lit something in him that made it impossible for him to move away. Then she popped her arse and started to grind into his lap, he was truly lost. He cursed the few pieces of cotton that were separating his cock from her core, and he pushed himself into her so hard he was shocked he didn't penetrate her anyway, fabric be damned.

When she promised to give him more time, he had almost touched her – *really* touched her. Instead, he made her hands touch herself, and it had been hot and erotic, though Draco had wanted nothing more than to move her hands away and do it all himself. Draco thought he deserved a fucking medal for his self-restraint.

That night in the club had fueled his fantasies for the last few weeks, and Draco felt himself growing weak with need for her. No matter what he did, he couldn't get her out of his head. He was going mad. He was becoming obsessed. He was *this* close to having his house elf follow her so he could know everything she was doing. She had promised to give him more time, but she never specified how much, and as the days ticked by Draco became more and more convinced that she would turn to someone else, only this time he wouldn't hear about it until it was too late. The thought of her getting close to any other man was practically corrosive because he wanted her all for himself. Dancing with her in that club had pushed the very limits of his self control.

Was it possible to die from a semi-permanent erection? If so, Draco was a dead man walking.

The other way in which she might kill him was through her continued interference in his pursuit of Dolohov. First she had nearly been waylaid by Luca Popa at his birthday party. Then she overheard his conversation with Potter. And now she appeared at this gala he was attending with the Popa brothers. It wasn't like any of it was truly her fault, but *fuck*. Why was she always in exactly the wrong place at the wrong time?

Draco had been thrilled when the Popas invited him to this event. It was the perfect time to prod for information. Thanks to Draco's situation with Hermione he needed as much information he could get as quickly as possible. Draco had spent the night before hanging out with the Popas, Sorin Cazacu, and a few of their other friends, before disappearing under Potter's invisibility cloak and making notes about the Popas' household and wards after everyone went to bed. But the gala was the real boon of the trip because of the opportunity it gave him to perform legilimency.

Draco couldn't risk doing legilimency in close quarters. He knew he was very good and his touch was very light, but the moment he joined another mind it was still discernible unless his target was sufficiently distracted. In a venue like this, however, with lots of people, music, and alcohol, he could walk around the room testing the minds of the guests from a bit of a distance and most people would never notice it. Those who did notice it would never know it was him. He rarely *pushed* for memories unless his target was truly drunk, but he could join a mind and just passively watch for a while before leaving to join another. He could eavesdrop on both their thoughts and their conversations this way.

This particular event was ideal because it was political. The Popa brothers had groused about the new Minister and his viewpoints toward muggleborns, but they had still contributed to his campaign because they thought a win was inevitable, and they needed to maintain appearances. They assured Draco that quite a few others felt that way too, and sure enough Draco had been able to suss out many who didn't like the new Minister's policies through passive legilimency all evening. He made a point to request introductions to those who disliked muggleborns, and the Popas seemed thrilled that Draco's instincts about this were so good.

But now Hermione was here, and Draco's mind spun at all the complications this caused, not least of which was having his cover blown. He was scared for himself, but most of all he was terrified for her.

Then again, she might kill him through the jealousy he felt as he watched her be escorted by a dark-haired wizard he didn't recognize. Hermione was supposed to be *his*. She had promised him in the club that she would give him more time, but he knew that time was borrowed. And sure enough, here she was, being escorted by a bloke who was more attractive than he ought to be and staring at Hermione like she was a prize to be won. Draco immediately entered his mind of course, and the wizard was actively plotting ways to get Hermione alone tonight in order to make a move on her.

Draco saw him glance down at the necklace she was wearing, and he felt the wizard's own jealousy toward Viktor Krum surge. Draco was almost certain that her necklace was really from the Potter vault, and not for the first time he thanked Merlin for Harry Potter. Hermione's escort, however, evidently didn't know this.

Still, the wizard only paused a moment to contemplate his hatred toward Krum before he glanced down further at the faintest line of Hermione's breasts that were gently mounding over the gown she was wearing. The wizard's mind then returned to getting her alone so he could take her dress off and have an unobstructed view. Draco wanted to rip his fucking eyes out, as jealousy and possessiveness washed over him.

If she was going to take her dress off and show those luscious breasts to *anybody* it would be for Draco and nobody else. She was *his*. She had to be his or he would go mad. Her breasts were for his eyes only, and he wouldn't be responsible for his actions if that other wizard tried to see them too.

And finally, it was always possible that Hermione would murder him herself as she caught a glance of the witch he was with tonight. Lola Dascalu had been summoned to his side, compliments of Andrei Popa, and Draco had been informed that she was a social climber but

had pure blood and came from a respectable family. Draco, of course, had no interest in her whatsoever, but he couldn't risk offending his host. He acted as though she was a delightful surprise.

He had no intention of bedding her tonight, but he had been flirting with her when he caught sight of Hermione.

The look on Hermione's face had been one of profound heartbreak mixed with betrayal, and Draco burned with the guilt of it. Then her face morphed to fury as she shot a look at Lola that was pure poison, and Draco wondered how Lola didn't drop dead on the spot. As he watched she sent the same look his way as well, and he internally cringed. The Popa brothers might be dangerous, but Hermione Granger was truly terrifying when she was angry, and Draco was suddenly aware that he was her target.

But then he saw her glance to the side, and her eyes widened a bit as she recognized Luca Popa. He watched as all the pieces of the puzzle fell into place, and then he saw fear on her face too. He grimaced at her and turned back toward the others, sincerely hoping he was right and she wasn't about to murder him from behind, when Luca Popa noticed her and started to walk toward her.

There was nothing for it. Draco started to follow, and he touched Hermione's mind in anticipation of whatever was about to come.

Luca, Draco had learned this weekend, was a legilimens. Granted, he wasn't a very good one, but he had tried on Draco the night before when Draco was being vague about what had happened with Hermione after his birthday party, citing their new professional relationship. Draco had ignored Luca's attempt and blocked it easily enough without much effort. Luca wasn't stupid enough to really push, and he clearly thought Draco was unaware of what he had done. But Draco knew, and he had been on alert around Luca Popa ever since.

Draco felt Hermione's shock as their minds joined. He sensed her recognize him, and something in her warmed just a bit to have him there. And then to his surprise her mind went completely still as she let him settle in to wait, and Draco suddenly knew what she was doing. She was going to let him lead. Draco was so relieved he nearly severed their connection.

"Hermione Granger," said Luca. "You probably don't remember me. I'm Luca Popa. We met at my dear friend Draco's birthday party in June."

"Of course, Mr. Popa," said Hermione graciously, if a bit coldly. "I certainly remember you. And Draco of course, lovely to see you again. May I introduce you both to Florin Rosu? He is my counterpart in the Romanian Department of International Magical Cooperation, and he invited me here tonight as a guest of the Department."

Draco was rather impressed by her composure, despite himself. Still, he couldn't help but notice that she pointedly ignored Lola, as they all shook hands. As for Draco, he tried to break Rosu's fingers with his grip.

“Draco Malfoy?” asked Rosu, now looking at him with intense dislike. “I can hardly get any time with Hermione, because she’s so tied up with France and Italy.”

“Well I’m new to the file, Florin, you know that,” said Hermione lightly. “I had a lot to get caught up on. Draco was very helpful of course, but it takes time.”

“I’m certain Draco enjoys helping you, Ms. Granger,” said Luca with a bit of a leer.

“Of course,” said Draco smoothly. “Working with Hermione has been wonderful. I have absolutely no complaints.”

“Is that so?” asked Luca, casting a knowing smile toward Draco.

Lola then jumped in and distracted Rosu with questions about his job, and Draco suddenly felt the press of legilimency on Hermione’s mind. He sensed Luca was looking for something about Draco, and in a split second Draco decided to give it to him, with the hope that it would satisfy him and make him go away.

Draco had never attempted this before, but he knew that Hermione had turned the reins over to him. He started to craft a memory in her mind, hoping beyond hope that Luca would think it was hers and not his. He would have to be careful, he knew, and he prayed Hermione wouldn’t hate him for this, but he would need to spin the story a particular way so Luca wouldn’t suspect his true feelings for her.

He visualized the billiard room where he had played cards with the Popa brothers the night of Draco’s party, knowing that Luca would recognize it. It was empty now, except for Draco, who was dragging Hermione through the door before he shut it.

“So my very own Golden Girl is here tonight. Dressed that way too, I see.”

The Hermione in the fake memory blushed at this, but gave him a flirty smile back. “It’s been a long time, Malfoy,” she said.

“Mmmm, yes, the last time I saw you this closely I believe you were tied up in my house after getting caught by some of my father’s friends. You were on the run with Potter and Weasley trying to save the world.”

“Not trying to... did,” she corrected.

“If you say so,” he shrugged carelessly as he started to walk closer to her. “Tonight though I couldn’t help but dwell on the part where you were all tied up. And that reminded me of something I’ve been wondering about for years... I’m hoping you can enlighten me.”

“What’s that?” she asked, her eyes narrowing at him a bit.

“When you were on the run with them, did you fuck them one at a time? Or did they share?”

She inhaled.

"Of course, you've always had a thing for powerful wizards, haven't you? First Weasley, though he was never very talented. He's Sacred 28 though, and his blood is pure. Then Potter, of course — only a half-blood unfortunately, but quite famous, and I'll admit he's powerful enough. Then Krum. He was the best of the bunch. Both pure and powerful. And who knows how many there were in between?"

He made her face redden with embarrassment at this.

"And now me," he added.

"You?" she asked with a challenge in her voice.

"Me," he confirmed. "That's what you're doing here, isn't it? You're hoping I'll fuck you. You want to feel the heir of Malfoy inside of you."

She was against the wall now, and her eyes were dark, torn between longing and anger as she looked at him. He closed the space between them, and his mouth hovered over hers.

"I'm not going to kiss the mouth that sucked Potter's dick," he said quietly. "But I do want to know if your cunt is as golden as your dress."

Then he raised his wand and quickly vanished her knickers and cast the contraception charm as he opened his own pants and pressed her against the wall. He moved a hand into the slit of her dress and ran it up her leg until he found her wand.

He pulled it out of its holster and tossed it aside.

"You won't be needing that," he said.

Then he swiped a hand down to her center to feel how wet she was. "Look at that," he murmured to her, as he stroked himself to get ready. "So wet for me. So very dirty. Let's see if I can fuck you as well as Potter then."

Then without further preamble he lifted one of her legs and plunged into her, and Hermione immediately moaned. To Draco's surprise, he thought he felt Hermione herself now contributing, heat and lust shooting through her as Draco ravished her.

He made himself continue to pound into her, careful to make sure her dress in the memory concealed everything important, until suddenly the Hermione in the fake memory shattered, and Draco emptied himself into her. He stepped back and watched as she sank to the floor, looking up at him in surprise.

"I trust you know the cleansing charm," he said as he zipped his trousers. "Since you're the brightest witch of our age and all. Please send Potter my regards."

Then he turned and left her there, and he sensed shame and anger emanating from Hermione's mind that felt all too real.

*Fuck.*

Draco felt Luca leave Hermione's mind, as Lola asked him a question, but Draco only had eyes for Hermione. She stared back at him, seemingly torn between hurt and determination.

*I'm so sorry*, he tried to say with his eyes. She tore her gaze away, and Draco swallowed a lump in his throat.

*What if she hates me now? What if she never lets me near her again?*

But Draco couldn't dwell on this, because his attention was pulled to Luca now, who was teasing him about his success with famous witches, as he cast a knowing look toward Hermione. Luca looked practically gleeful at the memory he had just seen. Draco then glanced at Hermione, who was still looking embarrassed, and Rosu's eyes swiveled between them, as understanding dawned on him. Rosu looked like he wanted to kill something, preferably Draco.

*I did it*, he thought dully. *I convinced Luca. And I may have ruined my last chance with her while I did it.*

Draco stayed dormant in Hermione's mind for the rest of the conversation until she started to make her excuses and turn away with Rosu. As she was leaving, however, Draco grabbed her hand to kiss it in farewell, causing her to spin back around and look at him one last time. He used the opportunity to push hard into her mind to find out where she was staying tonight.

He sensed she was tired and drained, and she didn't even attempt to fight back as he searched. He saw the hotel and room number, and then he quickly shifted through her memories to see if anybody else had been with her or knew where she was staying. Suddenly he stopped at an image of her in the bathtub. He could see her under the water, bubbles barely covering her breasts as she laid there with her eyes closed, her skin pink from the heat and a few curls wet from the water. He watched in disbelief as she touched herself under the water and moaned as she started to come, and he sensed a stray thought of *him* cross her mind while she did it. He was absolutely spellbound as he watched and memorized her like that. He stayed on it for as long as he could until he felt a strong nudge from her.

He came back to his senses and immediately released her, and they stared at each other for another moment. Draco was now painfully hard at the scene he had just witnessed. Her cheeks were burning, and he could tell she was both embarrassed and defiant about what he had just seen. He wanted to tell her she shouldn't be embarrassed. Merlin knew he had done the same thing dozens of times, and never in such lovely surroundings. He couldn't see her body, but her face was perfect. She had been an absolute vision as she climaxed. He could watch that scene on repeat for days and never grow tired of it. But he couldn't tell her these things because they were surrounded.

She raised an eyebrow at him, and he forced himself to refocus on what he was doing as he lifted her hand to finally kiss it.

"Good evening, Golden Girl," he said for Luca's benefit. "I'll be seeing you around.... Soon, I hope." Rosu scowled at this, but Hermione forced a tight smile that looked more like a grimace and then turned her back on him as she left with Rosu.

Luca turned and gave him an amused smile. “I must confess, my friend, I peeked into her mind just a bit. I see you fulfilled the terms of our bet that night of the party.”

Draco just smirked back. “I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about Luca. She and I are colleagues.”

“Oh yes, that is what they are calling it these days!” and Luca clapped him on the back, his eyes twinkling with mirth, but he let the matter drop to Draco’s great relief.

With the immediate danger in the past, Draco was starting to stew over Hermione’s presence here.

*Didn’t she know how dangerous it was? Didn’t she realize how much of a target she could be? And did she really have to look so fucking beautiful tonight that the whole room noticed?*

Draco continued to dip into the minds of the guests, especially those near the Minister, but he peppered this in with liberal exploration of the minds of those he observed talking to Hermione. Many of the wizards, he was unsurprised to find, desired her. And many of the witches were jealous of her. Her necklace sparkled brilliantly, and it made her impossible to miss.

*Thank fuck she wore it though,* he thought with some relief. It was doing a rather efficient job of keeping many of the wizards from doing anything more than daydreaming about her. They were all sure it was a gift from Krum.

*Except for Rosu,* he realized. Rosu had stayed by her side all night, dogging her footsteps and barely giving her a moment of peace. He dwelled on the necklace to be sure, but he was also thinking of Draco now. Together, they were making him angrier and more unstable, rather than serving as a deterrent.

Draco made sure to keep her in his line of sight the rest of the evening. When she finally started to walk out of the room, Rosu followed behind. Draco swore under his breath and then muttered an excuse about the loo and followed too.

He saw the back of Rosu’s head, and he entered his mind again, perhaps a bit harder than he meant to. Rosu flinched and whipped around, but he didn’t immediately locate Draco. He furrowed his brow in confusion for a moment before finally turning back to Hermione, and Draco heard their conversation.

“Hermione, can I tempt you with a drink? We can escape the crowd. There is an excellent bar down the street.”

“No thank you, Florin, I fear I must be getting back. I have a great deal I need to do tomorrow, and I’ll be taking an early floo back to Britain in the morning.”

Draco felt Rosu’s displeasure at this.

“I insist,” he said, trying to grab Hermione’s hand.

"And I must decline," she said just as firmly, as she yanked her hand out of his grip. "Now then, I best be going. Thank you for the invitation. I had a lovely time meeting everyone in your department."

Then she turned around and walked briskly toward the door. Rosu hovered for a moment, debating with himself about whether to follow her or not, but before he could make up his mind he saw Hermione turn and disappear. Rosu swore to himself, as he realized he didn't know where Hermione was staying, and then he decided to try cornering her at the Romanian Ministry tomorrow morning before she floo'd back to London.

At this, Draco was satisfied that Rosu wouldn't be following her tonight. But Draco was feeling very unsettled about tomorrow morning. Knowing what he had to do now, Draco released Rosu and headed back to the party to make his own excuses for an early exit. Thankfully, the Popa brothers were both rather preoccupied chatting up witches they had just met, so they simply waved him off when he said he was going to be leaving soon to return to their home. He bid farewell to the others he had met, and he gave a very disappointed Lola a perfunctory kiss on the hand before striding out of the room.

He needed to send Hermione Granger packing. Literally.

# Chapter 19: Confrontation

## Hermione

Hermione apparated to the empty alley near the hotel she was staying at in Bucharest and cast a look around to make sure Florin hadn't followed her. He had been terribly persistent tonight, but she forced herself to calm down as she remembered she was staying in a muggle hotel. She had intentionally kept the location a secret as a security measure. He would never find her.

She tried to keep a measured pace as she walked the two blocks to the hotel, before pulling open the doors to the elegant lobby and making her way toward the lifts. Several people stopped and stared at her, and she realized she caught their eye with her dress and necklace. The hotel manager smiled at her with approval, clearly enjoying the sight of a beautiful young woman in an extremely expensive necklace staying at his establishment. Hermione tried to smile back, but she couldn't quite manage it.

Once on the lift, Hermione watched the floors tick by, and to her relief they opened to reveal an empty hallway. She hurried to her room, bolting the door behind her, and then sank down on the bed as she finally allowed herself to examine everything that had just taken place.

*Harry and Draco thought Dolohov was in Romania.*

That was her main takeaway from tonight. There was no other reason he would be there, guarding her mind with his own occlumency against Luca Popa.

She desperately hoped the stunt he pulled with that dark-haired witch was part of his act, but she couldn't help but feel angry about it. Granted, he hadn't done anything outwardly inappropriate with her. But he had flirted with her, touched her, and stayed close to her all evening. Hermione had continued to watch them on and off, until she left the event. Hermione had *never* been that close to Draco for that long. After Draco's behavior at the club, she had been so sure he wanted her and was keeping his distance due to a misplaced sense of nobility. But watching him with that witch tonight had shaken her confidence. He looked so convincing that she was no longer certain.

She hoped she extracted some revenge by showing up with Florin. Not that she wanted Florin or even particularly liked Florin. In fact, she practically ran from Florin at the end of the night. But she was getting the impression that Draco was the jealous type. If she had to suffer while she watched him with another witch, she rather hoped Florin made Draco suffer too. She knew it was petty to feel this way, but she couldn't bring herself to care. She was learning that she was the jealous type too.

She forced herself to stop thinking about the witch. She was so beautiful and Draco had been enjoying himself and... *No*, she told herself. *Lock it away. You can't think about this now.*

She wished she knew how to occlude. Based on her preliminary reading about it, it seemed to be an excellent way to force unwanted thoughts away. But she couldn't occlude and thinking of occlumency reminded her of the other extraordinary thing that happened tonight.

Harry told her Draco was a skilled legilimens, and he was arguably the best occlumens that had come out of England in the last century. But she had never seen him do it until tonight.

*No, she corrected herself. I didn't see him do it. I felt him do it. He did it for me.*

She had no idea it was even possible to occlude through somebody else's mind. But Draco had done it by crafting a memory that was entirely fabricated the moment Luca Popa broke in and started his search. It wasn't even a modification of something real. He just made the whole thing up on the fly, through her mind, as though it was hers.

She had been surprised at first, then astounded as she watched what he was doing, and then mortified as she observed the scene unfold. She knew it wasn't real. She was sure he didn't really mean the things he said to her, especially about Harry. She knew that Draco was intentionally creating a memory that Luca would believe as a way to keep his cover. But still, it had been painful for her.

She thought about it, and her face burned. He hadn't forced her to have sex in the fake memory. There had been no coercion, not *really*. She hadn't said no or tried to stop it from happening. But he had thoroughly degraded her. He hadn't even deigned to kiss her. It was a gross display of pureblood power over a muggleborn witch that she knew Luca Popa had devoured with delight. And despite the fact that she knew it was fake, despite the fact that she knew he had to do it, despite the fact that she didn't really blame him for it, she still felt utterly humiliated. Her eyes pricked with tears for a moment, before she swiped them away angrily.

Just then she heard a pounding on her door, and she jumped.

"Hermione, it's me. Let me in," said Draco's voice.

She nearly groaned. She had half expected him to show up tonight after he searched her memory for her hotel, but she really didn't think she could face him after everything she had been through that evening.

She didn't respond, and he knocked again.

"Hermione, I will blast this door open if I have to, now let me in," he said.

Sighing now she stood up and walked over to the door, peering through the peephole to confirm that it was Draco. But then she paused for a moment, her security training from her years in the Order coming back to her. If Dolohov was really in Romania, she had to follow protocol. She cast around for something only Draco would be able to answer.

"What was I doing in my room last night?" she finally asked through the door.

"Taking a fucking bath," he muttered, and she unbolted the door for him and let him in.

He entered it swiftly and locked it behind him, muttering a silencing charm toward the door. Then he turned to look at her. To her consternation, he was practically quivering with anger, and this made her own anger start to bubble to the surface. She forced herself to stay silent and satisfied herself with a single arch of an eyebrow.

“You’re going to leave Romania tonight,” he finally said. “Now.”

Her jaw dropped. “Absolutely not!” she said. “I’m exhausted, and you know the international entry at the British Ministry is barely staffed at night! It will take ages for me to clear security!”

“You will leave,” he said again, “and you will do it now.”

“What makes you think you can just order me to do that?” she asked hotly. “I’m going to leave in the morning, just as I planned!”

Draco’s eyes flashed at this. “Rosu is planning on waylaying you tomorrow morning,” he said. “He wanted to get you alone tonight, and he failed. So he’s going to try meeting you tomorrow before you leave Romania. And now that the Popas also know you’re here, I want you gone. It’s not safe.”

Hermione furrowed her brow. “How on earth do you know that Florin is going to try to meet me tomorrow?”

He just gave her a stoney look, and her eyes widened. “You were doing legilimency on him?” she nearly shrieked. “What on earth were you thinking? Why would you do that? You have no right!”

He moved toward her swiftly, his eyes burning now. “What the fuck do you think I was doing all night Hermione? Did you think I was just enjoying the evening with some old Death Eater mates? Of course I was doing legilimency! I was watching him and everybody else around you! Not that it took any real skills to read Rosu’s mind — it was obvious to everybody that he just wants to fuck you!”

Hermione nearly lost it.

“And why would that be so bad, huh? At least he actually *likes* me.”

She didn’t mean it of course, but Draco’s attitude about the whole thing made the words come spilling out of her. Something in Draco seemed to snap as he grabbed her, his face inches from her now.

“You will not be around him alone again, do you understand me? I don’t give a fuck whether you like it or not. You’re not his.”

Hermione was outraged. “And why should I listen to you? What gives you *any* right to dictate who I’m with? Especially when you spent the whole evening with that brunette hanging off of you! You don’t want me to move on but you can’t even give me the same courtesy!”

He recoiled, a look of disgust on his face now. “You think I want to be with *Lola*?”

“Oh is that her name? I’m afraid I didn’t catch it, seeing as how you didn’t let her leave your side the entire fucking night!”

Draco looked like a man possessed, as he ran his hands through his hair. Finally he looked at her in disbelief. “You would have to be mad to think I want to be with her! Of course I had to pretend to be interested! Andrei Popa practically gift wrapped her for me! It would have blown my cover if I didn’t at least pretend!”

Hermione felt a surge of relief at this news, but she was still angry at him.

“So?” she asked. “There’s feigning interest and then there’s what you were doing tonight. I’m shocked you’re here instead of getting intimate with her. Isn’t that what you have to do for your cover?”

She winced at the look on Draco’s face, as she suddenly realized she had gone too far.

Draco stalked toward her again. “If you’re asking if I’ve ever used sex to get information for Potter, the answer is yes. If you’re asking if I enjoy it, the answer is no. I try to avoid it, but sometimes it’s the only way. That shit with *Lola* tonight did not require sex. She’s a pureblood, so the Popas would expect me to flirt with her, but they wouldn’t expect me to fuck her after a single evening together.”

Hermione stared at him, the implications of his words sinking in, before she felt tears prick again.

“So they wouldn’t expect you to sleep with her after one night because she’s a pureblood,” she said quietly. “But they would expect you to sleep with me, since I’m a mudblood, is that right?”

She saw a look of guilt cross his face. “Fuck, Hermione, that memory… you know I’m sorry about that.”

“No, it’s OK,” she said quickly. “I know why you did it. I get it. I just...” she trailed off, as a lump rose in her throat.

His eyes softened, and he pulled her to him, giving her an urgent look now. “You know I didn’t mean any of it right? Never… I...” he looked miserable, as he searched her face desperately.

“Like I said, I get it,” she sniffed. “I just… it was degrading. That’s all.”

“It had to be,” he said, looking like he hated himself for it. “It’s what they expect. They told me to find the most beautiful and challenging muggleborn to sleep with that night. Of course that was you. And after that dance we did, they thought we *had*. When he started to invade your mind to look for me, I had to show him something. It was the only way to keep my cover and protect you. I use an advanced form of occlumency he doesn’t recognize. If I had

done a block for you, he would have been suspicious about you and tried to press even harder. Who knows what he would have done to you.”

She just nodded, and he cupped her chin to raise her face to him. “I don’t want Lola,” he said quietly. “And I didn’t want to speak to you like that in the memory. I didn’t have much choice about either one though. What I’m doing is dangerous, and I don’t want you involved.”

“But why couldn’t you and Harry just tell me you thought he was in Romania? I actually asked Harry about it directly, and he refused to say anything! But you both know it’s one of my countries! If I had known you thought Dolohov was here, I would have stayed away! But I didn’t even think twice about coming here because I was sure that one of you would have said something if Romania was dangerous. You are being so bloody protective that you aren’t even doing it right!”

He dropped her chin and stepped back a few paces. He closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath before opening them again. He looked haunted.

“I know I’m not protecting you well. You don’t have to tell me that.”

Hermione felt a flash of guilt at this. “That’s not what I meant,” she said, trying to choose her words more carefully now. “I meant that I could actually help you if you would let me. I know a lot about this part of the world. And if you *don’t* let me help you,” she added, as he opened his mouth to protest, “then you still need to tell me enough so I can make informed decisions about my job. Totally cutting me off means that I don’t know what your basic plans are, and you don’t know what mine are either. I’m sure you would have stopped me if I told you I was going to be here this weekend.”

He nodded slowly, and Hermione could tell he was thinking hard. Something inside of her leapt. He was listening to her.

“And I would have told you about it if I had seen you these past few weeks. It would have come up. You’ve been staying away though, and it means we aren’t communicating about things at all. Even if you won’t let me help you, we need to communicate.”

A muscle in his jaw twitched, and he said, “Fine. Then let me communicate this. You will be going back to your flat tonight, and you’ll be letting Potter know anytime *anybody* from Romania contacts you again.”

Hermione felt a lurch in her stomach at this. “No,” she said.

“Hermione...” he warned.

“No, I’m not going. It’s late. I’m staying here.”

“*Your flat. Now.* Topsy will inform me when you arrive.”

Hermione said nothing, but just stared at him, her mind swirling about the fact that she *hadn’t* stayed at her flat for several weeks. Even if she convinced him to let her stay in Romania

tonight, he would surely find out about it tomorrow morning when she never showed up.

*Damn.*

Something of her thoughts must have crossed her face, because Draco's eyes suddenly narrowed, and he closed the distance between them again.

"What happened?" he asked softly. "What aren't you telling me?"

Instinctively Hermione clammed up.

"Hermione, we can do this the easy way or the hard way. I will search you if I have to, and you won't be able to stop me. Now tell me. *What happened?*"

Hermione swallowed. "I... I'm not staying at my flat right now."

Something dangerous flashed in his eyes at this.

"Why not?" he asked hotly. "Are you staying with somebody else? Because Potter would have informed me if it was him."

*He thinks I'm staying with a wizard,* Hermione realized, as she grew outraged again.

"Of course not! I'm staying in a hotel if you must know! You asked me to give you time, and I said I would give you bloody time, even though *you* have no problems making public appearances with other witches!"

His expression suddenly lightened as he reached up and stroked her cheek. "We already discussed Lola. I'm not talking about that bitch again. Now tell me darling... why are you in a hotel?"

Hermione bit her lip, but she knew it was no use. He would get his answers one way or the other. And besides, he had just called her 'darling,' again, and he was touching her, and her poor starved heart craved it so much she knew she couldn't keep any secrets from him.

"A few weeks ago... that night at the club... I went home afterwards and realized somebody had been in my flat."

His thumb, which had been stroking her cheek stilled, and she felt his hand grip her face ever so slightly.

"Tell me everything," he said darkly.

Hermione hesitated. "Not much to tell... I was getting ready for bed and realized the things on my nightstand had been moved. Then I found Crookshanks... he's half-kneazle you know, and he's very intelligent. I asked him what happened, and he led me to the cabinet where I keep my files when I bring home work from the office, and they were gone. I immediately packed and left. I've only been back one time to pick up this dress when Florin told me I had to go to the gala tonight."

“Which files?” he asked urgently.

“Not France,” she said quickly. “Nor Romania. It was my file on the Italian trade deal we’re working on, and my dossier for my counterpart in the Greek Ministry. He’s brand new, and I haven’t met him yet. That was all.”

“Do you have copies?”

She nodded. “The files that were stolen *were* the copies. I keep the originals in my file cabinet in my office at the Ministry. It’s warded so only I can get into it. I can make another copy for you if you want, though I doubt it will be helpful.”

“And you didn’t tell Potter?”

Hermione bit her lip again.

“Hermione...” he warned.

She sighed. “No, I didn’t tell Harry. I assumed he would tell you, and you would overreact, and I just... I couldn’t do it, Draco. I’ve been a mess. If there had been anything about France in those files I would have contacted him immediately, but it didn’t involve you.”

He pulled her to him, and she instinctively wrapped her arms around him and settled into his chest.

“It does involve me because it’s a threat to you. Do you understand?”

She nodded.

“Good. Then I want you to go to the Manor tonight. Or Grimmauld Place.”

“No, I...”

“Hermione,” he said firmly. “I want you out of here and in a place with wards.”

“The Manor then,” she said quietly. “I’ve been avoiding Ginny, and she will drive me mad with questions.”

He nodded.

“But *please* Draco, I’m exhausted. Can’t I sleep for a few hours before I go? It will take ages to get through security.”

She felt him hesitate, and she pressed her advantage. “I promise to go straight to the Manor when I leave. I won’t fight you on it. But I can’t face it tonight.”

“Fine,” he said. “Sleep for a few hours then, and I’ll wake you when it’s time.”

She nodded and extricated herself from him and grabbed her bag to take to the bathroom with her to change. She rummaged through it and grimaced as she looked at her only clean

option: an oversized T-shirt that said, “I like to ride it hard,” with a picture of a broomstick below it.

“Dammit,” she muttered as she undressed and then threw it on before emerging from the bathroom. Draco had settled into a chair, and he raised his eyebrows when he saw her.

“*Don’t*,” she said firmly, as his mouth began to twitch. “It’s a Weasley T-shirt. Ginny nicks her brothers’ clothing all the time and leaves things at my flat.”

“Mmmhmmm,” he said, as he struggled not to laugh.

Hermione just grumbled to herself as she slipped under the covers and reached for the light. It was only now that she realized Draco hadn’t moved.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m staying here,” he said.

“You can’t sleep there!” she insisted.

“Who said I’m sleeping? It will take too long to sneak in and out of the Popas’ house tonight. I have to break their wards to do it. I’m staying until I know you’re gone.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake,” she said. He gave her a slightly fierce look, and she knew she wasn’t winning this.

“Oh fine then, come sleep here,” she said.

His eyebrows flew up to his hairline. “Hermione, I don’t think that’s a good...” he started, but then he trailed off as he saw what she was doing.

“Look,” she said, as she lined up the pillows down the middle of the bed. “I made a pillow barrier. You won’t have to touch me. But you’re no use to me if you haven’t gotten some sleep too. Now come here, lie down, and *sleep*.”

Hermione crossed her arms and waited. Draco finally sighed and stood. To her consternation he started to undress right there. He kicked off his shoes and then shucked off his suit coat. She watched as he unknotted his tie before he started to unbutton his shirt.

Hermione knew she was staring. She knew she should look away. But as he kept going, she realized he was slowing a bit and studying her while he did it. He was watching her, as she watched him. It was suddenly far too warm in here.

When his shirt hit the floor she almost groaned to see his upper body clearly for the first time. He was lean and fit. His *sectumsempra* scars were still there, as was his Dark Mark, but they were sexy. They were dark and dangerous and made him look powerful. Hermione unconsciously licked her lips.

But he *still* kept going. Next came his socks and then his belt, and then he finally started to unbutton his trousers. Hermione tried to wrench her eyes away, but she couldn’t. His eyes

were boring into her now as he stepped out of them and kicked them away before walking toward her slowly. He was wearing nothing but his boxers and a small smirk.

He moved to the other side of the bed. He slipped under the covers and laid down, and then she did too, her pillow barrier between them blocking him from view.

“Goodnight,” she said, as she turned off the lights and tried to settle in.

“Sleep tight,” he replied.

*What the hell have I done?*

## Chapter 20: Barrier

### Draco

Draco was on one side of the Great Fucking Pillow Barrier, while Hermione was on the other side.

He was sure Hermione was asleep now, and he was feigning sleep too. But between the thoughts swirling in his mind and the witch sleeping in bed next to him, Draco was wide awake. In fact, there was a zero percent chance he would be sleeping at all tonight.

He couldn't decide if he wanted to rage at her or fuck her. Probably both.

*Definitely both.*

He couldn't *believe* she had been staying in a hotel for the last few weeks and had told nobody about the break-in to her flat. And he still couldn't believe she had come to Romania in the first place. But her point about communication had really struck home. She had done both of those things because Draco tried to push her away and cut off communication with her. It was all his fault that she couldn't bring herself to tell him about her flat, and it was all his fault she had no idea that Romania was their current target.

There was nothing for it. The circumstances had changed, and he wasn't protecting her well enough by cutting her off the way he had. He would have to get closer. And having her live at the Manor was a good way to do it. Nobody would ever suspect that she was living there. Nobody would be able to harm her because Draco would strengthen the wards so much he would make a bubble for her. He would keep everybody out except for her, him, and maybe Potter. He would have Topsy keep an eye on her, and he would know everything she was doing. She had lost her privilege to a private life the moment she told him about her flat.

Something in Draco stirred at this. He had been going spare without her ever since he left England. It took no time at all for him to get used to seeing her nearly every day, and then it abruptly stopped when he pulled away. He had been relying on Potter and the occasional lunch with Theo for news of her. It had been utterly maddening. He had been so tempted to have Topsy follow her before this, and now... well he finally had a justification for it. He told himself it was because she was in danger. She was important to him, and he had to modify his plans to keep her safe. But *fuck*. He could finally have some certainty about her whenever he was away from her. He would find out if any other wizards were trying to move in on her. He would know where she was at night, and he would be sure nobody else was with her because they wouldn't make it through his wards.

And of course he would have to drop in occasionally. He couldn't risk cutting off all contact with her again. She wouldn't be satisfied with communications through Topsy. She would need to see him now and then so she knew he wasn't ignoring her. It was the only way to make sure she trusted him enough to tell him if something happened at work. Because as

much as Draco wanted Topsy to follow her everywhere, Topsy couldn't follow her to work. The Ministry had magic that prevented any elves but their own from being on the premises, except for limited, designated areas. It was a security feature. So if Draco wanted to learn about Hermione's work, that would be all on him, and he would have to see her to do it.

His cock twitched in anticipation of this. He might see her in the mornings. Or in the evenings. Or after a shower. Or maybe around the swimming pool...

Draco exhaled. He would have to do his best to stay professional. He still had a job to do, and he couldn't afford distractions just yet. But knowing that she would finally be in *his* bubble satisfied something inside of him that was almost animalistic. He wanted her. He wanted her so much he might even be obsessed with her. Having her that close to him and fully under his protection would stoke his obsession. Draco knew he should be worried about this, but he couldn't bring himself to care. He felt how he felt, and his plan would keep her safe and keep her with Draco while he finished his job with Dolohov. Those were the only things he cared about.

Draco's eyes had been closed as he fantasized about Hermione Granger moving into the Manor that Draco had fortified to keep other men out. But then a small sound suddenly pulled Draco from his happy thoughts. It was the tiniest gasp, an inhale of breath. It was coming from the other side of the Great Fucking Pillow Barrier she had erected between them.

Draco stayed perfectly still as he strained his ears, and he thought he heard the soft slide of skin against fabric. Then another breathy sigh that ended in the quietest moan he had ever heard.

Draco's eyes flew open, and his cock immediately hardened as he realized what he was hearing. Apparently Hermione wasn't asleep either. No, she was wide awake on the other side of the Great Fucking Pillow Barrier, engaging in a little self-care.

Draco felt his heart start to race, and he was terrified to move in case it stopped. He was absolutely certain she wouldn't be doing this if she knew he was awake too. But his own cock was begging for some love, so he crept his hand slowly, *slowly* toward his boxers and slipped it inside. He worked with the tiniest strokes he had ever given himself as he listened to Hermione just on the other side.

Suddenly, a wild thought crossed his mind. He knew he shouldn't do it. It was reckless. She might sense it and hate him for it. And it would probably mean he had crossed that fine line between obsessive and creepy. But he found he didn't give a shit. He *had* to know what she was thinking about while she touched herself. She was here, *right here*, and the opportunity was too good to miss.

He closed his eyes again and reached out with the gentlest, lightest touch he could manage, and the moment he was in her head he sank back to the recesses of her mind so he could watch. He sensed her falter for just a split second before she dove back into her own imagination, and Draco watched it all unfold with awe.

Her fantasy was better than he could have ever hoped for. It was him and her, and she was splayed out naked on her bed in her room at Malfoy Manor. He was on top of her, running his hands and tongue over her breasts, and *Merlin help him*. If her tits looked even *half* as good as they did in her imagination he would be the luckiest bloke on earth if he ever got to see them in real life. He suspected it was a fairly accurate picture though, because she was imagining herself with some scars he had never seen and some beauty marks and moles on her stomach that almost had to be real. He thought they were beautiful, but most witches would call them blemishes. If this was a fantasy depiction of Hermione, she probably would have imagined her blemishes away.

*Fuck me those are her real tits then.*

Draco stroked harder as he stared at them, while the Draco in her fantasy suddenly went down on her.

He was pulled out of his study of her tits as he considered what was going through her head during this part of the fantasy.

*It's surely like this. I bet it feels amazing.*

Didn't she know? Hadn't she ever had a wizard do that to her? But as he watched and studied her fantasy, he suddenly knew the answer was no. She had never had a wizard's mouth there. Nobody had ever tasted her. She wanted it and fantasized about it, but she didn't *really* know what it felt like.

The possibilities running through Draco's own mind now were endless. He'd lick her, suck her, taste her, and then shove his tongue so far up inside of her that she'd come on command. She would taste perfect, he just knew it.

He watched as fantasy Draco finally lifted his head. Real Draco sensed that Hermione was getting close now, and fantasy Draco would only need one more trick before she was coming both in her head and in real life. He waited to watch himself slide into her, but to his surprise, fantasy Draco moved up further and further and further until...

*Oh fucking hell.*

She was imagining fantasy Draco nearly straddling her face as she sucked his dick. And in her fantasy her mouth was hot and open and the Draco in it was fucking her deeper and deeper down her throat.

Real Draco could scarcely breathe as he watched and stroked more firmly, no longer caring if she caught him doing it.

Draco knew he had a certain fascination with oral sex. He liked it just as much, if not more, than other kinds of sex. It was the one thing that could always, *always* get him off, and it was what he turned to whenever he was forced into a sexual encounter during his work with Potter. It didn't matter what the witch looked like or how he felt about her. He knew that if he could convince her to go down on him, he could close his eyes, think of England, and be confident in his ability to perform.

Because of this, he had never really allowed himself to imagine oral sex with Hermione. He associated it with his work for Potter, and it felt almost too dirty for somebody as good as her.

But now he saw she was thinking about it with him, and she was thinking about it in a way he had never even attempted before. And *fuck* if it wasn't one of the hottest things he had ever seen. If she *ever* let him do that to her he would be able to die a happy man.

He watched in disbelief as fantasy Draco instructed fantasy Hermione to swallow, and as she did it she came in real life with another broken gasp. Draco tried to suppress his own gasp as he came in his boxers just on his side of the Great Fucking Pillow Barrier. He left her mind to turn his full attention to the very real problem of the sticky substance that was now covering his hand while his wand was under his pillow.

Slowly, *slowly* he started to move his other hand toward his pillow, when suddenly he felt Hermione roll over and then whisper, "*Evanesco.*"

He froze as his mess cleared and he came to his senses about what the fuck he had just done. He gulped.

"Goodnight for real this time," she said.

*Goddammit.*

\*\*\*\*\*

"Hermione, it's time to get up," he whispered as he removed that Great Fucking Pillow Barrier and then stroked her cheek.

He watched as her brow furrowed a bit before her eyes slowly opened, and the memory of everything from the night before washed over her. She blushed prettily, but she didn't say anything to him about it, and he took his cue from her: there would be no discussions of the incident, then.

Fine. That was fine. It was probably for the best that they didn't discuss the fact that Draco was a Class A Creep now.

She stifled a yawn as she looked at him. "What time is it?" she asked sleepily.

"About four in the morning," he said, and she looked at him askance.

"Draco..."

"Shhh, no, I'm serious. It's too dangerous for you to be here. You need to leave before anybody goes to the Romanian Ministry to stop you. I'll come with you under the cloak to

make sure you get through alright, but then I have to go back to the Popas before they miss me. After you get to the British Ministry, I want you to floo to the Manor.”

“What about you then?” she asked softly. Draco could tell she was waiting for him to say he would be going back to France.

“I’ll be heading back to France next week, but I’m going to be back in England more often. You’re right that we need to communicate better.”

Her eyes lit up at this, and Draco felt a rush of affection for her, along with some guilt. He really shouldn’t have cut her off the way he did.

“I’ll be back at the Manor sometime today before I head to France,” he added. “But the Popas mentioned lunch, and I’m not sure how late they expect me to stay.”

She smiled for a moment, and then it dropped from her face as she sighed. “Alright, fine. You win. Give me a few minutes to get my things, and we can go.”

Draco nodded in relief that she wasn’t fighting him about it anymore. He sat up and started to get dressed in his clothes from the night before, as she went into the bathroom to get dressed.

A few minutes later she emerged and then picked up her wand and waved it. All of the things went soaring into her bag. Draco pulled the invisibility cloak out of the pocket of his robes and threw it on.

“Merlin that gives me flashbacks,” she muttered as she held the door open for him, and they proceeded down the hall and to the lifts for the lobby. She checked out, and then she led him several blocks to a nearby alleyway where she said, “Ready?” before turning and apparating to the Romanian Ministry’s apparition point.

Draco followed her into the section of the building that was open for international travel, and he was pleased to see only a single, sleepy-looking guard in place. It took longer than Draco liked, but eventually he cleared Hermione for travel back to Britain. He waited until he saw her step into the large fireplace before turning around and heading back out again.

He checked his watch and saw it was nearly five o’clock now, and he hurried to the apparition point to get back to the Popas. As he was approaching it, however, he heard a *CRACK!* and Florin Rosu appeared, looking tired and carrying a cup of coffee. Draco stilled and watched as Rosu passed him, heading toward the direction of the international floo point. Draco hesitated for a moment, but then followed behind, touching Rosu with some legilimency as lightly as he could as Rosu raised his coffee cup to his lips to take a sip.

Draco saw him rub his head a bit, but he clearly thought it was just exhaustion, because he didn’t otherwise acknowledge Draco’s joining. Draco waited and listened as Rosu approached the floo point to wait.

Draco himself waited for nearly five minutes before checking his watch again. He couldn’t wait much longer before he would have to give it up and go back to the Popas. Finally,

however, the guard seemed to feel like he had to say *something*.

“Erm, Mr. Rosu, are you waiting for somebody?” he asked.

“Hermione Granger,” said Rosu. “I’m expecting her sometime this morning, though she didn’t tell me when she would be arriving.”

“Oh, she just came through. About ten minutes ago,” said the guard.

Draco felt rage flood through Rosu. “And you didn’t stop her?” he asked incredulously.

“Was I supposed to?” asked the guard in confusion. “She’s a kind of diplomat, isn’t she? I thought she worked with you!”

“I sent a memo to the head of security last night that Hermione Granger was not to leave the country without seeing me first!” he said.

The guard seemed nervous now. “I’m sorry sir, but I didn’t get it. I’m sure if you go through yourself she’ll still be there. I can clear you quickly and...”

“No, she’ll be gone,” said Rosu.

*Damn right she will be*, thought Draco in relief. He had gotten her out in just the nick of time.

“Sir is there anything I can...” started the guard.

“No,” snapped Rosu, as he turned around and strode out. “I’ll handle it.”

Draco watched Rosu’s mind for a few more minutes, as he thought about staging a meeting with Hermione in Britain. He would use the security issues he had just discussed with her as the leverage point for it. Draco looked at his watch one more time as he listened to Rosu turn the plan over in his head. He grimaced. He was officially out of time and couldn’t listen in any longer. He released Rosu and strode to the apparition point, not even bothering to worry about the *CRACK!* he made as he apparated away under the invisibility cloak.

He appeared a moment later on a lane a short distance from the Popa residence. He needed to get in through the wards and to his room before anybody noticed he was missing.

He had studied ward magic extensively over the years, finding it to be useful in his work with Potter. He knew he could handle the Popa wards, having made notes on them Friday evening. They had not bothered with blood wards, opting instead for quantity over quality. He could drop all of them if given enough time, but still – it would be risky to do it in case any of the Popas were awake to feel them drop. He had lingered at the Ministry longer than he planned to.

*At least they don’t have a house elf*, Draco thought in relief. It was nearly impossible to sneak around elf magic. Elves always knew the moment any visitor arrived.

He raised his wand and worked as quickly as possible, dropping ward after ward until finally the last one fell, and he crossed the threshold of the property. Then he raised his wand again and quickly put the wards back into place. He checked his watch and realized fifteen minutes had passed while he worked the wards, and it was now nearly 5:45. He hurried around the back of the house toward an old window he had unlatched for himself Friday night when he was exploring the house. He lifted himself through it and shut it behind him with a small click and then crept as quietly as he could to his room.

He came to an abrupt halt as he realized the door to his room was ajar.

*Fuck*, he thought. He suddenly remembered he hadn't bothered to close it the previous night. He hadn't expected to see Hermione, after all – he was sure he would be coming back from the party with the Popas. He slipped inside and saw that the room looked slightly different than when he left it. It was subtle, but Draco had an excellent memory and a couple things looked off. His bag had been moved to the left just a bit. The pillow on the bed wasn't in exactly the same spot. His sneakers that he had kicked off the day before had been moved just a little to give access to the space under the bed.

*Somebody had searched the room.*

He knew they hadn't found anything. Draco kept everything important on his person whenever he was on these kinds of trips. The rough map he had drawn of the house and his notes on their wards were currently shrunk down in his pocket. But still, the fact that somebody had bothered to look meant that he had been missed, and they were suspicious. This was not great news.

As he was deciding what to do about this he heard a door open in the hall. Draco quickly pulled off the invisibility cloak and shoved it into a pocket in his robes just as Andrei Popa passed his room. He came to a halt when he saw Draco.

"Draco," he said, eyeing the clothes Draco was wearing from the night before.

*Here goes nothing*, Draco thought as he made a show of grimacing.

"Dammit Andrei, I almost made it back," he said, now giving Andrei a conspiratorial smile.

Andrei just raised an eyebrow in question, and something about the look on his face made Draco sure that Andrei was the one who searched his room the night before.

"In Britain we call it the walk of shame," said Draco.

Andrei's eyes widened for a moment but then narrowed again a bit suspiciously.

Draco shrugged. "Waitress from the party last night. She caught my eye as I was leaving, and I chatted her up. It didn't take long, though I did have to pay her for the wages she missed by leaving early. I made sure to get my money's worth though."

Andrei now looked reluctantly amused, but still slightly suspicious.

"Not Lola then?" he asked.

Draco frowned a bit at the suggestion. “Of course not. You said she’s a pureblood, no? I wouldn’t bed her after the first meeting like some common whore.”

Draco thought he saw some approval in Andrei’s eyes at these words, and some of the suspicion receded. “She liked you,” said Andrei.

Draco smiled a bit at this. “She’s beautiful, no doubt about that.”

Andrei gave him a knowing look. “But not the future Mrs. Malfoy?”

*Fuck no,* thought Draco.

Instead he said, “I’m reserving judgment. I’m in no rush of course, but when I find her... she will be nothing short of spectacular.”

Now Andrei gave him an amused look. “A high standard, indeed. And tell me, from one pureblood scion to another, where do we find these women who are worthy to carry our names and bear our heirs?”

“Give me a cup of coffee first, and then I’ll tell you.”

Andrei chuckled at this, but led Draco to the kitchen and quickly prepared some coffee.

“What are you doing up so early anyway?” asked Draco curiously.

“It’s my nature,” Andrei shrugged. “I thought I heard a noise, and it woke me up. I can never go back to sleep when that happens. Now I realize it must have been you coming in through the floo.”

Draco gave him an apologetic smile. “Sorry about that.”

Andrei shrugged. “It is no great matter. Now tell me. Where are these paragons of women to be found?”

Draco grinned. “Paris of course.”

Andrei actually laughed at that. “Of course, I should have known. And tell me — what are their qualities that make them so virtuous?”

Draco thought for a moment. “She should be beautiful, that goes without saying. But she should also have a certain air about her. She must be poised and well-bred in public, but I want some fire in private. I want somebody who is willing to fight me when I displease her. She must have a sharp mind, and she should always be seeking to improve it. And she should be fiercely loyal to me and those who are close to me. And given where I live most of the time, she must speak flawless French.”

Draco realized he had just described Hermione Granger perfectly.

Andrei raised his eyebrows at him. “And tell me, Draco, have you *ever* met a woman like that?”

Draco shrugged. "My mother is like that."

"You wish to marry a woman like your mother?" asked Andrei with some polite skepticism.

Draco raised an eyebrow. "My mother was all of those things for my father. She allowed the Dark Lord to live in our home, you know, and she served him through my father. She found some of his methods distasteful, but she persevered and upheld our family's name through some rather challenging years of the war. Then when the Dark Lord fell, she crafted a narrative of redemption for our family so that I would be accepted into social circles while my father went to prison. But she has never wavered in her commitment to our blood and family. I will be lucky if I find a woman who is half the witch my mother is. She has borne the name of Malfoy well."

Andrei nodded slowly, "Very well, I will admit you're right. Narcissa is truly a paragon. Your father was lucky to find her, and I can see why you will settle for nothing less. Though I must point out there is one thing that was missing from your list."

"What's that?" asked Draco curiously.

"Blood purity," said Andrei.

*Shit*, thought Draco.

"Oh, but of course. I thought that was a given," said Draco, wincing slightly for making such an obvious mistake.

They chatted for a bit longer until Andrei finally sent him upstairs to change.

"Luca is already bad enough," said Andrei, chuckling. "We can't have you putting any ideas into his head about bedding waitresses too. He'll forget the charm one day, and then I'll be paying for his bastard for the rest of my life."

"This is why you should have been an only child Andrei," said Draco seriously. "I only have to worry about my own bastards."

Andrei laughed uproariously at that and said, "Someday I'm going to make you tell me how many there are."

Draco smirked. "That's for me to know. I can't risk a leak. Mother would murder me if she found out."

Andrei laughed again but rolled his eyes at this. "Go Draco and get changed. I'm serious, Luca will be down any minute, and he will ask for every detail."

"Don't I know it," muttered Draco, but he left, feeling a sense of relief that he had averted yet another Hermione-related crisis with the Popas. He grinned to himself as he climbed the stairs. He had gotten caught because he had spent the night in bed with Hermione, albeit on the other side of the Great Fucking Pillow Barrier.

*It was worth it*, he thought to himself.



## Chapter 21: Pool Party

### Hermione

Hermione arrived at Malfoy Manor and exited the floo nearly on top of a very surprised Topsy.

“Erm, hello Topsy. I ran into Draco in Romania and there was an… incident. Suffice to say, I’m moving in.”

To Hermione’s surprise, Topsy didn’t question this but looked utterly thrilled, and she gave a little bob and then showed Hermione to her room. Hermione slowly began to unpack her things, including the beaded bag. Crookshanks slunk out and gave a rather petulant sniff at the new room, but then immediately went to a sunny spot and curled up. Hermione knew he would be fine.

After some coordination with Topsy, Hermione found that most of her clothes appeared in the closet, including those she had left behind at her flat. Topsy also canceled her dance lesson for that night. Hermione wasn’t sure when Draco would be back, but she was certain that he would lose it if she wasn’t here when he arrived. And in any event, they had some things to discuss.

*But not last night,* Hermione thought with a blush.

Merlin, she couldn’t believe she had done that while she was in bed with him the previous night. Seeing him strip down to his boxers had really turned her on though, and she was certain he was asleep when she began. It was only after she had settled into a very nice fantasy that she sensed the slightest bit of movement on the other side of the barrier, and then she felt him touch her mind for the briefest moment before sinking into the crevices of her brain.

Hermione knew she should have been angry or mortified by it, but she was so frustrated that she seized the moment and forced a fantasy on him that she hoped would make him crack. He had made it clear he wasn’t moving to the Manor permanently, and even if their communication would improve he was still holding back from her. She wanted to fling her fantasies in his face almost as if to say, “*See? Look what you could have!*”

She thought she was successful when she heard that telltale sound of male release next to her. She knew he had gotten off on it too.

He still hadn’t acted on it though, and now she was back to square one.

She sighed as she made her way to the library to spend the afternoon with a book while she waited for Draco. It was nearly dinner by the time he arrived, and she wasn’t terribly surprised to see Harry with him.

“Hermione,” said Harry in an annoyed voice.

Hermione sighed. Apparently Draco had told him everything.

“Malfoy’s told me everything,” he confirmed.

“I’m not going to apologize for going to Romania,” she said. “I had no idea because *you* failed to tell me.”

A muscle in Harry’s jaw twitched. “Fine. We obviously need to keep you more informed than you have been. But in the meantime you’re going to stay here, and I’ll be setting traps around your flat in case anybody searches it again. You are to maintain a low profile while you are here, do you understand me?”

“Yes, that’s rather obvious,” she said hotly. She did *not* appreciate being lectured by Harry.

“Don’t be like that,” he said.

“Then *you* don’t be like that. I did help you bring down Voldemort, you know. I’m not a complete idiot.”

Harry huffed, and Hermione just glared at him. To her consternation, Draco had a slightly amused look on his face.

“What?” she asked him.

He shrugged. “You two really are siblings.”

Both she and Harry cracked small smiles at this.

“Alright, fine,” said Harry. “I’ll call a truce. I’m going over to your flat now, Hermione. I’ll be alerted if anybody steps foot inside of it. Malfoy’s going to stick around England for at least another night. Please bring copies of the stolen files back to the Manor when you get off work tomorrow. He needs to study them.”

Hermione nodded, as Harry floo’d away, and then Hermione was left with Draco.

“Dinner?” he asked, and she nodded hesitantly.

He led her into the small room where she had first eaten brunch with him all those weeks ago, and to her surprise the elves has prepared the room with candles and flowers and a chilled bottle of wine on the table, along with her favorite gin and tonic.

This suddenly felt very much like a date, despite the fact that Hermione was in jeans and a muggle T-shirt.

“So,” he said as he poured them both a glass of wine. “You’re welcome to go anywhere in the Manor or on the grounds. The wards extend to the perimeter of the property, and I’ll be strengthening them tomorrow while you’re at work. Grimmauld Place is obviously fine too. And I suppose you can still go to the Ministry since it’s also well-warded, and you can’t

exactly disappear from the office without raising suspicion. As for other things, I'm comfortable with brief trips into the muggle world during daylight hours, as long as you carry your wand with you. You are anonymous there, and it's not a world that most purebloods know how to navigate. But I don't want you going into the muggle world at night, and I don't want you going to *any* other wizarding places without me or Potter around. Got it?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "You think the person who broke into my flat was a pureblood then?"

He gave her a hard look. "I would be shocked if it was anybody else. It's related to my mission, I'm almost sure of it."

Hermione felt a trickle of fear start. "But it had nothing to do with France or Eastern Europe..." she began, but Draco shook his head.

"Many of the European pureblood families are connected in some way. That's why I need to study those files. Just because they were for Italy and Greece doesn't mean they are unconnected. The timing of it is just too suspicious to ignore. Your flat's in a safe part of London. It's posh, and that building hasn't had a security breach in the last decade. I have to assume it's related to me."

Hermione furrowed her brow. "How do you know about my flat? And its security?"

"I just do," he said simply.

Hermione gave him an exasperated look, but he appeared unwilling to explain himself. Knowing Draco he had probably found the landlord and used legilimency on him.

They ate in silence for a few more minutes, and Hermione wondered if she had the courage to bring up the night before.

*No, she thought. No, not yet.*

"So what will your schedule be like?" she asked instead. "How often will you be around to escort me to wizarding places since you say I can't go there without you or Harry?"

He shifted a bit uncomfortably. "I'm going to be spending weekdays in France for the most part," he said. "But I'll come to the Manor on the weekends for now."

Hermione's heart leapt at this.

"So I can resume dance lessons?" she asked hopefully.

He nodded with a small smile. "Yes, we can do that. I highly doubt the Markhams are double agents."

Hermione couldn't help the giggle that escaped at that thought, and his eyes sparkled a little bit.

"Alright then. If I can get out on the weekends I suppose I can stick to your rules. Having a private library at my disposal should give me plenty to do in the evenings."

He smirked at this. "Yes. And we have a music room if you want to get back into piano and a pool. The pool is heated and private. We also have stables if you want to go riding. Horses are much easier than thestrals, and the grounds are extensive."

Hermione's eyes widened. "How did you know about the piano and thestrals?"

"I just do," he said again.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Merlin, how much did you see in Harry's head?"

He smirked again. "Quite a bit, and I remember everything."

"Clearly," she muttered, as she thought of the shampoo in her shower. She knew he must have seen it from Harry's memories of that year on the run. She and Harry shared a tiny loo in their tent for eight months.

Hermione narrowed her eyes as she thought about this, but he didn't say anything more as he calmly cut his steak.

"Do you know how Harry killed Voldemort then?" she asked quietly.

He glanced up at her and nodded. "Of course. I've watched nearly all of his memories from the war."

"So that's why you were never curious about my role in it."

He shrugged. "I'm curious about some things. But I couldn't really ask you about them without revealing what I *did* know, which was quite a bit."

"Like what?" she asked. Now *she* was curious. Usually wizards peppered her with questions about Harry, but Draco never did. Given everything he had seen, she wondered what on earth he *didn't* know.

"Well one big thing I've always wondered about was Hufflepuff's cup. I know you destroyed it with a basilisk fang in the Chamber of Secrets just as the final battle was starting, but Potter wasn't with you when you did it. I never got to see it."

Hermione was surprised.

"Well..." she said slowly, "it was Ron's idea really, and it took us ages to get in. He must have tried a dozen different sounds before he happened upon the right one. Have you seen the interior of the Chamber in Harry's memories before?"

Draco nodded.

"Well we got in the same way. Ron said it looked the same with the slimy slide and the vermin bones and all that. When we got to the actual Chamber itself, most of the basilisk had

decomposed, but the skeleton was still there. I pulled one of the fangs off of it and activated the cup and then..."

"Wait," he said. "What do you mean you activated the cup?"

Hermione hesitated, but figured it couldn't hurt to tell him. It had happened years ago. "I used it to scoop some water out of the moat that was around the Chamber, and I drank it."

Draco's eyes bulged. "You did *WHAT?*"

Hermione was indignant. "Well we thought we had to draw out the bit of soul first!" she said. "I mean, every other horcrux had been activated hadn't it? Ginny activated the diary by writing in it. Dumbledore activated the ring by putting it on. Harry activated the locket by opening it. And I activated the cup by drinking from it."

"That was entirely unnecessary," he insisted hotly. "Nobody wore the bloody crown in the Room of Requirement! The fiendfyre destroyed it anyway."

"Well yes, I know that *now*. But I destroyed the cup before we destroyed the crown."

"Bloody hell," muttered Draco as he rubbed his temples. She could see he was struggling to compose himself. "So what happened when you drank from it then?"

Hermione furrowed her brow. "It was... odd. The bit of soul tried to possess me of course, but I rather think it was surprised to find I was a muggleborn."

Draco frowned. "What do you mean?"

She shrugged. "Hufflepuffs are all about loyalty, hard work, and friendship aren't they? The cup had a lot of enchantments of its own, and one of them was to enhance the drinker's feelings of loyalty and friendship toward whoever owned it. Of course, Voldemort tried to turn it dark, and he warped those feelings to include loyalty toward him and all of his blood purity drivel. It felt a bit like going under the imperius curse, but I broke out of it quickly enough. It was so odd to feel blinding loyalty toward the pureblood agenda that I knew it wasn't me very quickly, and even the bit of soul inside of it seemed surprised by it. I doubt he ever thought a muggleborn would drink from it."

Draco exhaled, and he sat back and looked at her with a mixture of exasperation and respect.

"Alright, and then what?" he asked.

Hermione shrugged. "I took the fang and stabbed the cup in the middle of the chalice. It took a few seconds, but the venom eventually burned a hole through the bottom, the water drained out, and that was it."

Draco just shook his head. "That's unbelievable."

Hermione shrugged. "I got it done. It was rather satisfying."

He smiled a bit at this, and then switched the subject to small talk until dinner was finally over.

"I'm going to go read... or maybe explore a little if that's alright," she said, as she rose. Draco stood too.

"Of course. You can have Topsy fetch me if you need me for anything. I've ordered her to answer your call wherever you are."

Hermione raised her eyebrows at this, but nodded as she stepped back. She could sense Draco building his walls with her again. He hadn't flirted with her tonight or made any grand declarations. Hermione sighed. She needed to think about what to do.

Having no brainwaves at the moment, she started to make her way toward the library before changing her mind at the last second and turning toward the stairs to go to her room instead. Draco told her the pool was private. She decided to take a dip and check it out while she tried to think through the vexing problem that was Draco Malfoy. It was August, and the night was warm.

She changed quickly and threw on a coverup before grabbing a spare towel from the bathroom.

"Topsy!" she called, and the little elf appeared.

"Topsy, can you show me how to get to the pool? The Manor is huge."

"This way, Miss," squeaked the little elf, and Topsy led her to the end of the long corridor and showed her a door that led to a set of servant's stairs which ended in a small foyer at the bottom. "Tis the fastest way to the pool from your room," said Topsy.

Sure enough, the foyer had an exterior door that opened to the pool. Hermione saw hedges surrounding it on three sides and a small pool house on one end. Draco was right: it was private.

Hermione thanked Topsy and walked to the edge to dip her toe in. Draco was right yet again: the temperature was perfect. Hermione investigated the pool house and discovered a closet with some floats, along with a small loo and showers. It looked a bit like a locker room, though it was a much nicer one than Hermione had ever been in before.

She shucked off her cover up, grabbed a large float, and then launched it into the water as she stared up at the dark sky above her.

*Draco Malfoy. What the hell am I going to do about Draco Malfoy?*

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

The pool was not private.

Draco heard Topsy and Hermione chatting in the hall on the way to the servants' stairs that led to it, and he didn't even hesitate to grab Potter's invisibility cloak that he still had from his mission earlier that day and follow them. He waited until she had gone into the pool house before he slipped outside, and then he stood near the edge of the pool as he waited for her to emerge.

As he watched Hermione take off her coverup and step into the pool, Draco knew he was securing his identity as a Class A Creep as he stood there. He couldn't help it though. He hadn't been able to stop thinking about her fantasy ever since the night before, and the opportunity to see her in a bathing costume was too good to pass up.

"Fuck me," he whispered to himself when he saw it. It was more conservative than some muggle bathing costumes he had seen at the seaside, but it still showed an awful lot of her skin. It was a bandeau bikini, strapless, presumably so she wouldn't get tan lines from the sun. The bottoms gave her moderate coverage, but he could still see the tantalizing curve of her arse as she turned around. The whole thing was surprisingly colorful in hot pinks and blues, which was entirely out of character for her, but made Draco grin.

He sighed as he watched her slip into the water and onto the pool lounger as she floated around the pool for a long while. He crept closer so he could get a better look, and he saw that she hadn't been lying about her body in that fantasy. The scars were there, the moles were there, and her navel was half-in/half-out, exactly as she had imagined. Her breasts were just a touch large for the rest of her frame, and he could see her nipples peaking under the fabric of her bathing costume. And now he was more convinced than ever that she hadn't been lying to him when she showed him what they looked like.

Because Draco had thought about it all day, and he was now certain that she knew he had watched her fantasy. He felt that odd jolt when he first joined her mind, and he had seen a pretty blush color her cheeks periodically throughout the day. She hadn't talked about it, so he hadn't either, but they both knew he had done it. She knew he was a pervy, voyeuristic bastard, and she hadn't made any effort to get him to stop looking. If anything, she had invited it by showing him everything she wanted him to do to her.

So he decided to look again, not in her head, but at her body splayed out before him in the middle of the pool.

He was going to drive himself fucking insane.

He was sorely tempted to throw caution to the wind and just go to her room tonight and finally take her. They both wanted it, that was very clear. But she had managed to trip his protective instincts so hard over the last couple of days that he was afraid he would put her in further danger if he really had her the way he wanted her. Even with the Ministry's warding, he couldn't protect her mind all the time. And he couldn't send her into permanent hiding at the Manor without raising suspicions either.

*Maybe it doesn't matter, he thought a bit desperately. I've already spent the night with her. I've danced with her. I've practically dated her. Why not just take her too?*

But he couldn't do it, not yet. He would never forgive himself if somebody hurt her to get to him. He had to be strong until his mission was done.

After a long while she finally slid off the float and submerged in the pool before exiting, and Draco nearly groaned as he watched the rivulets of water running off of her body. It was too lovely, too perfect.

He desperately needed a wank. Again.

He watched her towel off before she finally slipped back into the house. He gave her five minutes before he followed and shut the door to his room and leaned against the door. As he had done so often over the last few weeks, he moved his hands into his pants and began to stroke.

He thought of her body in the pool, glistening with water. He imagined untying that maddening top so the tits he had seen in her fantasy sprang free, and he could finally see them for real. He would be in the pool with her, and he would pull her into his lap, weightless as he kissed them and sucked on them and finally got to touch them. Then he'd slip her bottoms off too so she was naked for him, and he'd use his fingers and his cock to make her release those same sounds he had heard the night before. She would gasp and moan and writhe until she was finally coming for him, and then he would come too and then...

*There.* He dropped his head against the door to his room as he sank down onto the floor. He waved his wand to clean his mess as he just sat there, wondering why he kept doing this to himself. This was the real reason he had pushed her away. It was for her safety, yes, but also because he had no self-control whatsoever when they were this close.

“Topsy,” he called, and the small elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Yes Master?” asked Topsy, as she stared at him knowingly. “Is Master alright?”

“I'm fine Topsy,” Draco lied. “I'd like for you to keep an eye on Hermione for me while she's here. Let me know what she's doing each day and when she leaves for work and comes back to the Manor each night. I'll be heading back to France tomorrow evening, but I'd like daily reports about her activities while she's here.”

Topsy bobbed and then disappeared as Draco closed his eyes again.

*OK I'll admit that's creepy too. I'm definitely creepy. Fuck.*

## Chapter 22: Creep

### Draco

Draco pulled out the dossier on Hermione's Greek counterpart as he put the file on the Italian trade deal away.

Draco had to admit that the draft trade deal was rather interesting. It was more thorough and better written than anything he had received from his British counterparts over the years. He also thought he sensed Blaise in it here and there. The deal didn't just cover the standard agriculture and manufacturing points that he expected to see, but it also touched on cultural heritage laws. Italy wanted Britain to return some of its treasures that had been appropriated over the years. This was something that had always been close to Blaise's heart, and he rather thought Hermione would be in full agreement, even if it was against the official position of the British Ministry. He smiled a bit to think that she was still crusading through the Department of International Magical Cooperation. He hoped she would propose a similar crusade with France, and that's why he told her to dream big. But so far she hadn't given him anything like that. Then again, that was probably his fault too.

He sighed as he put the trade deal away. As interesting as it was, there was not a single thing in it that referenced an individual person or group of people or any security measures. Besides, he knew it was a draft. It was probably already out of date.

The dossier on Hermione's Greek counterpart, Damien Gataki, was far more interesting. He read page after page containing the standard information: his security clearances, his professional history, and even things like his preference for red wine over white. As he read further, he learned that Gataki was a bit like Draco, in that he was Greek but he had been raised in a different country for most of his life. He had been born in Bulgaria, near the Greek border and had been educated at Durmstrang before his family moved back to Greece near the end of his education. Evidently he was a pureblood, which wasn't terribly surprising given where he had gone to school. Draco studied the dates he had attended Durmstrang: 1988 – 1995.

He sucked in a breath as he grabbed a quill and started to make some notes on a scrap of parchment to work out the dates. He stared at it and then pulled out his galleon.

*Hermione's Greek counterpart is Damien Gataki. He was in Krum's class at Durmstrang.*

It was late at night, but Potter kept odd hours. Sure enough, it didn't take long before he had Potter's attention.

*Seriously?*

*Yes. They must have been classmates.*

*So he was there with Karkaroff.*

*Yes, and he may have been at Hogwarts during the Triwizard tournament.*

*Fuck. And Hermione doesn't know him?*

*She said she's never met him, but she must have read his file by now.*

*Why wasn't it a red flag for her?*

*Almost everybody she's met from that part of the world went to Durmstrang. She probably didn't think twice about it.*

*Sure, but his file was also stolen out of her flat.*

*Exactly. And he was born in Bulgaria. His father's Greek, but his mother is Bulgarian.*

*That has to be it then. I'll dig.*

Draco felt a rush of certainty that they were on to something now. He debated about what he should say to Hermione. He had to keep her out of it, but he also didn't want her to meet with Gataki until they knew more about him.

He pulled forward the report Topsy had delivered to him about Hermione's activities that day: she woke up at precisely 6 AM before showering, dressing, and eating breakfast. She had left for the Ministry at 7:30 and stayed until 5:30 when she floo'd back and ensconced herself in the library. According to Topsy she was back to studying memory charms again, and Draco felt another surge of guilt at this. She had called for dinner around 8 and then visited the pool before turning in around 10.

Draco, in an effort to suppress the side of him that he was certain was becoming creepier by the minute, didn't ask Topsy the questions he *really* wanted to ask. What had she eaten? What had she worn to work? What did her bathing costume look like? Had she taken a dip in the pool again or just floated around like last time? And most importantly, had she engaged in any more self-care?

Topsy could tell him. Elves knew everything. But fuck it, he *refused* to be that creepy. He was certain that Topsy would see straight through him. She surely knew he had watched Hermione in the pool the other night. She always knew where he was.

Then again, if she already knew that...

"Topsy!" he called, and a moment later she appeared with a *CRACK!*

"Yes Master?"

"Topsy I need you to tell Hermione she is not to meet or communicate with her counterpart in Greece until she hears otherwise from me or Harry Potter."

"Does Master wish for Topsy to wake Mistress to tell her now or should Topsy tell Mistress in the morning?"

"Mistress?" he asked curiously.

"Yes, she is Topsy's mistress now. Master made her so with his new wards."

Draco stilled. It was true he had enhanced the wards considerably. One of them had been an ancient blood ward that tied her to the Manor. Nobody who wished to harm her could enter the Manor now, regardless of what other adjustments Draco made to the wards in the future. That blood ward to protect her would override everything. And it was also permanent. She was tied into the very foundations of the building now.

Evidently that had bound Topsy to her as well. Elf magic was complex, bound to both buildings or families and sometimes both. In Topsy's case it was both. She had always been a Malfoy elf, but she was also bound to serve anybody who had a blood tie to the Manor, whether that person was a Malfoy or not. Draco bit his lip. Hermione probably wouldn't like that if she knew about it, but then again, he hadn't meant to do it, and it couldn't be undone without freeing Topsy.

Draco and Narcissa had started paying Topsy and the other elves and giving them days off after watching Hermione's S.P.E.W. campaign in Potter's head, but they had stopped just short of freeing them. They had always served as an extra layer of security. Elves could sense their masters' magic. They knew when their masters were in danger or dead. They could be called from the other side of the planet. They could apparate through most common wards. As long as Draco and Narcissa worked with Potter, Topsy and the others would not be free.

And now that Topsy was bound to Hermione, she would have that same level of security too. Topsy would be able to sense it if Hermione was in danger, even if she was away at the Ministry and Topsy wasn't permitted to follow.

*Good.*

"Very well," said Draco. "Is she asleep?" he asked in what he hoped was a casual voice.

"Yes sir," said Topsy.

"And does she... have everything she needs for sleep?" he asked.

Topsy looked at him like he was a bit mad.

"Topsy thinks so sir."

Draco chewed his lip as he thought about how to ask the question he wanted to ask. Finally abandoning all pretense he said, "Oh fuck it. Topsy, what did she wear to bed?"

Topsy's eyes widened a bit and got a knowing look on her face that made Draco wince.

"Mistress wore a large T-shirt sir. 'Twas a Chudley Canons shirt."

Draco narrowed his eyes at this. *More borrowed clothes.*

“Does she have any nightwear that’s just hers?”

“Topsy did not see any sir,” said the elf. Then she studied her master for a moment as Draco chewed on his lip again. “Does Master wish for Topsy to provide different clothes for Mistress to sleep in?”

Draco seized on this. “Yes, Topsy, I think that would be best.”

“Very well sir. And does Master wish for Topsy to provide matching underthings?”

Draco now stared at the little elf in amazement. She just looked innocently back, but he caught a gleam in her eye.

“Topsy...” he said slowly. “Are you...?”

“Topsy wishes for Master to have whatever Master wants. And Topsy thinks it is high time Master settled with a witch. Topsy likes Mistress very much, and she is part of the Manor now.”

“Fucking hell...” he muttered. His mother had always been rather good about staying out of Draco’s love life because she knew his job with Potter came first. But evidently Topsy decided it was time that Draco found a wife. Draco couldn’t decide if he was amused or intimidated by this. Topsy knew everything about him. *Everything.*

Then again, it could be worse. Topsy could be pushing some other witch at Draco, but she had evidently chosen Hermione. Draco found he rather liked the idea.

“Topsy will take care of it sir,” said the elf a bit airily. “Topsy is sure she knows Master’s preferences. Does Master wish to see Topsy’s selections first?”

Draco couldn’t believe he was actually doing this, but he threw caution to the wind and just nodded. Hermione would know it was him the minute her new things showed up in her dresser anyway. But if she actually *wore* them...

Draco’s cock twinged in anticipation.

“Excellent,” said Topsy. Draco noticed she had a determined gleam in her eye now that made him gulp. “And does Master wish for Topsy to let Mistress sleep tonight, or should Topsy wake Mistress to deliver Master’s message?”

“Let her sleep,” said Draco quickly. “But please tell her as soon as she’s up tomorrow.”

“Topsy will,” said the elf. “And Topsy will be by soon with nightwear for Master to choose from.”

“Thank you,” he said. “And Topsy...”

The elf just looked at him expectantly.

“Please don’t tell my mother.”

Draco got the impression Topsy was struggling not to roll her eyes at him. “Mistress Narcissa would be thrilled if she knew.”

Draco couldn’t help but notice that Topsy hadn’t actually promised to keep it from Narcissa. Then again, this was probably the best he was going to get. “Thank you Topsy,” said Draco, wondering what the hell had gotten into him.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Hermione

“Master will be home tonight,” said Topsy excitedly as she brought Hermione breakfast the following Friday.

Hermione felt a rush of eagerness herself at this.

“So Mistress should find something else to do while he is here,” added Topsy.

“Pardon?” asked Hermione in confusion.

Hermione still hadn’t gotten use to the sudden moniker of “Mistress.” But Topsy had told her it was because she was part of the Manor now and left it at that. She had been evasive when Hermione pressed her on it, and eventually Hermione had given up. Still, Hermione had a hard time remembering that “Mistress” meant *her*.

“Mistress should be close to Master, but not too close,” explained Topsy. “Master Draco likes the chase, even though he does not know it.”

Hermione narrowed her eyes at the little elf. “And what happens when he finally gets what he wants?”

“For you, Mistress, he will never let you go.”

Hermione felt her breath catch.

“Do you really think so?” she asked.

“Topsy has known Master since he was a newborn. Topsy is certain.”

“It’s a bit hard to get him to chase me if he’s so determined to stay away himself though,” said Hermione wryly.

“Tis why Mistress should find other things to do during the day. It will drive Master Draco mad. He expects to spend the whole weekend with Mistress. He has been telling Topsy this

all week. Topsy thinks that Mistress should not let him.”

“You mean I should play hard to get?” she asked carefully.

“A little,” said Topsy. “See him for breakfast and dinner. But occupy yourself during the day. Make him wait to see you.”

“Topsy... why are you helping me with this?”

“Topsy knows what is best for Master,” she said unconcernedly. “Topsy knows this, even when Master does not.”

Hermione chewed on her lip as she thought of this.

“Alright Topsy, I’ll try that,” she said.

Topsy bobbed and gave her a toothy smile as Hermione finished her breakfast.

“Topsy,” said Hermione suddenly. Topsy looked at her curiously.

“When Draco arrives this evening will you let him know that I have a business meeting that’s going to run late? I probably won’t make it to dinner.”

The look that crossed Topsy’s face was a smirk so reminiscent of her master that Hermione couldn’t help but grin back.

“Excellent Mistress. Topsy will inform him.”

\*\*\*\*\*

The day passed with no word from Draco or Topsy, and Hermione grabbed dinner in the Ministry cafe to delay her arrival back at the Manor. She wondered if Draco knew he would be eating alone yet.

*Serves him right if he is.*

Hermione had to admit that Topsy’s suggestion had some merit. She had figured out that Draco was the jealous type. He clearly wanted to be in control. And she also knew that any time she challenged him she got a rise out of him.

She wouldn’t challenge him in a way that would compromise her safety or his. No, she trusted him and his plan too much for that. But she sensed that if she was just a bit uncooperative it would keep Draco’s mind on her. It would drive him around the bend if he only got to see her on *her* terms and not his. And then maybe, *just maybe* he would eventually give up his mad plan to stay away from her.

So that's why she listened to Topsy and was eating a rather grim sandwich tonight instead of a lovely candlelit dinner with Draco.

After dinner Hermione occupied herself with a book in her office until it was nearly nine. She finally made her way to the floo and before long she was stepping out on the threshold at Malfoy Manor. Not a moment later Topsy appeared.

"Quick!" she said. "I is to alert my Master as soon as you is back!"

Hermione smirked. "Tell him I'm taking a dip in the pool then."

Topsy gave her a toothy grin, and Hermione raced upstairs to grab a bathing costume before Draco waylaid her. She ran down the hall and hurried down the stairs and out to the pool house to change. She had just submerged into the water when the back door opened, and an irritated Draco stepped out, casting her an annoyed look.

"Where the fuck were you?"

Hermione tried to look puzzled. "I had to work late. Why?"

"Didn't Topsy tell you I would be back tonight?"

"Of course, but I have my own schedule. I can't always accommodate your preferences."

"My preferences."

"Yes, your preferences," said Hermione lightly. "I'm abiding by your terms while I stay here. But I have to do my job too, Draco."

"Of course," he said grimly. "I would never want to stop you from doing your job."

Hermione just gave him a sweet smile and then pulled herself up on the side of the pool. She watched as Draco's eyes dropped to look at her.

"In that case I'll see you tomorrow."

She saw a muscle twitch in his jaw, but the dismissal in her words were obvious. He just gave a small nod and turned to stride away. Hermione struggled not to laugh. Despite the fact that she had missed him desperately and she wanted nothing more than to spend time with him, she had to admit this was the best she had felt since Draco first pushed her away. It was the first time since that night that she felt the tables had turned just a little.

Maybe Topsy was onto something. She pushed herself out of the pool and towed off before heading back to her room where she opened her dresser to survey the new night things that had appeared the previous day.

It was filled to the brim with lace and silk. It was mostly black, but there were a few things in red, blue, and even green. The one Hermione had worn the night before had fit her perfectly, though it was rather low cut and barely covered her breasts. She felt practically

sinful when she put it on, and she couldn't help but indulge in another moment of weakness while she was wearing it.

Along with the surprise was a note.

*You should stop stealing other people's clothes.*

It was Draco of course. It always came back to him. He must have known she always wore old T-shirts to sleep in, and he had decided to change things up. It was intrusive, inappropriate, and also really hot. Something about it turned Hermione on more than she cared to admit, and she bit her lip as she picked out something for tonight.

*Red tonight.* It would make her feel powerful and help her commit to Topsy's plan.

At this point she would try almost anything to make him stay.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

Draco was not OK.

He had come back to England Friday night, having ordered Topsy to create a nice atmosphere for dinner, only to be held up by a certain curly-haired witch who decided to work late instead of joining him.

So Draco had been forced to dine by candlelight alone, while her empty plate winked at him from the other side of the table.

Then she had the audacity to go straight to the pool and bed, and he didn't even have a chance to speak to her except for a few words. Yes, he had gotten to see her in a bathing costume again — or rather, he had seen her mostly submerged under the water — but it wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough.

He woke up the following morning in a foul mood, but he was determined to push past it. He knew she loved her job. He would never interfere with it, except for her safety. That had been Krum's most fatal error, and Draco would learn from it. If Hermione had to work, he would let her work.

Breakfast had been better, but then she slipped away to play the piano. Draco hadn't minded this initially. She was better than he expected her to be, and he enjoyed her music. But it also wasn't conducive to conversation or flirting, and he didn't feel like he could just sit in the same room as her without disturbing her. So he stayed in the room next door so he could listen to her play, feeling increasingly sullen the longer it dragged on. She played for a couple of hours before disappearing to her room before Draco could catch her. She stayed there until lunch.

"Oh I'm meeting some friends," she said as she descended the stairs to find Draco eagerly waiting to have lunch with her.

"Who?" he asked, immediately suspicious and very put out that she was avoiding him yet again.

"Some muggle friends. You don't know them," she said breezily as she walked past him and out the door. Draco just gaped, and he was forced to cool his heels all afternoon until just before dinner, when she finally re-emerged, striding through the front door and disappearing up to her room again to change for dinner.

Draco was going mad, and he had every intention of confronting her about her sudden need to avoid him, until she showed up to dinner looking so lovely that all of his frustration melted away.

"You're beautiful," he blurted out as he took in the summery dress she had chosen. It made her skin glow and accentuated her curves. She gave him a gracious smile and dinner was going very well until he asked, "So what did you do today?"

"Oh I met some muggle friends of mine for lunch, and then we went shopping."

"Who are they? I didn't know you kept up with anybody in the muggle world."

"Old neighbors of mine. A brother and sister. He's a year older than me, and she's my age. I kept up with them during the summers at Hogwarts, and then we lost touch. We reconnected very recently."

Something in her tone made Draco pause. "How recently?" he asked.

"After you went back to France," she said, giving him a pointed look.

*Fuck. She had reconnected with some muggle bloke when he had disappeared.*

Draco had been so worried that other wizards would try to move in on her while he was staying away that it had never occurred to him that he needed to worry about muggles too. Sure, she made her attempt at a one-night stand, but that was an anomaly. She had been hurt, and she promised she wouldn't do it again. Draco believed her, and he had mostly stopped worrying about muggles after that. He didn't think she knew any muggles well enough for any bloke to really make a move. But evidently he was wrong, and she did. And he couldn't very well ask her not to see them or to stay out of that world since he told her she was safe there. She was safe there. He didn't have a good reason to stop her.

*Goddammit.*

"And you went shopping with them too?" he asked.

This was out of character for her, and it annoyed Draco more than he cared to admit. Hermione Granger didn't just *shop* unless it was a bookstore or a gift-giving event like Christmas. She had everything she could possibly need at the Manor. And if there was

something she needed that she didn't have, then he would give it to her. He would give her anything. He wanted to. He *needed* to. She was his.

"Yes, I needed something to wear at night," she said with a glint in her eyes.

*Oh fuck no.*

"You have things to wear at night," he said, as he gritted his teeth.

"Hmmm yes, I have some things, that's true."

"But..." he said.

"But I like to shop for myself too. And it was nice to spend the day with Amelia and Roger."

"Roger," he said.

"Mmmhmm," she said as she sipped her wine. "My muggle friend."

And so Draco had spent most of the dinner fantasizing about ripping Roger – who looked an awful lot like Carl in Draco's head – from limb to limb.

And even worse than that, it sounded like she replaced the things Draco had given her. That was completely unacceptable. It had only been a few nights, but Draco already found himself relying on her negligees for his fantasies. Topsy would tell him what she was wearing each night, and Draco could *see* it. He could visualize it. He could imagine her dressed like that, and he could generate a realistic picture for his wanks. But now she was threatening that. He didn't know what he would do if he couldn't create realistic fantasies of her anymore.

And even worse than *that*, it sounded like fucking Roger had gone with her when she picked out her new things. So *Roger* knew what they looked like, but Draco didn't. And goddammit it, he had become so creepy that he would probably sneak into her room to check before he left tomorrow. Maybe he would even take them away from her and put her back in the things he purchased instead.

And speaking of leaving tomorrow, his mother had called him back early so he would have to leave directly after breakfast. Even if Hermione showed up to breakfast, he had now lost the entire weekend with her. It was the first time he had ever seriously considered matricide.

No, he was definitely *not* OK.

Draco swirled his firewhiskey around his glass while he contemplated his witch, whom Topsy had just confirmed was in the pool at this very moment. Deciding there was nothing for it but to embrace his full creep, he drained his glass, stood up, and went upstairs to investigate these news things she had supposedly purchased. He had to see them. He might even steal them. But he couldn't let fucking *Roger* be the only bloke who knew about them. That was entirely unacceptable.

He glanced around as he got to her door and turned the handle to let himself inside. He stepped in and shut it silently behind him as he zeroed in on her dresser. He started to move

toward it when an odd sound made him stop dead in his tracks.

“Mmmmmrrrreeeeeooowww...”

“What the fuck?” he said to himself, as he spun around to come face to face with Crookshanks, who was practically glaring at him from one corner. Draco had no idea that cats could glare, but this cat was fucking glaring, and Draco was forcibly reminded of its owner.

Draco stared it down, but to his consternation the cat stared right back. Draco took one more step forward, and suddenly the cat darted before leaping onto the top of the dresser and sitting down to wait for Draco to make his next move.

Draco took one more, cautious step forward, and the cat started to hiss and spit. Draco halted and chewed on his lip for a moment. Hermione said her cat was very intelligent. Maybe he could be reasoned with.

“Look, I have to know,” he said with as much calmness as he could muster.

Crookshanks stopped hissing, but he gave another low, guttural growl that told Draco he was *not* satisfied with that explanation.

“It’s just her night things,” he said a bit desperately. “Please. Fucking *Roger* knows, and he can’t be the only one. I’ll go mad.”

Crookshanks was unconvinced.

“Look, I’ll give you whatever you want. Mice? Treats? Just say the word... or whatever... and it’s yours.”

Now Crookshanks cocked its head at Draco, and his heart leapt. The cat could be reasoned with.

“Treats?” he asked hopefully.

Crookshanks started a purr.

“Treats then,” said Draco with relief. “I’ll give you so many treats. Just let me look...” and he started to approach the dresser again slowly, *slowly*.

Crookshanks was still purring, and Draco let out a sigh of relief as he reached a hand out to open the drawer. And then...

“FUCKING OWWW!” he snarled, as Crookshanks launched himself from the dresser and sank his claws into Draco’s hand and arm. Draco started waving it around, but the cat held on, until suddenly a giant *CRACK!* caused both Crookshanks and Draco to jump.

“Mistress is drying off!” said Topsy urgently. “Master must leave *now*.”

“Goddamn cat,” he snarled as he turned to flee from her room. That fucking cat had planned it, Draco just knew it. He lulled Draco into a false sense of security before launching his attack. Sure enough, Crookshanks just gave Draco a satisfied look and began to purr again as Draco exited and shut the door behind him with a slam.

“Master should go to his room. Call Topsy later,” said the elf quickly. Draco just nodded glumly and made his way toward his room, slipping in just moments before he heard Hermione pass. All he could do now was wait and wait and *wait*.

He found himself pacing his room with agitation as he continued to check his watch. It was now past ten. Surely that was late enough.

“Topsy!” he called, and the elf appeared.

“Yes Master?”

“Topsy, what is she wearing tonight?” he asked, without preamble. He knew he sounded desperate. That was fine. He *was* desperate.

“She is wearing the navy one, Master,” said Topsy calmly. “The one with the ivory lace.”

Something in Draco unclenched.

*She was wearing something he had given her. Roger had no idea what it looked like.*

“Thank fuck,” he said with relief. Then he eyed the elf. “She said she bought some new things to wear at night. What do they look like?”

He got the impression Topsy was trying not to laugh at him, which he certainly did *not* appreciate. But he was committed to staying calm. Topsy had the information he needed, and even though she was bound to him he knew she could find ways to thwart him when he annoyed her. Topsy had a sly side to her.

“Tiny gold studs,” she said.

“Pardon?” asked Draco, totally nonplussed.

“They is tiny gold studs, Sir,” said Topsy. “Mistress is piercing her ears again and is needing new studs. She is having a metal allergy. The earrings from the shop has nickel posts and is irritating her ears. She is getting new ones that are very small so she can wear them at night.”

Draco blinked. “Earrings.”

“Yes sir. Mistress is wearing tiny earrings all day and night until her new holes heal.”

Draco sat back and thought about this. He had noticed she had a second a hole in her ear when he saw her in Romania. He didn’t think anything of it though. More important things had gotten in the way, and then he forgot to ask her about it.

“Did she tell you when she got them pierced?”

"Yes sir, she is getting them pierced by her friend Amelia several weeks ago. She is seeing her friend for the first time in many years at the shop."

*Amelia. The muggle friend.*

"Does Amelia have a brother named Roger?"

"Yes sir. Mistress is telling Topsy that she is seeing them today for lunch, and they is going shopping to pick out new earrings for her. She is also helping Roger pick an engagement ring for his girlfriend. They is seeing Mistress's jewelry at lunch and is liking it. They is asking her for help with the ring."

Draco's anxiety fully drained away at this.

"So to be clear, has she replaced any of the night things I got for her?"

"No sir, they is all there. Mistress is just getting new earrings to wear for a few weeks."

"Minx," he muttered. She had made him marinate in his own jealousy all evening. She had done it on purpose. He was *sure* of it.

"Thank you Topsy," he said, as the little elf disappeared with a *CRACK!*

The moment Topsy was gone, Draco settled in for his nightly wank, visualizing the navy silk with ivory lace. She would look beautiful in it. She always looked lovely in blue. And this time he imagined tiny gold studs in her ears too.

It didn't take long before he was coming all over his hand. He grabbed his wand, vanished his mess, and then collapsed on the bed as he revisited the day.

Fucking Roger. Fucking earrings. Fucking cat. Fucking hell.

No, Draco was definitely not OK.

## Chapter 23: Luna's Plan

### Hermione

“HERMIONE JEAN GRANGER YOU ARE COMING TO LUNCH WITH ME THIS INSTANT!”

Hermione looked up from the rather depressing salad she had purchased from the Ministry cafe to find Ginny Weasley staring down at her intimidatingly. Hermione gulped.

It had been over four weeks since she had last seen her friends. She had begged off their weekly lunch yet again, and she wasn't terribly surprised to find Ginny glaring down at her.

“RIGHT NOW OR I WILL...”

“OK fine! *Fine!*” hissed Hermione as she quickly stood up and tossed her salad in the bin on the way out.

“We have a lot to discuss,” said Ginny grimly, and Hermione tried not to mentally groan.

“Can it be a muggle place then?” she asked, thinking to herself that Draco would probably kill her if he found out she broke any of his rules, especially with the way she pushed him the previous weekend. He had left Sunday after breakfast looking like he was coming apart at the seams.

“Yes,” said Ginny curtly, as she strode to the apparition point. “And the others are already there.”

“Others?” asked Hermione in confusion.

“You'll see.”

Hermione said nothing more as they arrived at the apparition point and Ginny grabbed her arm and twisted.

“Hey!” said Hermione, but her words were lost in the darkness before she reappeared again, stumbling a bit. To Hermione's surprise they were at the Savoy, where she had met Draco for their first lunch together.

“Come on,” said Ginny, marching Hermione through the lobby and into the same restaurant, until they got to a different private room. Hermione came to an abrupt halt as she saw Blaise and Theo rising from the table to greet them, with Luna looking at her passively.

Hermione gulped.

“Sit,” said Ginny curtly.

Hermione slowly sat, and a waitress came by to take their orders. As soon as she was gone, Ginny raised her wand and cast a *muffliato* spell before turning her gaze on Hermione.

“You found out Draco’s a spy, didn’t you?” she asked bluntly.

Hermione felt the bottom drop out of her stomach, but she tried her best to control her face.

“Erm... what?”

“Oh don’t play games with us, Hermione,” said Ginny sternly. “We all figured it out. That’s what happened isn’t it? You figured it out too, and he tried to dump you.”

“He didn’t *dump* me,” she said. “We were never together. We...”

“Bullshit,” said Blaise, and Hermione turned to look at him in surprise.

“Look, why don’t we tell you what we know?” said Theo, casting a stern look at both Blaise and Ginny. “I know we’re ambushing you here, but we want to help you and Draco.”

Hermione didn’t know what to say to this, so she just nodded slowly.

“Fine, I’ll go first,” said Ginny. “Let’s start with the fact that you’ve been avoiding me and Luna for weeks now. And when you sent your owl to me this morning to tell me that you wouldn’t be able to make lunch yet again, I went to your flat to confront you.”

Hermione’s eyes widened.

“Yes, it was rather curious finding myself wandless and bound to a chair until my sodding boyfriend came to release me.”

Hermione just winced.

“And the other curious thing,” chimed in Blaise, “is the fact that I can’t floo to Malfoy Manor right now. Nor can Theo. I heard Draco was in town last weekend, and I tried to floo over to see him, but I was warded out. I sent an owl to Theo, and he tried too. He’s also warded out. That means Draco has something or somebody there that he wants to keep secret.”

Hermione bit her lip.

“I told them it must be you,” said Luna. “Since Draco’s a spy and all. You must have overhead something, and he’s trying to keep you safe at the Manor.”

“And he’s pulling a Harry by being all bloody noble about it. He’s trying to keep you safe, but he’s pushing you away at the same time,” added Ginny.

“OK back up,” said Hermione, trying to think quickly. “Why do you think he’s a spy?”

“Oh it’s been obvious to me and Blaise for years,” said Theo. “We’ve never asked him directly, but we could tell. He hasn’t been a pureblood supremacist since the Dark Lord made him take the Mark, but he plays in the sandbox with those who are. And he’s asked us for

introductions and invitations before. He's never done much business with them, so there's only one reason for it."

"He's tracking old Death Eaters," chimed in Blaise.

"Yes, and his aura changed in eighth year, you know," said Luna passively. "Right after his uncle Rodolphus died. I've suspected it for years too, and after Draco pushed you away I asked Theo if that was why."

Hermione's eyes widened.

"And I've always known Harry has an informant," chimed Ginny. "His track record at catching the top Death Eaters is too good. And he's left his galleon lying around now and then. I never knew who was on the other end of it, but I saw a few messages."

"His galleon?" asked Hermione curiously.

"Yes, it's one of your D.A. galleons," said Ginny.

"But..." Hermione trailed off, and then her eyes widened as she remembered. Harry had asked her to make a secure pair during Christmas of eighth year. Draco must have the other half. That's how they were able to communicate with each other so quickly.

"Bloody hell," she whispered.

"I finally realized it must be Draco when he pushed you away so suddenly," said Ginny. "It fits, and Luna thought so too. So I did some digging."

Now Ginny pulled out stacks of old newspapers.

"If you look through these, you'll see that Draco parties all over Europe. There are usually a couple months between when he's seen frequently in a country and when a Death Eater from the inner circle is caught, but it tracks. It all tracks."

Hermione's stomach was in knots, but she knew they had figured it out.

"So tell us," said Blaise. "Tell us everything so we can help you two fix it. Because Draco can be a stubborn bastard, but he's absolutely smitten with you, and he's miserable without you."

"And you're smitten with him," said Ginny. "Luna and I can tell."

Hermione sighed. She was stuck, but if she was being honest with herself, she would love their input and help. Topsy's suggestions were definitely pushing him, but he hadn't fully cracked for her yet. In any event, since they had figured out most of it, she knew she had nothing to lose by giving them some details.

"Fine, you're right," she said. "You're all right. I overheard Harry and Draco talking about an upcoming mission in Draco's library one night. I had come over to the Manor to ask him

something and heard voices and just... couldn't stop listening. They caught me of course, and Draco pushed me away and went back to France that night."

"But he showed up again at the club," said Ginny. "So he still cares about you."

"I think so, yes," said Hermione softly. "But when I went home that night I realized somebody had broken into my flat."

All of their eyes got huge. "I didn't tell anybody," continued Hermione. "I actually stayed in a hotel for a few weeks until I ran into Draco at a political event in Romania a couple weeks ago."

"Romania?" asked Blaise, with his eyes narrowed.

"Dolohov," breathed Theo.

Hermione winced again, which practically confirmed it for them.

"Yes, well, suffice to say one of Draco's... acquaintances tried to search my mind at the event. Draco did legilimency on me and somehow blocked them for me, but he was pretty upset by the fact that I was there. Of course, I didn't *know* that Draco and Harry thought Dolohov was in Romania because neither of them told me about it. But Draco still came to my hotel that night to try to send me back to my flat, and of course I couldn't go because..."

She trailed off, but they were all nodding with her.

"So we fought about it, but eventually I agreed to go to the Manor, and I left the next morning. I've been living there ever since."

"You left the next morning?" asked Theo curiously.

"Not that night?" added Blaise.

Hermione turned crimson, and all of them suddenly smiled.

"Oooh did anything happen?" asked Ginny eagerly.

"Oh my God, I can't talk to you all about this..." said Hermione.

"You shagged?" she asked excitedly.

"No!" said Hermione. "No, we haven't even kissed, we just... slept in the same bed. With a pillow barrier between us. And I might have... you know. I thought he was asleep, but he wasn't, so he also... you know."

Theo and Blaise burst out laughing.

"But you two still haven't kissed?" asked Blaise after they both calmed down enough to speak. "I mean, he's moved you into the bloody Manor and warded the rest of the world out, and he *still* hasn't made a move?"

“He says he has to get Dolohov first,” said Hermione simply. “Believe me, I’m inclined to just jump him myself... but his house elf is helping me, and she says I should play hard to get to make him break. Besides, I’m afraid that if I do it before he’s truly convinced he’ll reject me. I just... I don’t think I can take it. Not after everything else he’s put me through.”

“He clearly wants you though,” said Ginny. “That’s obvious.”

“And you *are* breaking him down,” said Blaise. “Theo and I had lunch with him yesterday, and he was in a right state.”

“Maybe, but his stubbornness is unbelievable,” said Hermione. “I can sense he’s cracking, but he just won’t go all the way. I need him to break the whole way. It can’t be a one-time thing for me either. I care about him too much for that. I need him to change his mind about us and decide to be with me.”

“Then you change the rules,” said Luna. Everyone looked at her curiously.

“And how does she do that, love?” asked Theo.

“She helps him catch Dolohov,” said Luna simply. “She proves to him that she should be involved. Then he has no reason to keep her at arm’s length.”

Hermione’s stomach clenched at this because she *knew* Draco and Harry would be furious if she interfered. Then again...

“You’re right,” said Blaise. “That’s what she needs to do.”

“And while you’re working on it,” added Theo, “you keep wearing him down.”

“Tell me,” said Hermione. “Tell me what else I need to do.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione’s “lunch meeting” rolled into the early afternoon as Theo and Blaise told her everything they knew about Draco’s sexual history and preferences.

“He’s definitely a tits guy,” said Theo.

“And he’s kind of pervy, to be honest. He likes to oggle,” said Blaise.

“Black is his favorite color on a witch,” added Theo.

“Though he also notices when a witch has the confidence to pull off bold colors,” finished Blaise. “Your gown at his birthday made a huge statement, and he definitely noticed.”

On and on it went, and Hermione had to admit that everything Blaise and Theo said fit the profile she was discovering for herself. He liked to look. That much was clear. He had given her a whole drawer of negligees. There were a few colors, but they were mostly black. He seemed most affected when she wore things that were low cut.

Yes, Theo and Blaise knew their best friend rather well.

And Luna's suggestion that she help solve the case had real merit too. It might be the *only* way she could prove to him that she could help. She needed to be in it. He didn't have to push her away from him.

On that note, Hermione spent the rest of the afternoon buried in her file about her Greek counterpart that she had copied again before giving the original to Draco. She had noticed that he went to Durmstrang and was in Viktor's class. But when she realized he was raised in Bulgaria, it occurred to Hermione that this must have been the thing that concerned Draco.

This gave Hermione an idea.

"Belinda, can you ask Archives to put together another dossier on Damien Gataki? I thought I had taken it home with me a few weeks ago, but I must have misplaced it. I have no idea where it is."

"Of course," said Belinda. "I'm sure they'll be able to do it quickly since they've already done it once."

"Great, thank you," said Hermione. "And please send my apologies."

Sure enough, just as Hermione was about to leave for the day, Belinda arrived with the new dossier. And as Hermione flipped through it, she noticed a few key facts had changed. Gataki's mother's last name was different, and the file said he had been raised in Greece his entire life. His date of birth and dates of attendance at Durmstrang were also different, placing him two years above Viktor.

This told Hermione two things. First, Draco was correct that Gataki's Bulgarian ties were the reason the file had been stolen. Second, somebody in Archives was manipulating the file.

Hermione decided to solve the second problem first.

She pulled out her magical reference for the employees of the Ministry of Magic and flipped to Archives. She scanned the pages until she found what she had been looking for: a brand new hire had started just after her flat was broken into. His name was Georgi Borisov.

Hermione turned to her bookshelves and quickly found the next thing she was looking for: old class yearbooks from Durmstrang that went back twenty-five years. Hermione had gotten the idea to acquire back issues after Viktor pulled out one of his own yearbooks to show her the picture of the new Bulgarian Secretary of Treasury a couple years ago. He was six years older than Viktor, but they had been on the quidditch team together for one year. So many of Hermione's colleagues in other countries had attended Durmstrang that it occurred to her that

the yearbooks could be helpful to learn more about them: their interests, clubs, and friends from school.

Sure enough, she flipped through the most recent year and found Georgi Borisov in his seventh and final year. He must have just graduated. She then worked backwards, year by year, until she discovered what she had been looking for: Georgi Borisov had an older brother named Ivan. Ivan Borisov was photographed with Damien Gataki over and over again. They were in the same house. They were in the same clubs. They appeared to be close friends. She noted that Viktor was in none of the pictures with them, and this was why they were unfamiliar to her.

Hermione was confident now that she knew who had altered the dossier, and she also suspected she knew who had broken into her flat. She wouldn't be able to go to Archives for information about Gataki's mother, but she decided she would check the library at the Manor for any records.

Deciding she had done enough for one day, Hermione packed her things and then floo'd to Grimmauld Place for the next phase of the plan: wardrobe enhancements.

Hermione relayed everything Blaise and Theo told her to Topsy. Topsy jumped in with enthusiasm and began bringing Hermione's clothes to Grimmauld Place, since Ginny was warded out of Malfoy Manor. Ginny and Topsy forced Hermione to model every single thing in her closet, rejecting anything that "didn't put her tits to their best advantage." Topsy also went through Hermione's accessories and pulled out a small diamond pendant.

"Mistress should wear this to draw attention to her assets," said the little elf. To Hermione's consternation Ginny had glanced at her curiously when she heard the title. But mercifully she didn't ask.

And when it was time to experiment with some new makeup and hair, Hermione and Ginny discovered that Topsy was quite a makeup artist and advised Mistress to "keep a few curls loose when she wears her hair up. My master is fascinated by Mistress's curls, and they will distract him."

"You're being very helpful Topsy," said Ginny with a grin.

"Topsy wishes Master would get on with it," said the elf. "Topsy is very happy to help."

And so armed with a plan to make Draco break for good, Hermione returned to Malfoy Manor very late. She would comb the library the following evening after work.

Work the next day consisted of more study through the Durmstrang yearbooks. Hermione eventually found both Popa brothers, as well as a Lola Dascalu who looked awfully like a younger Lola that Draco had draped on his arm that night in Romania. She spent hours making notes about their friends and acquaintances from school, and she found a link between those three and Gataki via Ivan Borisov and yet another wizard named Sorin Cazacu.

*They're connected. They're all connected.*

She didn't know if they connected to *Dolohov* yet, but they were all connected to each other, albeit a bit distantly. Still, as far as Hermione was concerned, that was suspicious as hell.

Hermione checked her watch and realized it was getting late. She wanted some time in the Manor's library to look into Gataki's mother tonight, so she hurried to pack and make her way to the Ministry's lobby. But she found herself waylaid by Topsy the moment she exited the floo.

"Quick!" she whispered. "My master is back early. Go upstairs, and I'll help!"

Hermione followed the little elf to her room, who immediately got to work. Before Hermione knew it her eyes were smoky, her lips were pink, her hair was up with a cascade of curls down the nape of her neck, and Topsy snapped her fingers to deepen the neckline of Hermione's dress.

"Topsy, doesn't that look a little... unprofessional?"

"Twill make my master jealous, Mistress," confided the elf, "if he is thinking you wore it to work today."

Hermione gave Topsy a surprised look, but Topsy just grinned back and clasped the pendant around Hermione's neck and then snapped her fingers again to make Hermione's practical heels narrower and taller. "My master is also liking legs, Mistress," she said by way of explanation, and then she shoo'd Hermione back downstairs.

"My master is just sitting down for dinner," she said. "Come along."

Hermione had no idea how the elf was aware of Draco's precise location in the Manor, but she assumed it had something to do with her magic. As it was, Hermione followed the elf to the small parlor, and Hermione took a deep breath as she walked through the door.

Draco was reading *The Evening Prophet*, when he glanced up at the sound of the door opening. His eyes widened when he saw Hermione, and he put the paper down and stood as she walked toward him.

She saw his eyes roving over her, lingering on her neckline and legs in particular, and she saw a grim look cross his face.

*Jealous.*

Hermione struggled not to smirk as she let Draco pull her chair out for her, and she sank down.

"You're back early," she said lightly, as he moved back to his own seat. "I wasn't expecting you until tomorrow or Saturday."

She caught a flash of annoyance on his face. "Is that a problem?"

"Not at all," she said lightly, as she fingered her pendant. Immediately Draco's eyes dropped to her fingers. Again, Hermione struggled not to smirk.

*Topsy is brilliant.*

“It was just unexpected.”

“I found I was needed back in England earlier than I anticipated,” he said tightly.

Hermione nodded in acknowledgement of this. “Of course. And how long will you be staying?”

“Until Monday morning,” he said.

Hermione bit her lip at this. That would seriously slow down her research. She was on a roll, and as much as she was thrilled to see Draco, she couldn’t do her research when he was around.

“You look disappointed,” he said with some consternation.

Hermione hitched on a smile. “Of course not.”

*Maybe there was a way...*

He raised one eyebrow as he took in her appearance again. “Did you have meetings today then? You’re awfully dressed up.”

The truth was, Hermione hadn’t seen a single person today other than Belinda on her way in. But she decided to improvise.

“Oh you know, the Italians have been lining up to meet me so I’ll soften on their trade deal. I blame Blaise of course. He’s been bringing in representatives from the major commercial groups to woo me and get me to bend. One of them actually got on his knees and serenaded me with an aria. His voice was rather remarkable.”

This was all true, though none of it had happened that day. Hermione managed to say all of this with a perfectly straight face as a muscle in Draco’s jaw twitched, and his face assumed a dangerous expression.

“He serenaded you?”

“Mmmhmm,” said Hermione as she took a sip of wine.

“Who was it?”

Now she gave him a small smile. “Oh I couldn’t say. He was just one of many.”

Draco’s eyes flashed, and Hermione struggled not to laugh as she switched subjects. But she couldn’t help but notice his eyes fixed on her pendant as it sparkled between her breasts for much of the meal.

When she was finally done she rose, and he rose too. “It’s a bit early, but I think I’m going to take a bath and turn in.”

He got a pained look on his face at this, but just nodded as he walked over to her.

“Sweet dreams then. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

And to Hermione’s surprise he reached up and tugged on one of the loose curls near the nape of her neck.

Hermione smiled at this and then stood on her toes to kiss him on the cheek. He had a stunned look on his face as she pulled away.

She just gave him a small smile as she turned and left the parlor, hurrying up to her room and exhaling as she got inside.

Her friends had been right, and Topsy was a genius. Draco was affected by everything she was doing, she was sure of it. Between this and playing hard to get she would surely wear him down soon. She would keep it up over the weekend and work as quickly as possible to compile the evidence she needed before presenting it to him. Maybe by the time she finally did he would be truly mad for her.

Hermione slipped off her dress and went to her dresser to pull on another negligee. Despite what she told Draco, she was not taking the time to bathe tonight. She was going to bed right away and setting her wand to wake her in the middle of the night. She would search the Malfoy library for what she needed under the cover of darkness and take whatever she found into work with her tomorrow so she could read it in the privacy of her office.

She loosened her hair, slipped under the covers, set her wand to wake her, and then soon drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter 24: On Your Knees

### Draco

Draco drank as he stared into the fireplace of his study. He had come back to England a day early for two reasons. First, he needed to give himself time to search the Manor library while Hermione was at work. Potter had messaged him earlier that day to say that he had found nothing about Gataki's mother in the Ministry Archives, so they had hit another dead end. Draco doubted that the Manor's library would have what they needed, but he told Potter he would check anyway. Second, he had come back early to catch Hermione before she slipped away from him again.

He had caught her alright. He had caught her looking more lovely and sexual than she had *any* right to look, especially on a work day. He couldn't believe she had met a bunch of Italian blokes who were evidently so struck by her they were willing to get on their fucking knees and *sing* to her. Draco felt himself nearly consumed by jealousy as he thought about it. Rationally, he knew she probably dressed that way to give *herself* leverage over a room full of men who were trying to sway her position. But being rational about it didn't soothe Draco's temper.

Her makeup made her eyes pop. Her lips were plump and pink. Her curls were tantalizing. They were so tempting pulled up like that he couldn't resist tugging on one as she left dinner just to watch it spring back in place. And her curves... Merlin her curves. That dress she had worn to work today was tailored and professional in some ways — it hit her directly at the knee and was a demure color. But the cut around her breasts had driven Draco mad, especially as she played with that goddamn necklace that kept disappearing between them.

Draco couldn't believe other wizards had gotten to see her like that. He was going to *kill* Blaise.

The only thing that saved the night as far as he was concerned was the kiss on the cheek. She had never done that before, and his stomach swooped the minute she did it. He tried to console himself that she hadn't kissed any of the Italians, surely. That was all for Draco. And she was living with Draco now and taking baths in his tub and wearing the lingerie he had bought for her. All of it was his, even if she shared that fucking dress with the world today.

Draco growled one more time at the thought and then drained his drink and stood. He would go upstairs, have a wank, and then try to sleep. He had a lot to get through tomorrow while Hermione was occupied at work, and he would need to start as soon as she was gone.

“Topsy,” he said as he got to his room. The little elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

“Yes sir?”

“Topsy, which one is she wearing tonight?” he asked as he started to undress.

“One of the black silks sir. The one with the lace on the bottom edge and the open back.”

Draco felt his cock twitch. *His favorite.* Goddamn, but what he wouldn’t give to see her in it. But no, even Draco wasn’t *that* creepy.

“Thank you Topsy. That one was...” he trailed off with a groan.

“She is as lovely in it as Master imagines,” she Topsy. “And she is asleep now.”

“Of course Topsy. Thank you. That will be all.”

Topsy disappeared, and Draco settled in with a sigh as he dropped his hands into his pants and imagined her in it. He would pull the straps down with one hand while he ran his other hand under the hem to squeeze her arse. It would tempt him to see her in it, but it was so small it would be easy to remove. Or maybe he wouldn’t bother, and he would just lower the top to suck those tits and then fuck her under the skirt. It was made for easy access after all. And this time she would be wearing that diamond pendant, and he would watch it sparkle between her breasts that were bared for him and him alone.

It didn’t take long before Draco felt himself cresting with a grunt. A wave of his wand vanished the mess, and he slipped under the covers. He set his wand to wake him at six in the morning, because that was the unholy hour Hermione liked to wake up too. Draco would sacrifice sleep if it meant he got to see her for breakfast. With one last sigh he pushed any thoughts of Italian arias out of his mind, rolled over, and went to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Master!” hissed Topsy. “Psst! Master!”

Draco awoke with a grunt to find Topsy shaking him, her large eyes glowing in the dark.

“Fuck, Topsy, what time is it?” he groaned.

“Tis one-thirty in the morning Sir.”

Draco forced his eyes open to stare at the little elf in disbelief.

“And why the hell did you wake me up?”

To his consternation Topsy didn’t look the least bit sorry. Instead, she looked at him conspiratorially and said, “I is catching Mistress doing something Sir!”

Now she had Draco’s full attention. “Doing what?”

Draco suddenly had the image of Hermione's hand slipping under that negligee and into her knickers to...

"Mistress is in the library Sir! Right now! Mistress is looking up pureblood family trees!"

The image in Draco's mind imploded, and it was replaced with a slow burning rage.

*She was doing research. She was interfering. Draco had told her to stay out of it, and she was ignoring him.*

"Thank you Topsy," said Draco. "I will take care of it."

Topsy gave a little curtsy and disappeared as Draco yanked off the covers and strode to his dresser to throw on a pair of joggers. He didn't take the time to bother with a shirt. He was going to catch her red-handed.

He left his wand where it was as he stormed out of the room. He was angrier with her than he could ever remember being, and he didn't trust himself with it.

He quickly made his way down the stairs and toward the library before pausing as he got to the doors. He forced himself to breathe to tamp down some of his rage and focus on what he needed to say to her to make this a one-time conversation. He pushed open the door and made his way silently through the stacks until he saw some wand light spilling out from one aisle and the telltale rustle of books being shifted around.

He crept toward it and turned the corner, and his heart nearly stopped at what he was seeing. Hermione was barefoot and wearing that favorite negligee he had wanked to not three hours ago. Her back was to him, and he could see it was so short it barely covered her arse, especially as she stood on tiptoe to reach a high shelf. The back, as Topsy had said, was open, with just a couple strings crossing it to hold the whole thing up. Her curls were loose and wild. She must have rolled straight out of bed to come here. Draco's cock was painfully hard. He was both angry and thrilled by what was coming next.

"What are you doing?" he asked, and she gasped and whipped around to face him.

Now Draco could finally see her front. The slip was low, edged in lace and barely covering the top of those tits. Draco could see her nipples under it, the silk slithering over them as she breathed hard. He knew he was staring, but he couldn't help it. Her curls framed her head, and she had a desperate look on her face. Draco realized she was about to run again. He forced himself to stay calm so she wouldn't bolt.

"Tell me," he said. "What are you doing?"

She was watching him warily now. "Research."

"About?" he ground out.

"Gataki's mother. Ana Peycheva."

Something in Draco snapped and he strode toward her.

"You will stop!" he said to her in a dangerous voice. "You will not interfere!"

He saw a spark of defiance leap in her eyes.

"Oh?" she said. "And have you figured out who broke into my flat? Because I have. It only took me half a day once I decided to work on it. And have you figured out how Gataki's connected to the Popas and Lola Dascalu? Because I have. That took me another day. And yes, that's Lola's last name by the way. You never told me what it was, but I figured it out."

Draco was breathing hard, torn between disbelief that she had made that much progress so quickly and utter outrage.

Outrage won.

"Do you want to compromise our investigation? Are you really that foolish?"

Hermione gave him a withering glare.

"I'm not foolish," she whispered, and Draco heard rage in her voice now too. "I'm very careful. And I would never, *ever* do something that might compromise you."

She suddenly reached toward him, and Draco's eyes widened for a split second as he wondered if she was about to slap him. But instead she grabbed his face, pulled him down toward her and gave him a bruising kiss before she released him and stepped back.

Draco blinked at her, his heart pounding like he had just run a marathon, all thoughts of his investigation evaporating as he stared at her.

She had kissed him. *She had kissed him.* And he had been so shocked by it he just stood there and did nothing, and she was still wearing that negligee, and she looked so wild and beautiful like this, and oh *fuck* she was breathing hard too, and it was making her nipples almost pop out.

They said nothing as they stared at each other for another long moment, and then Draco felt the last bit of his resolve crumble.

He strode toward her and grabbed her hard as he pulled her to him and dropped his mouth onto hers. He groaned as he felt her sink into him, and he tangled one hand into her curls to tilt her head back for him, while the other gripped her waist. He opened his mouth, and she did too, and now Draco could taste her, *finally*, and he thought he might be getting drunk on it as their tongues fought for control.

He felt desperate, feverish, as he wrenched his mouth off of hers before biting her earlobe and kissing down her neck. He was going fast, too fast, but he couldn't stop now that he had started. Her skin tasted better than he had ever imagined, and she was clinging to him, making breathy gasps that went straight to his cock.

He reached her clavicle and started to suck as he moved his hand out of her hair and toward the strap that had been taunting him. He slipped it off her shoulder, just as he had in his fantasy earlier that night, his mouth trailing hot kisses after it.

"I have to see," he murmured as he moved his other hand up and brushed one thumb over a nipple. He felt it harden through the fabric, and he groaned. "I need to... I need to see them. Please. I've been going mad."

"Yes," she breathed. "Look as much as you want."

Draco eagerly slipped the other strap off of her shoulder, and he stepped back just a bit as the negligee fell, and she was finally bare for him.

"Oh fuck Hermione," he said in amazement. "You lied. In that fantasy I watched in your head. These are even better..."

He was saying too much, he knew that. But he couldn't bring himself to care. He was staring at what had to be the world's most perfect tits. And they belonged to him.

"Mine," he said as he palmed one. "Goddammit, these are mine. All mine and nobody else's, *ever*. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," she groaned, as she pressed them toward him.

"Over here," he said as he grabbed her hand and pulled her toward a large window seat at the other end of the aisle. He sat and pulled her toward him so her breasts were at exactly the right height, and he opened his mouth and licked. He felt her knees buckle, and he put his hands on her waist to steady her, but now that he had tasted them he needed more. So much more. He lavished open mouth kisses all around the mounds until he finally pulled those perfect nipples into his mouth and sucked, as he flicked them with his tongue. Hermione was moaning now, and Draco pulled back just enough to see a look of utter shock on her face.

*Had Weasley and Krum really not done this?*

Granted, Draco knew he was rather fixated on breasts. They had always been his favorite part of a witch's anatomy. But he was still surprised that *she* was so surprised.

He went back to it, and now she was straddling him for balance and arching back to give him access.

"I could do this all fucking night," he said between licks and sucks. "I'm obsessed with your tits, did you know that? Fucking obsessed."

She said nothing, but was writhing now, grinding into his lap.

"But you need more don't you?" he asked. "You want it, don't you darling?"

"Yes," she said. "Please, it's been *years*..."

"I will," he murmured as he pulled her head down to kiss him again. "I've wanted to be balls deep inside of you for ages."

She shuddered and groaned a little.

“But first...” he said, as he pushed her back a little. “I want to see you come.”

She was breathing hard and looked a bit glassy eyed, but she nodded as Draco gently lifted her off his lap, and he scooted out from under her. He sat her down on the window seat before leaning down and hooking his fingers through her knickers. He tugged at them, and she lifted her bum to help, as he pulled them all the way off.

He tucked them into his pocket.

“A souvenir,” he said, as he stared down at her naked body. “Because they were covering one of your best parts just now.”

He thought she might be blushing, but it was hard to see in the moonlight. She looked a bit shy.

“You’re beautiful, did you know that? Stunning.”

“I have flaws...” she started.

“No you don’t,” he said simply.

“My scars...”

“They’re lovely. They’re perfect. They’re yours.”

She gasped a little, but he saw her lean toward him a bit too as he said this. He gave her a slow smile and took a step back.

“Show me,” he said. “Show me how perfect you are darling. Spread those lovely legs for me, and let me see.”

She gave him a dark, hot look, but she placed her hands behind her and leaned back a bit as she slowly, *slowly* opened her legs for him.

“Fuck me,” Draco muttered. He could see her glistening already, and she was growing even wetter under his gaze.

“Stay just like that,” he said as he approached her slowly, never taking his eyes off of her core. “You told me some Italian bloke got on his knees to sing to you.”

“A few weeks ago, yes,” she said.

Draco came to a halt as his eyes narrowed. “I thought it was today. You were wearing that fucking dress.”

“I never said it was today,” she said lightly. “You just assumed.”

Draco felt a surge of annoyance and lust shoot through him at these words.

“You wanted to taunt me then, is that right?”

She shrugged, and started to close her legs just a bit, but Draco spoke sharply, “Legs stay open.”

She inhaled, but did as he said, and she was starting to breath hard again as he got even closer to her.

“Now...” he said as he stepped between them. “Whether it was today or a few weeks ago, the point is you got some bloke to get on his knees for you.”

She nodded slowly, her eyes never leaving his face.

Draco now sank down to his own knees and put one hand on each of her thighs to hold her legs in place. He heard her breath catch, and her eyes were wide as she watched.

“He may have sung for you, darling. But I want you to sing for me.”

He leaned forward and gave her center one long lick.

Hermione gasped and jerked, and her eyes were huge as she stared at him. She was quivering.

“More?” he asked. She nodded frantically.

“Then let’s play our question game.”

“I... what?” she asked, dazedly.

“Our question game. I get to ask you questions. If I like your answers, I’ll eat you out.”

“Oh God,” she groaned.

“First, did Krum and Weasley ever touch your tits?”

“I... yes, a bit.”

Bad answer. She wasn’t getting anything for that, even if it was the truth.

“Did they ever lick your tits?”

“Not like you did.”

“That’s more like it,” he said as he gave her another lick, and she shuddered. “I think you’re getting the picture.”

She nodded quickly and wriggled her hips a bit. Draco just smirked.

“Did they use their fingers?”

“Sometimes,” she said.

“And did it get you off?”

"No," she said quickly, "I faked it for them. Always."

"Excellent answer," he said as he leaned forward and found her clit. He sucked for just a moment and she let out a great moan before he pulled away.

"Please," she gasped.

"Patience darling. We can't rush our game."

She groaned at this, but just squeezed her eyes shut and nodded.

"Are you ever going to fake it for me?"

"Never," she said. "You'd know."

"Good girl," he said with another flick of his tongue. He felt her growing hotter now, weaker for him. "I would know. And I would be very, *very* displeased if you ever fake an orgasm for me. Do you understand?"

"I... yes," she said. "No faking."

"Very good. Now how did you get off all these years since you faked it with Krum and Weasley?"

"Myself. My hands."

A lick and a gasp.

"And what did you think about?"

"You," she groaned.

He gave her a nice long suck for that answer, and she started to shake before he pulled away. Her breathing was ragged now.

"When did you think about me for the first time?"

"Fifth year. I saw you in the prefects' bath one day. You didn't see me, but I saw you and..."

Oh that was a *fantastic* answer. Draco leaned forward and penetrated her with his tongue as she gave a strangled cry.

"Have you ever thought of anybody else?"

"No, never," she gasped, and he gave her a long, lazy swirl with his tongue.

"Have I been a part of every orgasm you've ever had?"

"Yes," she groaned, and he rapidly flicked her clit with his tongue until she started to shake.

"Who do you belong to? Who is the only wizard who will ever satisfy you?"

“You,” she gasped.

Another long suck.

“Will you ever let another wizard’s tongue near your cunt like this?”

“No, just yours.”

More penetration.

“Do you want to come now darling?”

“Yes, *please*,” she moaned.

“Then sing for me. Don’t you dare hold back.”

Draco pulled her toward him and started to feast as Hermione let out a great moan and started to twist. Gods but she tasted amazing. That musky taste that was slightly salty was delicious enough to make him lightheaded. He wanted to drink every drop from her.

He loved oral sex. He fucking *loved* oral sex. He loved to receive it, but he loved to give it too. And Hermione was giving everything back that he could possibly ask for.

She was shaking hard, her breathing shallow, and Draco sensed she was close. He wanted to see it on her face this time. He had to know what she looked like. With his eyes fixed on her face he moved his mouth off of her and shoved two fingers inside of her. As he watched, her jaw dropped, her eyes squeezed shut, and she threw her head back as the words slipped from her lips the moment she fell apart.

“*Draco. Mon rêve.*”

Draco’s heart nearly seized at the term of endearment.

*Her dream. She called him her dream.*

“Again, *mon ange*,” he said as he pressed down on her clit with his thumb and rubbed in a circle.

After all, if he was a dream then she was surely an angel.

She cried out and jerked, and Draco felt her become impossibly wet as she rode out the aftershocks.

He had to have her now. He was desperate.

“Do you want it darling? Do you want my cock deep inside of you?”

“Oh God, yes,” she groaned.

He rose and shoved his pants down as he sat on the window seat next to her. He lifted her onto his lap.

"Straddle me. Straight down onto it. Take what you want from me, and then I'll fuck you until you're incoherent."

"Yes," she said frantically as she swung her leg over him, lined herself up and then sank down with a groan.

Draco nearly came at the sensation. She was so narrow and tight, and he was not prepared for the feeling of her channel all around him. Draco clenched his teeth to hold on, grateful that she was taking a moment herself to adjust.

Finally, mercifully, the immediate risk of early completion passed, and she put her hands on his cheeks again and kissed him just like that. It would have been so innocent and sweet if he hadn't been buried up to the hilt in her. But then she started to move, and all thoughts of sweetness left his mind as heat took over.

She was writhing, swirling her hips over him, and Draco bit his lips to hang on. He sensed her growing frustrated as she moved.

"Draco," she groaned, "Draco... I need..."

"What do you need *mon ange*?"

"You said you'd fuck me. Do it. *Please*."

Draco's eyes flew open, and he yanked her back so he could see her face in the moonlight. He stared at her for one moment and saw she had a needy expression. She was desperate for him.

*Good.*

He couldn't help but smirk as he suddenly pushed his hips up into her hard.

Her jaw dropped at the first thrust, and then her eyes rolled back at the second. And now Draco was memorizing every twitch of her face as he brought her to that place again.

"What am I to you?" he demanded.

"*Mon rêve*," she gasped.

"And why is that?" he asked, as he gritted his teeth and continued to thrust.

"Because... only man... to make me come... all my dreams... my whole life."

Draco felt that beast inside of him that had been burning with jealousy for weeks roar at this.  
"Then come for me now darling. You're so fucking perfect like this..."

And with one final thrust, she started to climax, and Draco felt it all the way to his balls. He couldn't hold back any longer, and he spilled into her too with a great shuddering breath.

They clung to each other for a long while, before she finally released her arms and stood with a wobble.

“Whoa, easy,” he said, reaching out to steady her. She just gave him a shy smile and walked back to her wand to clean things up. Then to his surprise she cast the contraceptive charm on herself.

“Better late than never. Sperm can live up to five days, you know.”

No, Draco didn’t know that. But suddenly he was oddly hopeful.

“Do you think it’s possible you’re...” he trailed off.

“I suppose anything is possible, but probably not,” she said. “We caught it soon enough.”

“Oh,” he said with a little disappointment. She just gave him a small smile at this and slipped the negligee back on, though she was knickerless. She looked back at him.

“Well,” she said a bit awkwardly, “I should go back to my room.”

“No,” he said quickly.

She gave him a cautious, but hopeful look.

“I just...” he sighed. “Look, I’m in it. It’s pointless to pretend I’m not. I’m so fucking in it I need to know that you are too. Stay with me tonight. Stay with me every night.”

*Forever;* he added silently.

Something like joy bloomed across her face, and she raced back toward him to give him a deep kiss.

“I promise we’ll keep it quiet until your mission is done,” she said as she pulled away. “I don’t want to compromise anything, I mean that. But I’ve been miserable without you. I’ve wanted this for weeks. Years, really. I never felt like this with Viktor.”

Draco’s heart jumped, and something in him finally, *finally* settled to know this.

“Alright,” he whispered. “I won’t push you away anymore. I’m so sorry darling. I just wanted to protect you. But after this... I won’t be able to bear it if I keep my distance from you. I think I’ll be less distracted if we’re together. I’ve been a fucking mess for weeks too.”

She beamed at him and nodded quickly.

“Good,” he said. “Now let’s go back to my room. It’s really late. We can talk about the things you’ve figured out in the morning.”

She nodded and tugged at his hand a bit, and he rose. He quickly put his boxers and joggers back on as he led her through the library, back up the stairs and down the hall to his room.

He slipped off his joggers again as he climbed into bed, and she slipped under the covers with him.

“None of your Great Fucking Pillow Barriers tonight,” he said as he pulled her close with a contented sigh.

She giggled a bit, but nestled in, and Draco felt something inside of him finally unclench as he held her.

“Good night *mon rêve*,” she said.

“Sleep tight *mon ange*,” he replied.

*I love you*, he said in his head, before he mentally winced.

*Fuck.*

## Chapter 25: Scars

### Hermione

Hermione woke up in an unfamiliar bed with an unfamiliar soreness between her legs and some very familiar hands creeping up her thighs and over her hips before they splayed out on her stomach.

She realized the large form of Draco Malfoy was behind her, spooning her, and she felt a rush of relief as his lips connected with her neck.

*He's not pushing me away.*

"New house rule," he murmured. "When you're in bed with me, no knickers. No bra. I like you just like this."

Hermione felt herself blushing, but she couldn't deny that she was pleased.

"What about all those new knickers you got for me? I noticed that each negligee has a matching pair. And there's a bra that matches too."

"I'm moving your clothes in here," he said, as he continued to run his hands over her. "You can wear the knickers and bras to work, under your clothes. I want to watch you get dressed every morning so I know. I'll be thinking about it all day. But at night... at night I want you just like this. Silk and lace. Easy access for me."

Then he slipped the strap down again to expose one breast. He teased her nipple until she felt it harden.

"Are you sore darling? From last night."

"A little," she whispered.

She felt him nod to himself, but he said nothing more about it as he turned her toward him and lowered the other strap.

"I should warn you," he said, as he leaned down to suckle her breasts. "I'm a jealous bastard."

"I worked that out for myself," she said, as she gasped. God, his tongue was amazing. Nobody's tongue should be *that* good.

"I'm very possessive. And I'm pretty sure I'm creepy too."

"Mmmm how?"

“Peeking into your head that night to see your fantasies. Following you to the pool to see you in a bathing costume. Asking Topsy for reports about what you’re doing and what you’re wearing at night so I could get off to thoughts about it.... That’s why I got you these, you know. I wanted you in the things I had given you. I wanted to be able to visualize it.”

Hermione felt her heart start to pound. She realized there was something dark and dangerous in him. She had always sensed it, and he was right, that was kind of creepy. Then again, it also made her feel desirable in a way that she had never felt before. It made her feel seen because he was the one watching. She knew it probably crossed some lines. But then again, did it matter if it made her feel so wanted? She had never felt this wanted before in her life. Hell, most of the time the wizards she dated wanted *Harry* and not her. Just as long as...

“Are you like that with every witch?”

He snorted. “No. Just you.”

“And do you plan on interfering with my career because of it?

He looked at her askance. “Of course not. I’ll only interfere if it’s for your safety, like Gataki or Rosu. Just because I’m possessive doesn’t mean I’m so idiotic that I’d ask you to quit.”

She smiled a bit. “Then it’s OK with me.”

Not only was she OK with it, she thought it might have been the best thing that had ever happened to her. He acted this way because he wanted her. And it wasn’t just anybody who wanted her. No, it was the only wizard she had ever truly fantasized about who wanted her this badly. She hadn’t been lying to him the previous night: he *had* been a part of every orgasm she had ever had since she was sixteen years old. It was true even when she didn’t like him. She had always craved a bit of his darkness. And now that she had it... well, it made her unbearably turned on, even if it was a little wrong.

“I mean it, *mon ange*,” he said as he rolled on top of her and pushed her negligee up over her hips. It was crumpled around her waist now. “Now that I’ve had you...” he ran a hand over her breasts and body with a covetous look. “All of this is mine. If you’re going to work, I want you to wear the things I got for you and let me watch. If you’re in bed, I don’t want any barriers for my hands and tongue and cock. And *nothing* touches your tits or cunt unless it’s me or something I’ve given to you. Got it?”

Hermione’s heart was racing now. *Possessive* was right. But damn, it was also hot. She nodded slowly, but then paused and furrowed her brow.

He gave her a hard look and raised an eyebrow in question.

“What about my own hands then?” she asked

“No,” he said quickly. “Not like that. No more self-care, unless I’m watching and tell you to show me.”

Her breath hitched. “You’re serious?”

“Very. Anytime you want to get off, just tell me. I’ll get you off. And I might watch you get yourself off too. I’ve fantasized about that before. But no more orgasms without me. No stimulation without me. It’s my one rule.”

“You have more than one rule,” she pointed out wryly.

“But it’s the most important one,” he countered. “I want to be there for every orgasm you have from here on out. I want them all.”

“And I told you last night, you have been there,” she said softly. “You’ve been there for every single one. Even if you didn’t know it.”

The look he gave her as she said this was so intense that she felt herself falling into his gaze. She had a sudden realization about him: he loved to hear her say this. He wanted to claim her. He wanted to know that he had *always* claimed her in a way no other man had before. He absolutely craved it. And Hermione knew she could give that to him. She could give him that reassurance that she belonged to him and no others. She had never belonged to any others. Not really.

He leaned forward and kissed her, and he was pouring something into this kiss that was indescribable. He finally broke away and looked down with a small smile.

“And that, *mon ange*, is why I will try to give you anything you want. Literally anything. And if I fail the first time I’ll keep trying until you have it. Because all I want is you. I want to know that I’m protecting you and giving you the things you need to be happy. That includes as many orgasms as you require.”

She smiled a little. “Alright. No more self-care unless you’re watching. I can do that.”

“Good,” he said as he moved down toward her navel and started trailing kisses down toward her core.

She instinctively started to move her hips. The things he had done to her the night before had been so delicious, so sinful that Hermione was dying to feel it again. She had never imagined it that way, *never*.

“So tell me darling... what is it that *you* want?”

“I just want you,” she gasped. “Please Draco...”

“Mmmm you do, don’t you... very well. I’ll ask you again when you’re not so eager. I know there are other things you want too. But for now...”

He settled down for another long lick, and Hermione felt her mind go blank as her hips bucked.

“I love doing this to you...” he said roughly between licks and sucks. “I love how wet it makes you. I love the way you taste... you’re perfect like this.”

“Oh God,” she said as she felt her control starting to slip.

“I’ll fuck you with my tongue every morning and night for the rest of our lives if you’ll let me...”

Hermione gasped.

*The rest of our lives.*

“Yes...” she moaned. “Please...”

He gripped her hips and went down on her, sucking and flicking and licking, and Hermione felt herself shaking. Her senses were so scattered, but it was building and building until...

She heard herself moaning as her sense of being wrenched itself apart for a split second. She still wasn’t used to coming with a partner leading it for her. She never had until the night before, not really.

She opened her eyes blearily to find him staring at her with a kind of intensity that made her heart race. “Do you want to...?” she started, but he shook his head.

“You’re sore.”

Hermione nodded a little and pulled him up toward her. “Then let me return the favor.”

“Hermione...” he started, and she was surprised to see he looked a little uncertain. “You don’t have to...”

“I’m serious. You said you’d give me whatever I want. I want to blow you *mon rêve*. Just like you saw the other night.”

His face transformed into a look of utter wonder at her words, and she suddenly had another flash of insight.

*He likes to give it, but he likes to receive it too.*

Hermione felt so thoroughly inexperienced compared to him that she was a bit nervous. But she told herself that doing it like this would be good for the first time. He would be able to lead her in a way. He could show her how he liked it.

She watched as he closed his eyes for a moment before shucking off his boxers and moving up toward her face. She saw him biting his lower lip, and he braced himself against the headboard as he lowered himself toward her. Hermione reached up to circle him with her hand, and he gasped. She licked her lips and opened her mouth and guided him in. She was watching him as she did it, and he was staring at her in disbelief until her lips closed around him, and he exhaled and closed his eyes to compose himself.

“Goddammit,” he muttered as she started to move her hand, and he started to move his hips. Hermione opened her throat to bring him in deep, and his jaw dropped as he watched in amazement.

“Nobody’s ever...” he started before he cut himself off with a groan as his head flopped forward.

Hermione felt a sudden surge of pride. She wasn’t sure what she was doing that was new for him, but whatever it was he seemed to love it. He might be on top, but it made her feel powerful as she felt him start to lose control above her.

Before long he was giving her shallow thrusts as she swirled her tongue around the tip. “Can’t... believe... I’m fucking... you like this...” he said between thrusts. “That mouth... I’m gonna...”

Hermione locked eyes with him, giving him permission to do it. He groaned, and she felt the hot liquid sliding down her throat as she swallowed.

She released him, and Draco just stared down at her like she was the most beautiful thing on earth.

### *Adoration.*

That’s what it was. It was adoration. Hermione could scarcely believe she had elicited that expression from *anybody*, let alone Draco Malfoy. Every pretense he had fell away, and all that was left was something so pure she wondered how she had ever doubted him and his feelings for her.

He slipped back down under the covers and pulled her to him tightly and just held on for a long while before pulling back and looking at her.

“Thank you for that. It was a fantasy I didn’t even know I had until I saw it in your head a couple weeks ago.”

She gave him a small smile. “I’ll admit I came up with it on the fly once I realized you were watching.”

“Minx,” he muttered, but he had a wide grin on his face before it dropped, and he sighed. “We need to talk.”

“Yes...” said Hermione slowly, suddenly nervous.

He seemed to notice her expression because his jaw tightened just a bit, but he said, “Look. Let’s get dressed and have some breakfast first. I’ll call Potter over and you can tell us both. Are you free at work this morning?”

She was a bit surprised he thought to ask her that, but also very pleased. She just nodded. “Yes, I had planned to do research today. I cleared my schedule. I should probably go in at some point so Belinda sees me. I’ve recently learned that she’s very observant and will tell anybody anything. But I can take some time with you and Harry this morning and then be quick about it when I go in.”

He looked relieved by this before he called “Topsy!”

Topsy appeared with a *CRACK!* and Hermione instinctively buried herself under the covers.

She heard a laugh in his voice when he said, “Topsy, Hermione needs some clothes.” Then to her slight mortification he peeled the covers back to expose her head. “What do you want to wear this morning darling?”

“Bloody hell,” she muttered. “Jeans and a T-shirt are fine for now.”

He grinned. “And any underwear is fine Topsy, as long as I gave it to her. And after we are done in here, please move Hermione’s things into my room and get rid of any underwear she bought for herself.”

She looked at him askance, but he gave her an unapologetic smile. “That way you don’t break my rules.”

“Fine,” she huffed as Topsy apparated away and reappeared a few moments later with the requested clothing. Hermione couldn’t help but catch her eye, and Topsy looked utterly delighted.

*At least she approves.*

Hermione started to get dressed with some consternation, though she couldn’t help but notice Draco’s eyes tracking her every move.

“Stop,” he said, as she grabbed her T-shirt. “Let me see you just like that first.”

She raised an eyebrow at him, but released her T-shirt and let him see her in the things he had given her. His eyes were roving over her, and she wondered if anybody had ever looked at her that intently before.

“Now turn around,” he said in a low voice.

Hermione turned slowly. She looked behind her to see Draco staring at her bum.

“Tits have always been my favorite,” he said quietly. “But your arse might convert me.”

Hermione felt herself blushing all the way to her toes. She had never felt that she was *that* pretty.

She slowly turned back around and saw he was still studying her, and Hermione bit her lip a little nervously. Her scars were on full display like this.

She tried not to have a complex about her scars. That’s why she didn’t cover them when she didn’t have to. But it had always been harder to own them than she cared to admit. They were ugly. They made her look more flawed than she was. Too many wizards and even witches had commented on them over the years for Hermione to really have confidence about them.

“You’re so beautiful,” he murmured as he continued to study her.

Hermione unconsciously touched her scar from Dolohov. Draco saw her of course and then looked at her face.

“You don’t believe me.”

She shrugged a little. “It’s just... it’s always been a thing.”

To her surprise he suddenly yanked the covers off of himself and stood up so she could see him clearly too.

“Do mine bother you?” he asked simply. “Or my Dark Mark?”

Hermione stared at him and allowed herself to look at him the way he looked at her. His *sectumsempra* scar was even larger than her scar from Dolohov. And it wasn’t the only one he had. His arms and chest were riddled with thin white lines. And his Dark Mark on his left forearm no longer moved, but it was still a deep black with the skull and snake.

She was certain he was the most gorgeous man she had ever seen.

“No,” she said. “They’re...” she hesitated, as he walked toward her.

“They’re what?” he coaxed, as she reached forward and started running her fingers over them.

“They’re way hotter than they should be,” she said.

He smirked at this, as she traced some of the pale lines.

“What were these from?” she whispered.

“Bellatrix’s knife,” he said. “You weren’t the only one who went under it that day. The Dark Lord liked to use it too. Though yours...” and now he traced the thin line on her neck where Bellatrix had held the knife against her. “I would kill her for this if Molly Weasley hadn’t already done it for me.”

Hermione’s eyes flicked up to him and she could see the truth in his eyes.

“That’s the day I decided the Weasleys weren’t so bad you know,” he added. “Watching Molly take down Bellatrix was fucking brilliant. Though Ginny’s still my favorite.”

She smiled a little at this as he continued.

“Please believe me when I tell you that yours don’t bother me either. Not at all. The only thing that bothers me about this,” and now he touched her scar from Dolohov, “is the fact that the fucker who did it to you is still breathing. But that’s a temporary problem.”

Her breath caught as she stared at him. “Surely...” she started.

“Azkaban’s too good for him,” said Draco simply. “And he wouldn’t be the first.”

Hermione's heart was pounding now. "You mean..."

Draco shrugged unconcernedly as he reached up to stroke her face. "Did you know that Potter and I were both told we were expected to kill other people on the same night? It was right after the Department of Mysteries. Potter was called to Dumbledore's office, and I was called to the Manor. Potter was told he would have to kill the Dark Lord, and I was told that I would have to kill Dumbledore. Both of our masters ordered us to become assassins in order to kill the other that night. Both of our masters asked us to sacrifice our bodies and our souls to complete our tasks if it was necessary. And both of our masters died eventually, though not in the way that either one of them had envisioned. Let's just say that Potter and I have an understanding about this sort of thing. And we make a very good team. It's nothing for you to worry about darling."

"I just...." she stared at him, utterly struck by what he had just told her.

He looked back at her serenely. "Don't think about it *mon ange*. That's my job, not yours. All I want for *you* to do is believe me when I tell you that you're beautiful. And you turn me on. And you do something to me that no witch has ever done before. Forget about the things any other wizard has ever said to you. They don't matter. They will never see you like this again. Just me."

He leaned down and kissed her until she was breathless before he pulled away.

"Can you do that for me?"

She nodded slowly, knowing that in that moment she was turning something over to him. She was giving him a part of her that she had never given to anybody else. She couldn't name it. She didn't know what it was. But she knew it was his, and it would never belong to anyone else.

She thought he must have sensed it because he suddenly looked nothing short of triumphant as he leaned down to kiss her again.

"Good," he said. "Now let's get dressed and have breakfast. I'll call Potter."

He released her and took one last appreciative look over her as he moved to his dresser to pull clothes out for himself. Hermione took a deep breath as she started to dress too.

*He's truly dangerous*, she thought. But instead of being afraid, something about it made her feel safe.

# Chapter 26: Research

## Chapter Notes

TW: Reference to rape in this chapter.

### Draco

Draco was playing with Hermione's curls as Potter strode into the library to hear what Hermione had to say. Potter cast one look at them and smirked.

"I take it you've gotten your head out of your arse then?"

Draco just flipped him off. "Blame Topsy. I didn't stand a chance once she decided to interfere."

He saw Hermione blush, but smile a bit, and Draco's suspicions were confirmed. Topsy had been working with Hermione to make him break. And she had woken Draco up last night so Draco would see Hermione in that negligee. She was devious, but he found he didn't mind. He had been a fucking idiot to push her away like he did.

That didn't mean this conversation would be easy. But Draco knew that whatever she told them he couldn't distance himself again. It was impossible, now that he had had her. She was in his blood now, and he would never get enough.

Potter turned serious as he looked at Hermione. "So tell us. Malfoy messaged me to say that you've been researching."

Hermione hesitated for a moment before looking between them both. "Before I do, there's something you should both know first."

Draco cocked an eyebrow at her, and Potter suddenly looked wary too.

"On Wednesday, Ginny sort of... waylaid me at lunch."

"Fuck," muttered Potter, and Draco felt his heart sink too. Potter told him about Ginny showing up to Hermione's flat that morning.

"Yes, well, she took me to a restaurant... in the muggle world," she added quickly, seeing Draco's fierce look. "And Theo, Blaise, and Luna were there too."

Draco felt his stomach clench at this, and he could tell Potter felt the same way.

"They know about Draco," she said simply. "Theo and Blaise figured it out years ago. Ginny's known that Harry's had an informant for a long time, and she figured out it was Draco when he pushed me away. And Luna..."

"Did Theo tell her?" asked Draco, suddenly angry at one of his best friends.

To his consternation, Hermione snorted and shook her head. "No, I'd wager Luna figured it out first. She's known since eighth year."

"Pardon?" asked Potter in disbelief.

Hermione shrugged. "You know Luna. She said Draco's aura changed after Rodolphus died..." she trailed off, and her eyes widened for a moment as she said this. She turned to Draco and gave him a questioning look, and he just raised his eyebrow back at her.

He wouldn't confirm it for her, but he knew that she knew.

Rodolphus had been the first one to die. When Draco turned the information about Rodolphus over to Potter, it had taken Potter some time to convince the higher-ups to do a proper raid. By the time he had worked through the chain of command, Narcissa had been training Potter in occlumency for a couple of months. There was a night when Potter fought her hard enough that he had broken into Narcissa's mind by mistake. It was one of those things that happened in occlumency training now and then, but what Potter saw when he did it signed Rodolphus's death warrant. Because by then Potter cared about Narcissa. They were living together, she was training him in occlumency for hours each day, and Draco learned that she was also mothering him. Potter had started to view Narcissa a bit like Molly Weasley.

Because of the thing he had seen, Potter intentionally slowed down the timing of the raid until Draco came to Grimmauld Place to visit over Easter break. When he arrived, Potter told Draco what he had seen in Narcissa's head: there was a night when Rodolphus snuck up on Narcissa, silenced her, and then raped her. It had happened at least once. It may have happened more than once. Narcissa asked Potter to keep it quiet, but Potter decided he wouldn't keep it quiet from Draco. And Draco would never forget Potter's next words.

*"I want to make him pay for what he did to her. But it has to look like an accident."*

That was the precise moment Draco Malfoy became friends with Harry Potter.

Together they hatched a plan and before Easter break was over, Draco took an international floo to Switzerland, apparated to the chateau where Rodolphus was hiding, crossed the wards as a member of the House of Black under Potter's invisibility cloak, and then cast some spells to weaken the stone walls all around Rodolphus's bedroom. When it came time for the raid itself, Potter and the others went in the middle of the night. Potter had simply "missed" when he cast a reducto hex toward Rodolphus. Instead of hitting Rodolphus it hit the weakened wall behind his bed, which collapsed and crushed him to death.

Neither he nor Potter had felt terribly guilty about it. As Potter pointed out, they both had years to get used to the idea that they would have to kill other people during the war. The

war had fucked them both up. They might as well put their mutual fuckery to good use.

They caught two other Death Eaters the normal way before it was time for the next one to die: Amycus Carrow became Potter's special target when Ginny had too much to drink one night, and she started to spill some stories to Potter about all the times Amycus singled her out for torture at Hogwarts. Draco knew that Potter had even searched her memories to watch some of it. And after he saw it for himself, he calmly informed Draco that Amycus needed to go the same way as Rodolphus.

Draco had no problem with this, because by then Harry Potter was on the very short list of people who had Draco's full loyalty.

This time Draco was in the room when the raid happened, polyjuiced as a bartender at a small gathering that included Amycus in the French Riviera. Draco simply poisoned Amycus and then signaled Potter on the galleon to start the raid. During the ensuing chaos, Draco slipped under the invisibility cloak and obliviated one of the other guests whom Draco confirmed was a Death Eater sympathizer. The guest confessed to poisoning Amycus's drink in retaliation for a business deal that fell apart, and nobody looked further than that.

They stuck with arrests after that until Draco learned more about Dolohov. He had been thinking about it anyway since Dolohov killed Remus Lupin, who was his cousin's husband and Teddy's father. But the news about Hermione made it a foregone conclusion that he would also die. Potter hadn't looked remotely surprised when Draco suggested it, and Draco wondered if Potter had been planning on doing it himself all along.

"So they all know then," clarified Potter after Hermione had told them about her conversation with their friends at lunch. "And three of them have known about it for years."

"Yes," said Hermione. "In fact..." she trailed off.

"What?" asked Potter with a strained look on his face. Draco could relate. This changed everything.

"Well, it's just that Luna was the one who suggested I work on finding Dolohov."

"And must you really do everything Luna suggests?" asked Potter with exasperation.

To Draco's surprise Hermione now looked directly at him and actually smirked. "Oh you know me. When Luna says come, I come."

Draco snorted, which broke some of the tension in the room, as Potter rolled his eyes. "Bloody hell Hermione, that is not necessary."

"Yes, well the point is, Luna suggested it, and she was right. I've made progress."

"Fine then, let's hear it," said Potter.

Hermione then began to speak, and Draco listened in amazement as she described everything she had learned and how she figured it out.

"So you see," she finally said, "even if you went to Archives yourself you can't trust what's in it. I'm certain the records have been altered or destroyed."

"I did go myself," said Potter slowly. "I never send requests for the archivists to search for me when it's something that involves Malfoy. But I bet you're right. I bet he removed those records on his first day there."

"Yes, precisely," said Hermione calmly. "So the low hanging fruit is a search of the Malfoy library. I found a few books last night that could be promising before I was... interrupted."

She barely glanced at Draco as she said this, but he saw her cheeks turn a pretty pink.

"Erm, right," said Potter a bit awkwardly.

"But if those don't have what we need..." she started.

"Then we're stuck again," finished Draco.

To his consternation, Hermione looked at him like he was dense.

"Of course you're not stuck."

"Explain," said Potter. "Because I already know Grimmauld doesn't have anything about this. Archives is unreliable. And Malfoy doesn't think there will be anything helpful here either. We've been working on Dolohov for a couple years, and Malfoy has looked before. We had nothing at all until Malfoy lucked out and met the Popas last spring."

Hermione actually rolled her eyes at this. "Well if you had bothered to *ask* me, I could have helped."

Draco felt a lurch of annoyance at this. "You've really done enough I think."

"Oh?" she asked coolly. "Is that so? Because my suggestion was going to be to try the Hogwarts library next. I go there fairly often when Archives doesn't have what I need. Or we could just skip to the end and go straight to Durmstrang. I assume I'm the only person you know who has spent a considerable amount of time in the Durmstrang library and has a standing invitation to visit anytime she wants."

Draco felt his jaw drop at this and he saw Potter's did too.

"You can get us into Durmstrang?" Potter asked incredulously.

"Yes of course," said Hermione. "Or rather, I can get myself into Durmstrang. I doubt they will let you in. It took a couple years for me to gain access to it, and they have never let any of my colleagues visit with me."

"One of us will polyjuice as you then," said Draco quickly. "You aren't going."

Hermione leveled him with a fierce look, and he gulped.

“And how, pray tell, do you plan on finding what you need without me? Durmstrang’s library has a unique system of organization. And Durmstrang is in Romania, and most of the titles are not in English. I don’t speak Romanian very well, but I know enough phrases to communicate when I go there. And I can read it well enough to find what we’re looking for.”

“A translation spell...” started Draco.

“Would raise suspicion if somebody saw you using one. I have never used them, and it’s one of the reasons I’m let in. Besides, you wouldn’t even know where to start looking in the first place. I have been to Durmstrang many times, and I know *exactly* where to look.”

Draco chewed his lip, a keen sense of anxiety welling up at the thought of Hermione on a mission. He glanced at Potter, and he could tell that Potter was in favor, but he would defer to Draco on it. Draco looked at Hermione one more time, and she gave him such a hard look that he threw up his hands.

“Fucking fine. If we can’t find what we need in here, then I want to try Hogwarts first. If *that* doesn’t work we’ll go to fucking Romania again. Maybe I can see the Popas while I’m there.”

Hermione arched an eyebrow. “What do you mean, while you’re there?”

Draco gave her a stern look. “You may be the one going into the library, but I’ll be with you under the cloak. Or Potter will. That’s not something I’m willing to compromise on.”

Potter nodded firmly at this, and Hermione glanced between them. “Fine,” she said. “If that’s what you insist on doing, that’s fine. We can start at Hogwarts. I’ll write to Minerva if we don’t find what we need here.”

Hermione rose, and Draco automatically rose too. He cast a fierce look at Potter, who rolled his eyes but rose as well.

“I’m going to head into the office,” she said. “I’ll bring the yearbooks home tonight in case we need them this weekend.”

Draco barely registered the fact that she leaned in to kiss him on the cheek before turning around and leaving. He was too preoccupied by the last thing she had just said.

*Home. She had just called the Manor her home.*

\*\*\*\*\*

There was something magical about watching Hermione Granger in research mode. It was almost good enough to make up for the fact that she had inserted herself into the hunt for Dolohov, despite Draco’s protests. Draco had seen glimpses of it over the years in Potter’s head, but Potter had a tendency to let his mind wander or goof off with Weasley whenever

Hermione was focused on a project. Now, however, Draco had a front row seat to watch her brilliant mind at work.

She was methodical, efficient, and an inordinately fast reader. Draco discovered she had a working knowledge of several languages, and she flew through texts in French, German, Italian, and the Romanian that appeared in the Durmstrang yearbooks without a translation spell.

She had returned to the Manor after several hours in the office, and she dropped her old beaded bag on one of the reference tables in the library and pulled out an absolute treasure trove of books, old files, and notes from her years at her job.

"I took everything I could find from the office," she said matter-of-factly. "And I broke into Bernard's office too and pulled my old files from there as well. His wards are useless."

Draco looked at everything in disbelief.

"I can't believe you stole..."

"I didn't *steal* it," she said firmly. "I *borrowed* it. There's a difference."

Draco suddenly recalled that Hermione had a rather different definition of theft than the average person. Not that this bothered Draco. If anything, it turned him on.

"I can't decide if I should yell at you for taking needless risks or fuck you because those light fingers of yours are giving me an erection," he said as he walked behind her and ran his hands over her breasts.

"I'm studying," she said firmly. "Later."

Draco sighed. This was the *only* part about Hermione Granger in research mode that Draco didn't like. She was so focused that nothing could distract her, not even Draco himself.

"You're awfully focused," he said a bit testily.

"Yes, well, the sooner we get Dolohov, the sooner I can date you publicly. We'll obviously keep it a secret as long as we need to, but I really wish the world knew that I'm yours."

She didn't even look at Draco as she said this, but Draco felt something so lovely and warm bloom inside of him at her words that he wondered how he didn't levitate off his chair.

And with that, Draco immediately forgave her for her dogged focus, and he buckled down too to help. They worked late into the night until she fell asleep on top of her books again. Draco then had the exquisite pleasure of carrying her to bed again, but this time he vanished her clothes, deposited her into his bed naked, and then joined her before he fell into a dreamless sleep next to her.

He thought she was a bit surprised to find herself naked the next morning, but she didn't protest as Draco spread her legs and made her come with his cock inside of her. He sat back on his knees while he thrust into her and stared down at his witch, curls wild and tits

bouncing while she shattered all around him. Draco told Hermione that she was perfect, and Hermione told Draco that she was all his. Draco could scarcely believe that he had gotten this lucky.

The other words he wanted to say to her were on the tip of his tongue, but Draco held back. She had only been his for a couple of days, even if she swore it had really been much longer than that. Still, he made sure to use words like ‘always,’ and ‘forever,’ to train her brain to think of him that way. When he finally told her, he desperately wanted her to say it back.

Saturday continued with more research and by the end of the day their circle of suspicious people had expanded, and they had traced a few others whom Draco had never met. But Gataki’s mother’s family was still nowhere to be found so the next stop would have to be Hogwarts.

“I’ll write to Minerva tomorrow,” said Hermione. “Let’s find a day next week when we can all go. You and Harry can polyjuice into a couple others from my department. I’ve brought guests before.”

“How will you get their hair?” asked Draco suspiciously. He didn’t relish the thought of Hermione taking any more risks.

“I’ll confund them of course,” she said, rolling her eyes. “It will be simple.”

Draco was reminded yet again that his girlfriend — for she had referred to herself that way, much to Draco’s delight — was both a Gryffindor and a capable witch who had helped take down Voldemort. He supposed he could trust her to collect a few hairs without giving the game away.

*Fucking fine.*

That evening Draco consented to adjust the wards for the thing Hermione had talked him into. Granted, it hadn’t taken very much to persuade him. Draco knew he could never tell her no when she told him she wanted something, especially when she added, “Our friends are the only ones I can tell about us.”

So of course Draco had consented to have the whole group over Saturday night, though he was still a bit put out with Blaise for parading a bunch of Italian men in front of Hermione.

Still, as he looked around at the group he had to admit it was a bit of a relief to hang out with their friends and finally be able to acknowledge what he did. And it was the first time he had been able to treat Potter as friend too, rather than a very casual acquaintance. Potter, it turned out, got along quite well with Blaise and Theo, and of course the girls got along well with all of them. It was an odd amalgamation of Gryffindors and Slytherins, with one Ravenclaw thrown in, but something about the group worked.

“I fail to understand how I’m the only one here who is single,” said Blaise, looking at the three couples with some dismay.

“You told me you were sowing your wild oats,” teased Hermione.

"And so I am. But now I feel a bit left out. I'm used to Draco and Theo being single with me."

"I heard Cho Chang is single again," said Hermione.

"Not Cho," said Potter quickly. "You know she cries all the time."

"Oh my God Harry, she cried on you when she was sixteen!" said Hermione, rolling her eyes at him. "And that was because the boy she actually wanted to date had been murdered! Give her a break!"

Potter looked a bit disgruntled at this. "She wanted to date me!"

"When Ron asked you what it was like when you kissed her, your exact words were, 'It was wet,'" said Hermione. "Trust me, she didn't want to date you."

Blaise wrinkled his nose. "No thanks."

"You could always call Daphne," said Draco. "She's on the prowl again."

Blaise rolled his eyes. "Daphne Greengrass is a social climber. You know that. And her nose is slightly off-center."

The witches all looked offended on Daphne's behalf.

"Really!" said Ginny. "She's perfectly attractive!"

"Blaise is like a cliff in the ocean," said Theo, a bit philosophically. "He's shallow at first before he falls deep. So he'll only look at the surface to start. But once he's past the surface she has to be something extraordinary to make him jump."

Draco gave Theo a rather impressed look.

Blaise, however, looked offended. "How on *earth* would you know that?"

"I've known you since we were eleven," said Theo, rolling his eyes at his best mate. "It was obvious. You had a hundred crushes, but once you looked past the pretty face most of them were so vapid you never made it to a second date."

"It's true," confirmed Draco.

"So stunningly beautiful and a strong personality?" asked Ginny, with her eyes narrowed now.

"I suppose so," said Blaise in a disgruntled voice.

"Yes," said Draco and Theo together. Blaise glared at both of them, and they just smirked as Potter snorted with laughter.

"How's your French?" asked Ginny.

Hermione and Potter were both looking at Ginny in confusion, until Hermione's eyes started to widen.

"His French is excellent," chimed in Draco.

"And how do you feel about younger women?" asked Ginny.

And now Potter's eyes started to widen too.

"I don't mind..." said Blaise. "As long as they aren't *very* young, you know."

Ginny smirked. "Do you know Gabrielle Delacour? Her older sister is Fleur. You'll remember Fleur, I'm sure. She was the triwizard champion from Beauxbatons, and she married my oldest brother."

Blaise's eyes widened as he remembered. "I don't know her, but I remember her..." he said. "Wasn't she just a child when Fleur pulled her out of the lake?"

"Yes, but she's twenty-one now," chimed in Potter, "and she's a quarter veela. She looks just like Fleur, but she has more of a temper. That's saying something."

Blaise's eyes started to shine, and Theo snorted.

"That's it then," said Theo. "He's done for. Nobody else will stand a chance compared to Gabrielle."

"Is she single?" asked Draco curiously.

"Yes, fairly recently in fact," said Ginny. "Fleur told me her last boyfriend tried to take a naked photo of her, and Gabrielle hexed him so hard he ended up in St. Mungo's for a week, and then she blew up his camera."

Blaise got a dreamy expression on his face.

"Merlin, he's in love already," muttered Theo, and the others laughed.

"So she's in London then?" asked Blaise suddenly.

Ginny nodded. "Yes. Her English is good, though French is her first language of course. I asked because when she gets worked up about something she tends to slip into French. I figured you should know something about it. But yes, she lives here most of the time. She actually works as a buyer for a high-end muggle fashion group. She's always going to Paris and Milan for runway shows. And she designs bespoke wizarding wear as a side business. She says she leans on muggle fashion quite a bit."

"Gabrielle was the one who told us where to get my dress for Draco's birthday party," added Hermione. "It was muggle, you know."

"Done," said Blaise. "When can I meet her?"

The others laughed.

"Tell you what, we can do one of these at my house in a couple weeks," said Potter. "I'll invite her, along with a few other Weasleys so it's not terribly obvious we're trying to set you two up. She comes to extended Weasley family events now and then, so it won't be that odd. And then you can take your shot."

Blaise looked ecstatic. Everyone was grinning at this, and Hermione caught Draco's eye and winked.

"I can come as Luna's date, and we can drag Blaise along I suppose. But how are you going to explain Draco?" asked Theo curiously.

Potter and Draco exchanged a look.

"You all know we have to keep Hermione and me quiet," said Draco. "But Potter and I have pretended to have a casual relationship for years thanks to Teddy. Potter can invite Andromeda and Teddy, and I'll come along to babysit to give Aunt Andy a break. Besides, I plan to create a more public relationship with Hermione soon, so that will give me an excuse to be seen with her. We just can't let people know the extent of it until Dolohov is handled."

They were all giving him a curious look, Hermione in particular.

"What are you on about?" asked Hermione.

Draco shrugged and pulled Hermione in for a kiss. "I think it's time we finally put together a deal, darling. It's going to take a lot of work. Lots of meetings. We'll have to keep it professional, but I plan to be seen with you quite a bit."

A slow smile started to blossom on Hermione's face.

"Alright then," she said. "I'll clear my schedule."

## Chapter 27: Beautiful

### Hermione

With the last of their guests departed, Hermione followed Draco up to his room, where he sent her to get changed for bed.

“Surprise me,” he said with a smirk.

Hermione walked into the bathroom, which had a large closet attached to it. Draco had showed it to her the day before with a negligent shrug.

“It’s always been empty. You can have it.”

Hermione walked in to find a closet that was the size of her bedroom at her flat. It was beautifully organized with a large dressing area in one corner near a window, and a large pouf in the middle. It even had a chandelier.

“Why have you never used this? It’s enormous!”

“I’m a bloke. I don’t need this much space,” he said simply. “Besides, it’s awfully feminine.”

It was true. Still, it surprised her. He had been using a basic reach-in closet with a dresser in his bedroom instead of this.

Hermione walked over to her night things, which Topsy had actually hung for her, as she ran a hand across the fabrics. Draco had been giving her some very charged looks throughout the evening, and it had gotten her worked up; so worked up she’d probably forget to cast the charm again.

She bit her lip as she reached for her wand and went ahead and did it. The charm would kill any of his sperm for the next few hours. They had had sex that morning, and it had taken her a couple hours to remember to cast it after they were done. When she mentioned it to Draco, he seemed totally unconcerned.

Hermione snorted. Evidently contraception was going to be up to her. She made a mental note to ask Topsy for a potion tomorrow.

Hermione finally made her choice and smiled a little bit as she slipped into Slytherin green and made her way back into the bedroom. His room was large and had a seating area with a fireplace, and she found Draco waiting patiently for her on one of the sofas. She faltered a bit when she saw he was still fully dressed, but he just gave her a slow, lazy smirk.

“Over here darling,” he said. “Let me see if you followed the rules.”

Hermione knew she did, and she thought he knew too. Still, she walked toward him slowly and felt her nipples hardening under his gaze. She saw his eyes flick down to watch, as he licked his lips. As she finally approached him, he ran a hand under her negligee and found nothing but bare skin.

“This is how I like you,” he said roughly. “Exactly like this.”

Hermione was breathing a little hard, but she just nodded.

“Now then, come sit,” and Draco guided her to sit between his legs, with her back against him.

“What are we doing?” she asked a little breathlessly.

“You’ll see,” he said as he ran one hand over her stomach, then across her breasts as the other ran up her thighs.

“Are you wet yet?” he asked, and she just nodded as she leaned back against him. Draco was giving her neck slow, lazy kisses as he danced his fingers over her, refusing to touch her where she wanted it.

“Excellent,” he said. “Now I had a realization this evening.”

Hermione felt her heart start to speed up.

“Theo said you looked nice, and you did. You looked beautiful. But I could tell you didn’t really believe him. And you still don’t believe me.”

He started tracing lazy circles on her thighs and dropping kisses along her neck and collarbone as he spoke.

“And then it occurred to me that you’ve never seen yourself, have you? You’ve never gotten to see how fucking perfect you are when you get off?”

Hermione slowly shook her head.

“That’s what I thought,” he said, and he reached for his wand under one of the cushions and flicked it. A large, gilt mirror appeared directly in front of them.

Hermione gasped as she saw herself. Her cheeks were flushed, and her eyes were dilated. Draco’s hands were under the hem of her negligee, and he was staring at her in the mirror, as he licked his lips again.

She felt him tug at the negligee, and she lifted herself just a bit so he could pull it over her head. Now she was completely naked, and she watched with huge eyes as he spread her legs apart so she could see.

“Look at that,” he murmured, as he traced around her opening. “So lovely and wet. I don’t even have to touch you there, and you become sodden for me.”

To Hermione's amazement he was right. She could always feel her arousal, but now she could see it too. It was turning her on to see herself like this. And as for Draco...

"You're still dressed," she groaned as he started to palm her breasts.

"Mmmm, is that a problem? I rather like it like this."

"It's unfair," she ground out.

"Does that bother you? I was under the impression you like it when I lead you."

He was smirking at her again like he already knew the answer to his question.

"It's just... it's just..."

God, but she *did* like it. She loved it when he led her like this. It felt hot and far too dirty, but she couldn't help it. Only a few months ago she had come out of a two-year relationship with a man who put sex on a pedestal and kept it out of her reach. And now she was with Draco, and he was *so* deeply sexual that she hardly knew where she was half the time.

"It's hot," he said simply, as he licked her neck. She watched his long tongue leave a trail in the mirror and she shuddered.

"It's hot when you're naked, and I'm not. It means I can touch you, but you can't touch me. Not really. And that gives me control. We both know you like it that way."

As if to emphasize his point, he pinched one nipple hard, and Hermione gasped. She knew he was right about this. And yet, she couldn't help but be contrary. It's who she was. It was what they did.

"Maybe you're wrong," she groaned as he swiped at her core.

He stilled for a moment, and his eyes flashed.

"We discussed this at my birthday party, *mon ange*," he said. "You *wish* you liked it on top. And maybe you do now and then. But you really want to be on the bottom. Besides," and now he gave another swipe, "your cunt tells me everything I need to know about your preferences."

Hermione's eyes fluttered closed as he started to stroke her with one hand and tease her nipples with the other.

"Open your eyes," he said roughly. "Watch yourself. See how lovely you are."

Hermione wrenched her eyes open, and as soon as she did it he shoved two fingers inside of her, and she gasped at the intrusion. She felt him hook his fingers up before drawing them out again and smearing them across her scar from Dolohov.

She groaned, and his eyes darkened as he looked at her in the mirror. "It's beautiful isn't it? You're beautiful."

Hermione just nodded a little. He was right. For the first time ever, she could see it. She *was* beautiful like this. It wasn't just lip service. It wasn't just nice words. She was with a wizard who had seen it, and now she was starting to see it too.

"Keep watching," he murmured.

He dropped his fingers back to her core and dipped them in again. This time when he pulled them out and brought them to her lips.

"Taste it," he said darkly. "Taste yourself. You're a fucking delicacy."

Hermione had *never* done this before, but instinctively she opened her mouth, and he slipped his fingers inside. Hermione was unbearably aroused now as she sucked, and she tasted herself for the first time. It was a little salty, a little musky. She didn't know if she would call it a delicacy exactly, but she could tell he believed it. And she had to admit it didn't taste bad at all. She swirled her tongue around his fingers, and she felt his breathing getting ragged behind her.

"Look at your cunt," he said. "Look at how fucking wet..."

Hermione's gaze dropped, and she saw he was right. *God* this was getting ridiculous. She might stain the couch if they kept this up. But she no longer cared, and she was certain he didn't either.

"Keep watching. Eyes open the whole time..."

And now he squeezed her breasts and licked her neck before pressing his fingers back inside of her. She caught him watching too as he finally pressed down on her clit, and she jerked.

"You're going to come for me now," he said. "And you're going to look in the mirror the whole time. You need to see yourself like this. It's the most incredible thing."

He started moving his fingers in and out, and almost unconsciously Hermione's hips rocked too. He pressed down on her clit and swirled it, and Hermione started to gasp and moan.

"Watch," he demanded, and Hermione did. She glanced at his face in the mirror, and he was giving her a dark, feral look as he studied every single thing he was doing to her. And now her gaze was wrenched back to herself as she watched her skin flush, her pupils blow out, and her jaw drop as she moaned.

"Now darling. Come *now*," and Hermione broke. She watched in amazement as her orgasm washed over her, and damn but she *was* beautiful. She was stunning. She believed him. She believed everything he said.

"Get on all fours," he said roughly. "I have to get inside of you."

He gently pushed her forward onto the floor in front of the mirror and then he dropped behind her, pulling his cock out as he did it. Hermione barely had time to get situated before she felt him pushing into her entrance from behind. They both groaned at the feeling. She

had never done it this way before. It was tighter somehow, and yet he was hitting her in some deep spot nobody had ever reached. It was driving her mad.

“Look,” he said. “Look at yourself like this.”

Hermione’s gaze flew back to the mirror, and she suddenly realized she had fantasized about this, but she had never gotten it quite right. She had never imagined Draco’s face like this, looking at her like he was about to combust and she was the reason why. She had never imagined *herself* accurately either. She didn’t know she could look like this – so wild and unrestrained practically begging for a man to just take her to places she had never been before. It was erotic, seeing herself with Draco buried into her, and she felt herself closing in on another orgasm as he continued to thrust.

“Harder,” she gasped. “I can take it.”

Draco’s eyes widened, and his nostrils flared just a bit as he gripped her hips and lost all restraint. Hermione was shaking and moaning again, and then finally she felt herself wrench apart as she crossed that moment.

She forced her eyes to stay open to watch Draco as he screwed up his face. “Fuck,” he gasped. “Fuck...” and then he was spurting into her, something hot and slightly sticky filling her channel completely.

He pulled out and Hermione nearly collapsed forward as she felt the cum start to drain out of her, and she groaned. She just closed her eyes. She couldn’t move. She could barely think.

She felt him stirring behind her and a moment later the cleansing spell was cast over her. She groaned again, and she thought she heard him chuckle as he gathered her into his arms and carried her to bed.

“You keep doing that,” she murmured.

“I keep doing what, darling?” he asked.

“Carrying me places.”

“I only carry you to one place, and that’s to bed,” he retorted as he gently deposited her.

Hermione sighed and stretched. “I’m naked,” she pointed out.

“I know,” he said.

“I should...” she started.

“You should stay just like that,” he said.

“What about the house rules?” and she forced her eyes open to look at him. She could see he was grinning to himself as he started to undress for bed.

“I’m amending the house rules. Negligees or nudity. Either. Both. All.”

“You’re too much,” she said.

“And you’re beautiful,” he replied, as he slipped into bed next to her and pulled her close.  
“Now tell me. Do you believe me?”

Hermione studied his face, and she gave him a shy smile. “I do,” she said.

His eyes widened just a bit, and Hermione suddenly realized what she had said. She blushed, but she didn’t try to take it back. She didn’t want to.

“Do you want me to keep telling you that?” he asked more softly now.

“I do,” she said, and his eyes started to shine.

“Do you want to be mine?”

“I do,” she said quietly.

He reached up and traced her lip with his thumb. “Do you want to be with me for a very very long time?”

“I do,” she whispered.

He was giving it to her again: that look of adoration, like she was the only woman in the world. He appeared almost stunned, as though he couldn’t believe she would feel this way about him. But how could she not, especially when he took the time to make her feel like this about *herself*?

“I do too,” he whispered back. “So fucking much. You have no idea. I just... I do.”

Hermione gave him a slow, brilliant smile, and he smiled back too. He watched her for a long moment before she finally said, “Nox.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Minerva responded to Hermione’s owl within a day, agreeing that Hermione and two of her colleagues could come to Hogwarts the following weekend for research. And so, with their hunt for Dolohov at a standstill for several days, Hermione decided to work on her other project with Draco.

“So this deal we’re developing,” she said at breakfast on Monday morning. “Tell me about it.”

“You tell me,” he said. “I’ve been waiting for you to tell me what you want for weeks now.”

Hermione pursed her lips. “You haven’t given me any guidelines though.”

“Sure I did. I told you to dream big. I mean it. Give me your wish list.”

Hermione’s heart leapt, but she forced herself not to get too excited yet. “Does that mean you would be open to topics like house elves?” she asked carefully.

“Absolutely,” he said without hesitation. “In fact, I will reject any proposal you give me that doesn’t list that first.”

Hermione was a bit stunned by this, but amused despite herself. “And why is that?”

“Because I know that’s what you want,” he said simply. “You’ve wanted it ever since you learned about house elf enslavement. Don’t forget, I’ve watched you lecture about S.P.E.W. in Potter’s head for years.”

Hermione bit her lip. “Do you think it’s possible?”

He shrugged. “Anything is possible. And if we work together on it, you may be surprised.”

She smiled at him now. “What surprises me is the fact that you’re willing to tackle something like the house elves, but you won’t consider a tariff reduction on brie.”

He wrinkled his nose. “I told you, I don’t give a shit about things like tariff reductions. And neither do you. I want to work on your ideas because they will make an impact. That’s the real reason I’ve rejected every proposal that’s come my way since I joined the French Ministry, you know. They were all terrible and a colossal waste of time. They didn’t actually *do* anything. But I want to do things. I help Potter catch Death Eaters. And I want to help you with your wish list.”

Hermione felt her breath catch at this as she imagined it. However, she realized there was a minor problem with this plan.

“You don’t know what my wish list is yet. I haven’t given it to you.”

“That’s OK,” he said. “I don’t have to know what’s on your wish list to know I want to help. I know you. And I know that whatever you come up with will be better and more profound than anything Lorraine could have come up with in ten lifetimes.”

Hermione was watching him in awe now. “Do you really think we can do it?”

He raised his eyebrows at her. “You know we won’t get everything, at least not on the first try. And it’s going to take time to coalesce support and votes. But I told you I would do my best to give you anything you want, and if I don’t succeed the first time I’ll keep trying. Besides, you’re Hermione Granger. You’re the Brightest Witch of the Age and the sister of Harry Potter. He would do absolutely anything for you, even stump for house elf rights. And I’m Draco Malfoy. I’m the head of one of the oldest and wealthiest pureblood families in Europe, and my mother is my secret weapon. She’s nearly unstoppable when she wants something. If the Potters team up with the Malfoys it’s going to change the world.”

Hermione felt overwhelmed.

*I've found him, she suddenly realized with amazement. I've found the wizard who wants the same things I do.*

She stood up and ran to the other side of the table to launch herself at him, kissing him frantically. He laughed as he caught her and kissed her back.

After a long while he pulled away to look at her. “So what do you say then, darling? Will you dream big for me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said in excitement. “I can’t wait.”

\*\*\*\*\*

With the promise of Draco’s help secured, Hermione wasted no time in finally putting together her list of things she wanted from France. As Draco requested, the first thing on her list was “Institute Laws Against House Elf Enslavement,” and then she came up with twenty more things until it ended with “Prcleared Travel Program Between Britain and France for Frequent Floo Network Users.” Hermione had traveled between countries often enough that she wondered how something like this wasn’t already in place, at least through most of Europe. After all, the muggles had made Europe practically borderless already. Surely witches and wizards could too.

Draco looked at her list, declared himself satisfied, and promptly scheduled a meeting in the office to flesh out the plan in order to present it publicly.

“But you’ve never met any of us in the office before,” said Hermione in confusion.

“That’s because I’ve never had anything to work on before. But now I do. Belinda booked a conference room that’s ours until further notice. We’ll work in there so others can see us. It will make it less suspicious when we are seen together outside of work.”

Hermione had to acknowledge he was right about this last point, and soon she was holed up with Draco most afternoons as they worked on the plan together. Draco, it transpired, had reserved a conference room with floor to ceiling glass walls so everybody else in the department could see that they were working, but few knew exactly what they were working on.

The only thing Hermione’s colleagues knew was that she was suddenly asking staffers to do things like “model estimated house elf contributions to gross domestic product if the population received a living wage for their work” and “prepare a report on national standards for magical education from primary school through Hogwarts.”

Draco brought in his own group of staffers from Paris. He rotated the groups who were doing the French equivalent of the research Hermione was requesting. To Hermione’s

amusement he never allowed them to stay overnight, and he sent them home to France each day.

“My department doesn’t have the budget for extended hotel stays for all of them, and I’m sure as fuck not letting them stay at the Manor with us. Besides, sending them home each day will reinforce your point about international travel.”

The only other person who knew about the whole list was Harvey Cooper. He cornered Hermione after seeing Draco buried in paper in their conference room for several days and demanded an explanation.

“Don’t get me wrong, Hermione, I’m thrilled he’s here and working on something with you. But I really need to know what you’ve promised him.”

Hermione hesitated but knew she would have to tell him at some point. So she started by telling Harvey the reasons Draco had always been so intransigent in the first place and the kinds of things he actually cared about. Then she pulled out her list and showed it to him.

Harvey’s eyes widened as he read it. “You want a free trade deal with France? As in a single market economy?”

Hermione shrugged. “The muggles have gotten pretty close to it with much of Europe.”

He eyed her curiously now and then looked down at her list again.

“And free travel between countries... that’s actually not a bad idea...” he muttered.

Hermione smiled to herself. “I’m surprised you haven’t mentioned the house elves.”

Harvey just rolled his eyes at this. “You’ve always wanted to free the house elves, everybody knows that. I’ve been waiting for you to tell me you plan to do it ever since you joined this department.”

Hermione’s jaw dropped, and he just chuckled at the look on her face as he handed her list back to her.

“I don’t know how much of this you two will get passed, but you’re welcome to work on it for as long as it takes. And I’d wager once some of this is done with France other countries will come to the table on these items too. I’ll admit, it’s far more interesting than itemized trade agreements.”

Hermione beamed, relieved that her boss was on board.

As for Draco, he just waved off her concerns about presenting the idea to his own boss. “He feels the way I do,” he said simply. “Why do you think I’ve never been pulled from Britain with the way Harvey Cooper’s complained about me over the years?”

Hermione also wondered how long Draco could live in England, given that he was supposed to be working in France.

"Indefinitely," he said simply. "I've always worked from home for the most part. They know my family seat is here."

Still, Hermione committed to making a trip to Paris to return the favor at some point in the near future. This suggestion was met with some teasing from Draco.

"But you'll have to speak French," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "I speak French."

"I know," he agreed. "I heard you that night at the restaurant. That's how I knew your excuses about declining France were full of shit."

Hermione just wrinkled her nose at him as he laughed. "Come to bed, darling," he said. "We did a lot of work this week. And tomorrow we're visiting Hogwarts."

And so Hermione did. She slipped into Draco's favorite negligee and tangled herself up with him as he ran his hands over her bare hips.

"Thank you, *mon rêve*," she said suddenly. "Thank you for giving me France. If we can accomplish even a single thing on my list it will fulfill so many dreams for me."

He smiled softly. "Always, *mon ange*. Always."

## Chapter 28: Fourth Finger, Left Hand

### Draco

Minerva McGonagall looked exactly the same. Draco tried not to grimace as his old Transfiguration professor, who was now the Headmistress, cast her eye over him before giving Hermione a warm smile and then sending them on their way to the library.

Granted, he didn't look like Draco. And Potter didn't look like Potter. Both of them had taken polyjuice that Potter had nicked from auror stores after Hermione unceremoniously confounded a couple of staffers in the loo. Of course that meant that he and Potter were both female today. Draco had taken polyjuice before, but never like this.

"How the fuck do women stand it?" he grumbled, as he adjusted his bra. "This thing is like a vice."

"God, tell me about it," muttered Potter. "I had no idea it was this painful."

"Yes, well, Ginny and I aren't exactly the same size as Laura and Patty. Bra sizing is more precise than you might expect. For instance, mine is..."

"Oh please stop," begged Potter.

Hermione just rolled her eyes at him. "Honestly, Harry, this is the twenty-first century. Women wear bras. Just because men insist on being so *ignorant* about..."

"Hermione, spare me," groaned Potter. "I get it, OK? Bras suck. I won't argue with you there. I'll even support a bra-cott if you want. But I don't need to hear details about your bra size and how it differs from Malfoy's tits right now, OK?"

Draco snorted as Hermione huffed, but she fell silent as they made their way toward the library.

"Miss Granger," said Madam Pince as she stared over her beaky nose at the three of them. "And Miss Wright and Miss Jones."

"Good afternoon," said Hermione cordially. "We're here to do some research on one of my counterparts in Romania. We know where we're going."

Madam Pince sniffed and looked at them skeptically, but Hermione just gave her a firm smile and then strode past, leading Draco and Potter toward a section of the stacks on the third floor. The library was mercifully empty, as it was the last weekend before students returned for the school year. They had timed this visit strategically.

"Here," said Hermione, as she led them toward a section with book after book of family trees. "We need to find Ana Peycheva."

And so they began to search. On and on it went, hitting dead end after dead end. They broke for a lunch that Topsy had packed for them in Hermione's beaded bag before resuming their search. Draco and Harry were on their sixth dose of polyjuice, before Hermione finally found it.

"Here!" she said. "Here, this must be it! Though it doesn't tell us much we don't already know..."

She had been looking through birth and marriage records in Greece. She finally found records for an Ana Peycheva who had married a Constantine Gataki in Greece in 1974. The couple registered the birth of a son named Damien in 1976.

"The marriage certificate gives her date and town of birth," said Hermione. "That should help narrow it down quite a bit. But Hogwarts' records for most of Eastern Europe aren't very good. We will have to go to Durmstrang to learn more about her while she lived in Bulgaria."

Finally conceding defeat, Hermione slipped the records into her bag, ignoring the knowing looks from Draco and Potter.

"It's not *stealing*. I'll bring it back once he's caught."

Too eager to take his bra off to argue, Draco just caught her arm and escorted her out. One long walk to Hogsmeade later, they were apparating back to their respective destinations, and Draco was pulling Hermione up the lane to the Manor.

"I'll be myself in ten minutes. I've got to get this thing off."

"You are *not* oggling some staffers boobs under polyjuice."

"Darling, that is not at all what I..."

"Draco Lucius Malfoy, you will stay exactly the way you are until your polyjuice wears off. It's bad enough you had to use the loo like that, you are *not* taking your bra off until you are back to yourself!"

Hermione actually stomped her foot at this, and Draco huffed but decided to let her have this one. "Fucking *fine*. But I still don't know how you wear this thing all day long."

He flung himself into a chair in the library and counted down ten more minutes until finally he felt himself start to change.

"Ow, ow, *ow!*" he said as the band cut into his back and the underwire dug into his chest.

"Oh don't be such a baby!" hissed Hermione, as she helped him take the shirt and bra off. "There. Better?"

Draco scowled. “Next time I’m polyjuicing into a bloke. That was too weird.”

Hermione just rolled her eyes. “Well you may get your chance. Durmstrang is next.”

Draco looked at her a bit grimly, but nodded. “Fine. We’ll make a plan with Potter.”

\*\*\*\*\*

It was the following week, and Hermione was tied up with Italy, finalizing their trade deal. Draco appeared at the Ministry for a couple of hours to check on his staffers before heading back to the Manor to begin working through the Durmstrang problem.

The biggest issue, as far as Draco was concerned, was that they needed Hermione to go in herself. She was right that he and Potter would never be able to find what they needed without her help. But it would be challenging for her to get into Romania without Florin Rosu learning about it. Even if they snuck her in with an illegal portkey or through muggle channels, Draco was sure that news of her would make its way to Florin eventually. Draco had learned he was far too well-connected, and it was likely he would hear she was in the country once she appeared at Durmstrang. It could affect her job if she didn’t go through authorized channels to enter the country.

Draco was turning this problem over in his mind when Topsy appeared in his study.

“Master!” squeaked the elf. “I is needing to speak to you sir.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked with concern.

“Topsy is wanting to know if Master has chosen a ring yet?”

Something in Draco’s heart lurched. “Erm. Pardon?”

“A ring for Mistress Hermione. Topsy can go to Gringotts for Master if Master is requiring it.”

“Topsy... she’s been my girlfriend for a week.”

“She is being Master’s girlfriend for twelve days, Sir.”

“Right. And I’m certain that’s going to be a bit fast for her.”

“But Master is loving Mistress, yes?”

“I...”

He had only admitted it to himself. But of course Topsy knew everything about him. “Yes,” he finally said.

“Then Master is needing a ring sir. ‘Tis time for Master to settle.”

“Topsy...”

She just gave him a stern look, and to his consternation Crookshanks suddenly slunk out from around the corner and sat next to Topsy, studying Draco with his tail twitching.

Draco narrowed his eyes at both of them.

“Look,” he said carefully. “I love her, and I want to do it. Hell, I would marry her tomorrow if I could. But we haven’t talked about it. Our relationship is still too new. And she has said no to a proposal before. Viktor Krum proposed to her after two years, and she turned him down.”

Topsy waved a hand in the air dismissively. “Mistress is not loving Mr. Krum. ‘Tis not relevant.”

Draco suddenly seized on this. “Did she tell you she loves me?” he asked eagerly.

“Topsy can tell she does.”

Draco’s hope imploded. Topsy was just making assumptions. Hermione hadn’t said anything.

“Look Topsy, I’m not proposing until I know that she loves me. And I need to finish my job with Potter first too.”

Topsy glared at him. “Master shall choose a ring.”

“*Topsy,*” he said in disbelief. She was using the same tone of voice she used to use on him as a child when he wasn’t following his parents’ orders. This suddenly made him suspicious.

“Did Mother put you up to this? I haven’t even told her about it.”

“Mistress Narcissa is aware of Mistress Hermione and is very pleased,” said Topsy airily. Draco couldn’t help but notice she was being intentionally vague about whether or not his mother was interfering through the little elf.

Draco huffed. “Tell Mother I’ll choose a ring when I’m sure Hermione feels the same way,” he said as he rose.

He started to walk toward the door and Crookshanks darted in front of him. He began to hiss.

“Oh you cannot be serious...” he muttered as he stared at the cat.

Draco dodged left, and the cat blocked him. Then right, and he was thwarted again.

“As I said, Master will choose a ring,” said Topsy calmly, as she watched Draco try and fail to make it past the cat. “Topsy will go to Gringotts, but Master must order it so the goblins will release the items to me.”

Draco glared at the cat. He was sorely tempted to hex it, but Hermione would probably murder him if he did that. He had overheard her talking to it, and it was evident to Draco she loved this fucking cat more than almost anything. Draco was fairly certain she would choose the cat over him if it came down to it.

“Goddammit...” he muttered.

Then he turned to look at Topsy. “Fucking *fine*, please go to Gringotts and pull out every ring we have. And do it today while she’s gone.”

Topsy bobbed and smiled. “Right away Master,” and she disappeared with a *CRACK!*

Crookshanks gave a contented meow and turned his back on Draco, bottlebrush tail held jauntily in the air as he walked out of the room.

“Unbelievable,” he muttered, as he flung himself into the chair to wait for Topsy. He suspected she would be back any minute.

Unbidden, Draco started to think about putting a ring on Hermione’s finger. He had to admit he wanted it. He wanted it a lot. It would be one step closer to making sure she belonged to him permanently. He wanted to tie her to him so thoroughly that she would never be able to leave, and he sensed a ring would clinch it for him. She would never say yes unless she was prepared to go the whole way. Krum’s failed proposal proved that.

But Merlin, it had only been twelve days. It was true he had committed himself to her well before that, and he thought she might have as well. But he couldn’t be certain. His mother and Topsy must have lost their fucking minds.

Then again, maybe it didn’t hurt to go ahead and pick out a ring. It didn’t mean he would actually give it to her anytime soon. He could hang onto it for months or even years if he had to until he was sure he knew what her answer would be. He knew that once he picked one out he wouldn’t change his mind about it. He was the type to commit to a decision once it was made. Whatever he picked out would be hers whenever she was ready for it. And it would get Topsy and his mother off his back for now.

As though his thoughts summoned her there, Topsy suddenly appeared with a *CRACK!* carrying a large briefcase that she brought over to Draco.

Draco raised an eyebrow.

“‘Tis every ring in the Malfoy vault,” she said, as she opened it with a flourish.

Draco’s eyes widened a bit as he took in row after row of rings. He lifted the tray out and found another tray below it and then another one below that.

“I had no idea,” he muttered. There had to be over a hundred to choose from: round, princess, emerald, oval, the choices went on and on. Some were set in yellow gold and some in white. Some had other stones accompanying them and others just featured diamonds. To

Draco's eye, everything looked goblin made, which didn't surprise him. The Malfoys only bought the best.

"These are all engagement rings then?" he said with some incredulity. There were far more rings here than Malfoy wives.

"Some engagement rings, some anniversary rings, some for other occasions Sir," said Topsy.

Draco thought about this. "Do you think she would want her own? I can get her one that's new."

"Topsy thinks Mistress would appreciate an heirloom," said the elf. "And it has the added advantage of being done today."

Draco glanced at Topsy. "Topsy, if new is better then surely this can wait a few weeks until I can have something made for her."

"New is not better Sir," said the elf. "Mistress likes heirlooms very much. Topsy knows this. Master can always purchase something new for Mistress at a later date if he wishes."

Draco turned this over in his mind for a moment and decided that Topsy was telling the truth about Hermione's preference for heirlooms. Draco had paid attention and questioned her gently over the weeks he had gotten to know her, and he determined that nearly everything she wore was a Potter heirloom, along with a couple of pieces from her grandmother mixed in. In fact, he had never seen her wear *anything* new except for those tiny earrings she was wearing around the clock in her new piercings. She told him they were temporary, and she would take them out once her ears fully healed. They were nothing more than a placeholder.

"Alright," he said slowly. "Something heirloom then."

Draco scanned the choices, scarcely believing he was doing this today. He thought of Hermione and the things she gravitated to. He had seen her wear gemstones and pearls on occasion, but she wore diamonds more than anything else. She had a strong preference for the diamond stud earrings from the Potter vault, along with the matching pendant that she had continued to wear ever since she tempted him with it a couple weeks ago.

*Just diamonds, then. Classic. Beautiful. Timeless.*

He quickly narrowed it down to several rings before he made his choice: a round solitaire set on an eternity band of tiny diamonds that circled the whole finger. It was stunning in its simplicity, and though the center stone was large it wouldn't overwhelm her. He thought it would blend perfectly with everything he had ever seen her wear.

"This one," said Draco, pulling it out. "You can return everything else," he said.

Topsy gave him a toothy grin. "Tis perfect for her, Sir. Mistress will love it."

"Thank you Topsy. I'm going to hang onto it until the moment is right. You're free to go."

Topsy gave one last bob before apparating away, no doubt to inform Narcissa that he had picked something out. Draco was staring at it, twirling it around in his fingers as he thought about seeing Hermione wear it. He knew it would affect him. It would be the most public declaration he could make for her. That familiar surge of possessiveness rose up as he considered it. Just like her tits and her cunt, Draco was suddenly determined that *nothing* would touch the fourth finger of her left hand except for rings that Draco gave to her. If he got his way, then this one would be first, and then he would add a wedding band, and then another band that represented their children...

He sighed as he thought about it. He knew it wouldn't happen any time soon, but that spot on her left hand was reserved for him. It had to be. He wouldn't survive it if it ever belonged to somebody else.

Suddenly, as if on cue, his galleon burned.

*I proposed to Ginny last night.*

Draco promptly dropped the ring in shock.

*Holy fuck. And?*

*She said yes.*

Draco grinned broadly at this. He had no idea why Potter had dragged his feet for so long, but Draco was very happy that he had finally done it. Then again...

*Congrats mate. What does the ring look like?*

*Classic three stones. Middle is bigger than the other two.*

Draco exhaled and had to smile a bit. A ring exactly like that had made it onto his own short list. Draco knew it was a lovely design. But he was also pleased that Hermione's ring would look different from Ginny's.

*I bet she loved it. That's fantastic.*

*Thanks. We're going to wait until Dolohov is gone before we do it. I want you to be there.*

Draco's eyes widened, as it suddenly occurred to him that maybe *this* was why Potter had waited so long to propose. Had he waited so Draco could come to the wedding without blowing his cover?

*Is that why you waited?*

*Partially. I needed to finish the inner circle for myself first. But we're almost there. And once Dolohov is gone you can stand up with me.*

Draco felt himself slowly starting to smile at this. He knew Potter was right. Dolohov wasn't the very last Death Eater, but he was the last member of the inner circle. Once he was gone, Draco could retire. His sins would be forgiven. His witch would be avenged. And

then he could finally go public with Hermione and be friends with Potter too. He got a rush from his work with Potter, but he was ready to move forward.

*I wouldn't miss it. Let's celebrate this weekend.*

*That's the plan. Big party at my place. We'll set up Blaise and Gabrielle at the same time.*

*You're on.*

Draco smiled broadly at this and then picked up the ring from the desk as he thought of Ginny and Potter. They had broken up during the last year of the war, but they had gotten back together the day the Dark Lord was killed. From that point forward, it had taken Potter more than eight years to pick out a ring.

It had only taken Draco twelve days to do the same thing.

Draco shrugged as he smiled a little. *Each to their own.*

## Chapter 29: Little Louis

### Hermione

Hermione couldn't have been happier for Harry and Ginny. She floo'd over well before Draco to give the appearance that they were arriving separately and also to gush without him watching. She was certain he would tease her mercilessly if he could see it.

"Oh my God Gin, it's gorgeous!" she squealed as she looked at Ginny's ring. The three stones shone brilliantly, and Ginny wiggled her fingers with uncharacteristic glee. Ginny had always been a bit of a tomboy, but even she couldn't contain her excitement that Harry had finally done it.

"You're going to be one of my bridesmaids, right?" asked Ginny eagerly. "You and Luna both."

"Of course," said Hermione, who warmed at the thought of it. "I can help with the planning. Luna can be in charge of..."

"Emotional support," supplied Ginny.

"That's perfect," smiled Hermione.

"Harry's going to ask Ron to be a groomsman of course. But he wants Draco too."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Seriously?"

Ginny nodded. "Seriously. I had no idea they were that close, but apparently they are. We're going to wait until Dolohov is gone before we set a date. I rather think that's why Harry waited so long."

Hermione smiled softly at this. It was rather heartwarming that her boyfriend and best friend were as close as they were. And it certainly made things easier on her.

A half hour passed as more and more Weasleys, friends, and work colleagues arrived for the impromptu celebration of Harry and Ginny's engagement. It wasn't too long before Hermione saw the flash of floo, and Draco stepped out with a hand on Teddy's shoulder, followed by Andromeda and to Hermione's surprise, Narcissa.

Hermione gulped. She hadn't seen Narcissa since she moved in with Draco, though he assured her that his mother was aware of it. To Hermione's relief, Narcissa caught her eye and winked.

*She doesn't hate me then.*

Hermione knew she had to maintain a bit of distance from Draco and his mother, but some polite chatting wouldn't go amiss.

"Narcissa, it's lovely to see you again," said Hermione as she walked forward.

Narcissa looked at her eagerly. "Oh the pleasure's all mine, I can assure you. I do hope you have been well... especially recently?"

Hermione tried to hide her grin at this, but Narcissa's eyes were twinkling. "Yes, I've been quite well, especially recently."

"I'm so happy to hear it, my dear. I rather felt it has been a long time coming."

Hermione looked at her in surprise. "Really?"

"Oh yes," said Narcissa calmly. "The number of letters I received over the years complaining about you made me awfully suspicious. I'm afraid that teenage boys can be rather clueless about their own feelings."

Hermione gaped at her. "But surely not..."

"Oh I don't think he realized it," she said. "But you have always held his attention in one way or the other. Always. I'm quite glad you two were able to... reconnect. Through work I mean," she added quickly as one of Harry's colleagues with the Ministry approached her to say hello.

"Yes, we've been working together quite a bit," said Hermione. "In fact, there's something I need to speak with him about. John, nice to see you too," she added as she slipped away, her mind swirling about Draco.

Had he really always been interested in her? Had he watched her, thought about her, maybe even hated her as a teenager, but still wanted to know everything about her?

*Yes, said a small voice in her head. Yes he has. And that's why we both fell so hard so fast once we grew up.*

Hermione smiled a bit as she searched for the tall blonde head of her boyfriend. She didn't see him in the living room, but guests were spilling out onto the patio and gardens, and Hermione went outside to see if she could find him there.

She came to a complete and sudden halt as she watched him talking seriously to Teddy about something. And then a moment later Bill and Fleur walked over with their children, and Draco clapped Teddy on the shoulder who straightened up. Hermione watched in slight disbelief as Teddy took Victoire's hand and bowed over it. Victoire, aged 7, started to giggle as all the adults smiled.

Then Draco crouched down and introduced himself to Victoire and Dominique, who was five. He also waved at Louis, who was three and clinging to Fleur's leg. She could tell that Louis was very interested in Draco, but also a bit shy. Draco was giving him space to warm up.

Hermione couldn't help herself. She wandered over and caught his eye. His expression warmed when he saw her.

"Hermione, lovely to see you here," he said as he grabbed her hand and kissed the back of it.  
"I was just telling Bill and Fleur that we've been working together quite a bit."

"Yes, working with Draco has been quite the... experience," said Hermione, trying not to laugh at the expression on Draco's face.

"Well we have heard about you for years from Teddy," said Bill, now turning to Draco.  
"Glad you could make it."

Draco gave a casual shrug. "I told Aunt Andy she could have a day off. I'm on official babysitting duty today."

"I'm not a baby!" interjected Teddy.

Draco turned a rather stern eye to him. "Perhaps not, but the last time you were left on your own you snuck out of the house and disappeared for three hours. Your grandmother was frantic."

"I just went to the stream to play!" he insisted.

"Yes, you went to a large body of water without adult supervision."

"I can swim!"

"That doesn't make it acceptable," said Draco. "So I'm here to keep an eye on you. Besides, it's been awhile since we've worked on your manners, and this is a perfect opportunity. Potter's not been keeping up with it."

Teddy grumbled a bit at this, but then sighed. "Fine. I'll work on manners. But can I go flying first? Please?" he added at Draco's stern look.

"Not yet. You need to greet other people, and then we'll be having an early dinner. You can fly after dinner."

Hermione, Bill, and Fleur were staring at each other in slight amazement at this exchange, but they didn't interrupt. Before long, Gabrielle had joined them too, and then Hermione saw Blaise quickly making his way over.

"Blaise!" said Draco, shaking his hand. "Let me introduce you to the group."

They made the introductions, and then to Hermione's surprise Blaise kneeled down and put his hand on his heart as he looked at Victoire and Dominique.

"*Les petites princesses! Aussi adorable que ta mere et ta tante.*"

The two girls giggled as he dramatically kissed the back of their hands and pretended to swoon.

“Fucking Italians,” Hermione heard Draco whisper under his breath.

“Draco, is *that* what I’m supposed to do?” asked Teddy with some disgust, as he surveyed Blaise, who was still twinkling at the girls.

“Absolutely not,” said Draco firmly, though Blaise just smirked at him as he rose and then immediately engaged Gabrielle in conversation in rapid French. Hermione could tell that Gabrielle was rather intrigued, and Blaise was quickly charming her.

Feeling like she couldn’t find an excuse to stay much longer, Hermione moved on after a wink from Draco, who started to guide Teddy away from the group to make him introduce himself to people.

“Can you believe that?” said a voice behind Hermione. She spun to find Ron sipping on a drink and watching Draco and Teddy.

“Believe what?” she asked, trying not to sound offended on her boyfriend’s behalf.

“Malfoy. He’s turning Teddy into a miniature of him, I swear it.”

“Would that be a problem?” asked Hermione. “I’m working with him now, you know. He’s not nearly as bad as he was in school.”

Ron eyed her, but Hermione refused to back down. Then he sighed. “Look, I don’t hate Malfoy. He’s been in the shop a fair number of times since the war, especially in the last few years. I haven’t told Harry this, but I’m pretty sure he’s buying things for Teddy to use to prank Harry. It seems like any time George or I sell him something the same thing shows up at Harry’s house a couple weeks later. So I’ll admit he’s grown on me a bit. But Teddy just... I don’t know. He practically *reveres* Malfoy.”

“They’re cousins, Ron,” said Hermione softly. “Or rather, first cousins once removed, I think. Tonks was Draco’s cousin.”

“You call him Draco?” asked Ron incredulously.

“Yes, I told you. I work with him. The deal we’re doing... it’s big. Transformative.”

“What’s in it?” asked Ron.

“Can’t say just yet. We’re still hammering out some details. But my point is I’ve gotten to know him pretty well.”

Ron suddenly looked at her suspiciously. “Harry told me that dance you did with him and the other snakes that made the papers was to send Krum packing.”

“It was,” said Hermione calmly. “Ginny and I ran into them randomly in Paris before the party, and we planned it between us. Viktor was driving me mad, and I was desperate. There was nothing more to it than that.”

“But now you’re working with him...”

“I work with Blaise too,” said Hermione.

“But not as much as Malfoy.”

“No,” said Hermione. “You’re right that I work with Draco more. But that’s because he’s my counterpart in France. Blaise is with the Italian chamber of commerce so I only see him when he’s brought in for economic policy.”

“You like him, don’t you?” asked Ron.

“I like them both,” said Hermione.

“Bloody hell Hermione, you don’t have to be so evasive.”

“Ron, now is really not the time. But yes, I like Draco. I like him quite a bit. And if Teddy Lupin wants to grow up and become him someday, he could pick far worse wizards to emulate.”

With this Hermione gave a slightly perturbed Ron a firm glare, and he just sighed in resignation as Hermione moved off.

Kreacher had just opened the line for food, and Hermione made herself a plate before heading toward a large, round table that included all of the Slytherin men, Luna, Andromeda, Narcissa, Teddy, and Victoire. She saw Gabrielle heading over at the same time, with a slightly determined glint in her eyes. As she and Gabrielle approached, the three Slytherins stood, and Teddy did as well after Draco nudged him.

She smiled a bit at this, as Theo helped her into her chair, since he was closest to her. She could see that Gabrielle gave a dazzling smile to Blaise as he did the same thing for her, and Hermione couldn’t help but smirk.

*Mission accomplished.*

Hermione tried to engage in conversation with Theo and Luna, but her attention continued to be pulled by Draco, who had found himself sitting with Teddy on one side and Victoire on the other. Gabrielle was sitting next to Victoire too, but she was rather focused on conversation with Blaise. And Narcissa and Andromeda were chatting with each other and largely ignoring Teddy. That left Draco to manage both children himself.

*He’s extraordinary*, she thought as he made Victoire laugh and then quietly corrected Teddy about the way he was holding his knife. As she watched, he helped Victoire cut her food and then he gently pushed Teddy’s elbows off the table. He seemed perfectly at ease as he moved back and forth between them, and soon she heard him coaxing them to eat.

“Teddy, you need to at least try your vegetables. You won’t be flying until you do.”

“Draco, I don’t *like* brussels sprouts.”

“You’ve never had them prepared like this. They’re delicious. I want you to try them.”

“I don’t like brussels sprouts either,” chimed in Victoire.

Draco looked between them. “I’ll tell you what. Whichever one of you eats the most brussels sprouts will get a five second head start on your race around the pitch after dinner.”

Both kids looked at him in amazement and then immediately tucked in. Hermione couldn’t help but chuckle, and Draco caught her eye and winked.

Before too long the brussels sprouts were consumed, and he left the table with Teddy and Victoire, presumably to organize the race he had promised them. The rest of the adults chatted for a while longer, until shouts and squeals attracted their attention.

“I think that’s my cue,” said Blaise as he rose too and hurried off toward the noise.

Curious now, the rest of their group slowly made their way toward the small quidditch pitch Harry had installed at Grimmauld Place several years earlier. Hermione was stunned to find Draco leading the various Weasley children, Teddy, and a few others who were the kids of Harry’s colleagues through quidditch drills, while he carried little Louis Weasley in one arm. Louis, evidently, had gotten over his shyness and was positively clinging to Draco. Blaise, she saw, had also stepped in to help control the hoard of small children, the oldest of whom was nine.

Hermione realized her jaw had dropped as she stared.

“He’s single, yes?” asked Gabrielle, who had just come up next to Hermione and was staring at Blaise like a piece of meat.

“Blaise? Definitely. And I know he wants a relationship. He’s told me recently,” said the voice of Ginny Weasley who had just approached them from behind.

“And he is kind? You both like him?” asked Gabrielle, as she watched Blaise pick up Roxanne Weasley and dust her off before setting her back on her broom.

“I like Blaise a lot,” said Hermione. “I work with him now and then. When he cares about something he really goes all in. He’s going to be the reason the British Ministry returns a large number of Italian magical artifacts and pieces of art that we’ve been holding since the Statute of Secrecy went into place centuries ago. He’s couched it all in terms of economic importance – he wants to create a new museum to increase tourism and so forth – but that’s not why he’s doing it. It’s because he cares about Italy’s cultural heritage. I expect Greece will want to do the same thing once they hear about it.”

Gabrielle listened to this with wide eyes. “Then I will ask him out,” she said firmly. “He is very charming and handsome.”

Gabrielle marched off to speak to her sister, and Hermione turned to look at Ginny in amusement.

“That didn’t take long,” said Hermione.

"Well I think they're perfect for each other," said Ginny enthusiastically. "And speaking of perfect couples, if you don't marry Draco Malfoy, I'm going to divorce Harry and marry him myself."

Hermione smiled at this a little as both witches turned to watch the barely organized chaos that was ensuing. All of the childrens' parents, she couldn't help but notice, were standing back to let Draco and Blaise manage it for them.

"I had no idea he was so good with kids," she said softly. "I knew he had practice with Teddy of course, but this..."

She just shook her head. It was doing something to her to see him like this. It was making her think of the future and marriage and babies and Draco as a father.

*He'll be an amazing father.*

Hermione realized the last piece of the puzzle was sliding into place for her.

She didn't know much about Draco's relationship with Lucius, but she knew that Draco had been woefully misguided as a child. And he had been without his father for the last eight years, during some very formative experiences. Hermione herself had been loved as a child, but she had also been without her parents since she went on the run with Harry during the war. Only now did she realize that there had been a small part of her, some unconscious part, that was afraid to go all in with Draco because of this. She didn't know if they could get married and have children together without somehow screwing them up.

But seeing him like this made Hermione want it. She wanted it so much. She wanted to be with him. She wanted to marry him. She wanted kids with him. She was absolutely certain about this.

She didn't know if she would be any good at parenting herself, but Draco was obviously *so* good at it that he would surely make up for any of her flaws. She was forcibly reminded of the couple of times she had seen Viktor around the Weasley kids, the most recent time being the previous Christmas. He had done his best to ignore them and had made some rather unkind comments about them. But here was Draco, organizing a tiny tykes quidditch match and cheering them on.

Hermione felt something a bit primal stir inside of her. And now she *really* wanted to jump him.

She heard a whistle blow, and she was pulled out of her thoughts as Blaise was calling the kids down to the ground.

"Alright!" he shouted to the crowd who was milling around. "Next up, I think we need to see a Potter-Malfoy rematch in a race for the snitch!"

Several people cheered and even more laughed, as Draco and Harry both grinned. But then Hermione watched as Draco tried to peel Louis off of him, and Louis shook his head no and

clung on stronger than ever. Draco just gave a good-natured shrug and said something to Blaise.

“Change of plans!” shouted Blaise. “Because our friend Mr. Malfoy here is occupied by far more important things! I’m calling Ginny Weasley forward to wipe the floor with her fiancé!”

Ginny started to laugh and bid Hermione farewell as she moved forward to take a proffered broom from Blaise. It wasn’t long before they were both in the air, and Draco wandered over to her, still holding Louis.

“I assume you’re cheering for Ginny?” he asked.

Hermione smiled a bit. “Yes,” she said. “I’m a bridesmaid, you know. I suppose I have to be on her side for this sort of thing.”

“That’s what I figured. And you know how I said I’d give you anything you want?” he said under his breath so nobody could hear him.

Hermione nodded curiously. “Yes, you’ve said that a few times now.”

“Good. Just watch and wait for it then.”

Hermione was puzzled by this, but then turned her attention back to Ginny and Harry, and before long they both went into a dive at the same time. She heard Draco inhale next to her, and she watched as Harry’s head suddenly whipped up, and he looked around the crowd in confusion. Ginny plucked the snitch right out from under Harry’s nose, as everyone cheered and Draco started to chuckle.

“Yes! I got him!” he said.

“Got him with what?” asked Hermione, totally nonplussed. But then Harry flew over to them and landed while he gave Draco an appalled look.

“*Really* Malfoy? A legilimency attack in the middle of a sodding quidditch game? Don’t you have *any* scruples at all?”

“It’s not against the rules Potter,” said Draco, now smirking at Harry. “Besides, Hermione was cheering for Ginny. It would go against my interests to disagree with her about that.”

Hermione clapped her mouth over her hand, and she started to laugh hard as she realized what Draco had done to Harry to make sure Ginny won. Harry threw her a disgusted look but just stalked off toward Ginny, who was being congratulated by the crowd.

“Think he’ll kick me out of the wedding party for that?” asked Draco, still chuckling.

“You could always get on your knees and beg for forgiveness,” said Hermione.

“There’s only one person I’ll kneel for darling, and that’s you,” said Draco, as he shifted Louis a bit.

Hermione felt herself turn crimson at this reminder of their first sexual encounter. Draco just gave her a satisfied smirk as he wandered off.

Hermione sighed as she stared after her sexy boyfriend who was snuggling a three-year-old he had only met that afternoon.

*That's it, she thought. There's nothing to hold me back now. I'm in love with him. How could I not be?*

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

Draco rolled his shoulders as he stepped through the floo. He was eager to get to Hermione, who had left the engagement party well before he did. Draco had managed to get trapped under Louis Weasley, who fell asleep soon after Ginny caught the snitch, and he just settled into a chair for the rest of the evening until the party broke up.

After the party, Draco floo'd first to Shell Cottage to deposit the sleeping toddler into his bed. Teddy had insisted upon coming along so that Draco would then have to floo to Andromeda's house to put *Teddy* to bed. As usual, Teddy took full advantage of the situation, and Draco was forced to put his foot down after the fifth bedtime story.

He was tired after babysitting a dozen kids for much of the afternoon, but he didn't mind it. Ever since getting to know Teddy Draco had liked kids, and he got a lot of practice with his younger cousin. Draco knew that Teddy looked up to him as some blend of uncle, older brother, and father in much the same way he viewed Potter. Draco took the responsibility seriously, as the only male Black other than Teddy himself. Potter might have abominable manners and etiquette, but Draco did not, and Draco was determined to help raise Teddy in a way that would be a credit to the Blacks.

Draco was just thinking about how he needed to enroll Teddy into Madam Markham's group dance lessons when he walked into his bedroom and was nearly tackled by his girlfriend.

"Ooomph," he said as she jumped into his arms and started kissing him frantically.

"You. Are. So. Sexy," she said through kisses that started to move from his lips to his ear and down his neck.

Draco grinned at this as he ran his hands down her. It was rather dark in the room, but she was ready for bed. That meant she was ready for him.

"Can I ask what brought this on?" he asked as he tilted his head back. "Not that I'm complaining, mind you."

"Just you. And the kids today, especially Louis. And *God* it turned me on. I've been dying to get you alone all night."

Then she stepped back and started unbuttoning Draco's shirt quickly before yanking it off his arms. Draco shrugged out of it for her as it suddenly occurred to him that he could use this to his advantage. He decided to take control as he pulled her to him before lifting her negligee off.

The dynamic shifted now that she was fully naked and he was not. He felt her melt a little as he ran his hands over her and dipped a finger inside of her.

"How long have you been like this *mon ange*?" he asked.

"Ages," she whispered. "And I was so good and didn't touch myself, and I'm so ready to..."

"Shhh," he said. "Patience. You know I'll give you anything. But first..."

He gently pushed her back on the bed, and she laid down for him, watching him hover over her, already quivering with her need.

Draco slowly unbuckled his belt and unfastened his pants before pushing them down and then moving over her.

"*Please* Draco, get me off... I need it so much..."

"Shhh," he said again as he kissed down her body. "I told you I will. But I have some questions first."

"But *why...*" she groaned as he spread her legs and started kissing around her center.

"Because you're so lovely and honest like this. You'll tell me anything to get what you want from me won't you?"

"Yes," she whispered, and Draco placed a small kiss directly in her core which made her jerk.

"Good girl. Same rules as last time then. Now tell me. You want kids?"

"Someday," she said, and he gave her a lick, which made her gasp.

"How many?"

"Two, maybe three," and Draco gave her a nice long suck on her clit, which made her moan.

"Me too darling. I always wanted a sibling growing up."

"So did I," she said and he gave her another small kiss for this.

"Boy or girl?"

"At least one of each," she replied. Another kiss, another jerk.

“Did Krum want kids?”

“I don’t know, we never talked about it.”

Draco paused, in utter disbelief. “Two fucking years, and you never talked about it?”

She was squirming for him, but he waited for her answer.

“No... there were... a lot of things we never said to each other.”

Draco gave her a long lick as he thought about this.

“What else did you never say to him?”

She was quiet for a moment and then took a hesitant breath.

“I never told him I loved him.”

Draco’s head shot up to stare at her.

“Really?” he whispered.

“Really,” she said.

“But he proposed to you!”

“Yes, and I don’t know why. I never loved him. Maybe his press secretary told him to do it. Draco *please...*”

She wriggled her hips again, and Draco suddenly realized he wasn’t playing the game right. He was so struck by the confession that he had forgotten himself.

She had never loved Krum. She had never said those words to him. He gave her several long lazy licks with penetration for this. She was shaking and getting close, but he wasn’t done yet. He pulled away, and she groaned.

“Did you ever tell Weasley you loved him?”

“Not like that. I’ve told him I love him as a friend before. Same as Harry and Ginny. But not like that.”

More penetration for this. She had never told a bloke she was in love with him. If he ever got to hear it from her, he would be the only one. He felt something deeply satisfying settle into him with this.

He *really* wanted to ask if she was in love with him. But he was afraid of her answer. So he moved back to the original topic.

“Back to kids darling. When do you want kids?”

“When the time is right.”

He frowned at her. That was not specific enough.

“When will that be?”

“I don’t know. I should probably get married first I suppose. Rita Skeeter would have a field day if I didn’t.”

He gave her a contemplative lick. She was right about that of course.

“And seeing me play with the kids turned you on?”

“So much,” she groaned. “*Please* Draco, I’m dying here.”

He chuckled a little and just flicked her with his tongue.

“Why did it turn you on so much darling?”

“I don’t know. I guess I could see it.”

“See what?” he whispered.

She was quiet for a long moment. “You as a dad.”

And with this answer, Draco gave her what she wanted. He buried his face in her and licked and sucked and plunged, and before long he felt her shaking, desperate for that last push.

“Come on *mon ange*,” he said. “All over my mouth this time.”

She broke with a cry, and Draco tasted her pleasure as he licked up every bit of it. He shoved his boxers off and moved up toward her to finish himself.

“You’re beautiful,” he said as he slotted inside of her with a sigh and began to move. “And I’m glad it turned you on.”

He kissed her deeply, and he felt her sigh into him as he moved to her neck and then her breasts, all while continuing his motions. She started to writhe for him again, and he began to move faster and harder, until she was gasping beneath him.

“One more time, darling. Give me one more.”

She moaned and shattered again, and then Draco pumped himself into her. She was so lovely like this, so perfect. And something about it felt more intimate this time, perhaps because he could finally be secure in the knowledge that she had never loved some other man. He still wasn’t sure if she loved *him* yet, but he would never have to compete for her heart with some bloke from the past. Not really.

He sighed and pulled her close to him after cleaning her up.

She was starting to drift off to sleep when he heard her voice, barely audible. “You should have kids someday, Draco.”

He stilled and dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Just as long as they’re with you,” he whispered.

But she was already asleep.

# Chapter 30: Seven Weeks

## Chapter Notes

A/N: Very sensitive, difficult topics are in this chapter. PLEASE READ THE TAGS FIRST. I placed a trigger warning at the end too (it contains a spoiler).

I wrote about this because it's all too common in the real world and rarely discussed. I also feel there is something big that has to happen to finally break through Hermione's emotional walls so they can be honest about their true feelings with each other.

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

## Hermione

Hermione felt wretched. She truly did. She had taken her temperature and didn't have a fever. She didn't have flu-like symptoms. But she felt exhausted – utterly exhausted as though she had pushed the limits of her body and magic. She thought she could sleep for a year.

"I think that's what we'll need to do then," said Harry. "We can use Rosu's security requests as a cover for me and Hermione to go to Romania together."

Hermione and Draco were meeting with Harry to work out the plan to get her into Durmstrang. Neither Draco nor Harry were inclined to let her go alone. And the plan they were coming up with was a good one, truly. Or at least she thought it was. But truthfully, Hermione could barely follow it. She was just so *tired*.

"Hermione are you alright?" asked Harry with concern when she yawned for the third time.

"Fine Harry," she said a bit weakly. "I'm just... I'm exhausted."

"Bed then," said Draco firmly. "We have a basic plan in place for Romania. You can send the letter to Durmstrang tomorrow darling, and then we'll hammer out the details once we have a date."

Hermione just nodded as she yawned again, and Harry rose to leave, as Draco helped her up and led her to his room. He watched her with some concern as she disappeared into the bathroom and then into her closet to get ready for bed. When she emerged, she nearly collapsed into bed and sighed as she finally allowed herself to close her eyes.

"Are you OK *mon ange*? Something seems off," said Draco.

Hermione opened one eye to look at him. "I'll be fine. Just a bit under the weather, and I've never been this tired in my life. I think I'm fighting something."

He nodded a bit. "Well if you need anything let Topsy know. We can't have you getting sick."

She smiled a bit at this as he leaned in to kiss her and slipped a hand under her negligee. "I'll let you rest, but I need one touch first," he said, as he swiped his hand over her breasts. Hermione flinched just a bit.

"What?" he asked in confusion.

"Just sensitive tonight, that's all," she said.

He said nothing to this, but narrowed his eyes and nodded slowly as he pulled his hand away. "Alright. Sleep then. We have meetings all day tomorrow on our deal."

Hermione nodded and closed her eyes. Not even a minute later, she was fast asleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

Hermione managed to drag herself to their meetings the next day, though she felt dazed and distracted as she listened to their staffers give reports on the various things she and Draco were having them research. She still felt exhausted, and today she had developed a headache that was so severe it was making her nauseous. Or maybe it was Francois Barbier's cologne that was making her nauseous. It was so strong today, she wanted to wretch.

"Excuse me," she muttered as she rose and fled to her office to get some gum. Surely the peppermint would overwhelm Barbier's cologne.

Draco gave her a curious look as she made her way back and sat on the other side of the table from Barbier, immediately next to Draco. He looked at her in surprise.

"What's going on?" he whispered under his breath.

"Barbier. His cologne is killing me."

"It's the same as always," muttered Draco.

"No, he practically bathed himself in it today," said Hermione. "I can still smell it all the way over here."

"Darling, your back's to the door."

"It's worth it to get away from that foul smell," she said.

Draco let it drop, but Hermione sensed an awareness about him, and when they broke for lunch she noticed that he was studying her closely. Hermione looked at the platter of sandwiches Belinda had ordered, and her stomach turned at the very thought. She just grimaced and picked up a bag of crisps instead.

"Hermione, you need to eat something," he said quietly.

"I just... I will. Later," she said as she picked up a second bag of crisps.

He frowned, but again let it drop, and after lunch she managed to snag a seat that faced the door but that was also as far away from Barbier as possible.

She munched dully on her crisps, and she felt a sharp pain below her navel.

Hermione exhaled.

*Finally.*

She had been suspicious about what was going on with her the last couple of days, but she hadn't checked. Her cycles had always been a little uneven, and she told herself there was no need to worry about it just yet. A week late or even two... that happened a couple times a year for her.

She felt another sharp stab, and now she started to relax. She caught Draco's eye across the table, and he raised an eyebrow at her. She just tried to give him a reassuring look back. She still felt terrible, but it was because of something else. It wasn't because of *that*.

Of course, now she needed to excuse herself to take care of some things.

"I'll be back, you all keep going," she said as she stood shakily.

Draco furrowed his brow in concern, and she tried to convey to him with a look that he was acting far too worried about her. He might blow his cover right there if he kept watching her like that. She saw his mouth thin, but he seemed to understand what she was trying to communicate as he wrenched his eyes away from her.

Hermione made her way to the witches' loo, feeling worse than ever. She was clammy now, and she rather thought she had gotten a fever after all. She felt dizzy, and she was starting to shake. She finally made it to one of the stalls and cast a cleansing charm on the seat before sinking down onto it.

*Bloody hell, this is terrible.*

She took several deep breaths to compose herself and then began to take care of business. But to her surprise, she found almost nothing. She thought it would be much worse than that with the strong cramps she had been feeling, but it wasn't. There was barely anything at all.

Hermione groaned.

*Surely, surely it's not...*

But somehow in her heart, Hermione knew what had happened. And now the fact that she was feeling *this* bad was actually concerning. She needed to get help. She needed to get help right away.

She took several more minutes to compose herself as best she could. She knew she couldn't let Draco see her like this. He would probably panic and blow everything. She would be on her own. She just had to get to a floo.

She stood on shaky legs and tried to ignore her lightheadedness and nausea as she forced herself to walk out of the bathroom and toward the nearest floo.

"Belinda, can you let the others know I'm leaving? I'm not feeling well," said Hermione, as she passed a surprised Belinda.

Hermione didn't even stop to see if Belinda heard her. She made her way as quickly as possible to the atrium and took a deep breath as she threw some floo powder into the fire. "St. Mungo's," she muttered, and she felt herself spinning away.

She forced her stomach down as she made her way until finally she slowed. She stepped out onto the threshold on the other end.

"Ha, made it," she said vaguely as she hit the deck, and it all went dark.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

*Where was she? Where the hell was she?*

Draco was chewing on his lower lip, as he tried not to let his anxiety show to the others. Hermione had been feeling unwell for a few days now, but today it had gotten really bad. And there was something about it that niggled his brain, but it didn't fully settle into place until he watched her pass over her favorite sandwiches at lunch.

The moment it all came together hit him like a ton of bricks. She was exhausted. She was nauseous. She couldn't eat. She suddenly thought Barbier's cologne smelled terrible when it had never bothered her before. Her breasts were so sensitive that she had flinched the last time he tried to touch them. And Topsy had absolutely *insisted* he pick out an engagement ring for her.

Topsy knew. House elves always knew when they were bound to a witch in Hermione's condition. And Draco strongly suspected that he knew too. He wondered if Hermione herself was still figuring it out or if she was waiting to tell him.

His heart surged at the thought, but along with it came a crushing wave of anxiety.

*She would absolutely kill him.*

Draco had no qualms about it, other than the fact that she was in danger. He wanted her. He wanted to marry her and have kids with her. And if this was the way it happened, he wouldn't complain about it. A baby would bring them together so permanently she would never leave him, he was sure of it.

But he had to convince her that it was alright first. He was sure she would be terrified and angry that he had been so casual about contraception that he never bothered with it. A small part of him knew it was because he was hoping she would forget and end up carrying his child. He had never forgotten with another witch, not once. But with Hermione, he decided to leave it up to her and let nature take its course.

Nature *had* taken its course, Draco was almost certain.

It also created enormous complications. There was no chance whatsoever that Draco would allow her to go to Romania like that. Not only was she obviously in no physical condition to do it, but it would put his child in danger. That wasn't happening, *ever*. And of course there was the issue with her reputation and her job. Unwed mothers were as common in wizarding circles as muggle ones, but Hermione was famous. Hermione's job was public-facing. Hermione would be absolutely *destroyed* in the media if she announced a pregnancy outside of an engagement.

That was Topsy's reason for pushing the ring on him of course, and now Draco was relieved she had insisted. He could ask her tonight. They could elope in the next couple of weeks. And then it was just a matter of figuring out how to announce to the world that she was married to him.

*Shit, that wouldn't be easy.*

Draco chewed on his lip even harder as he waited and waited and waited....

*Where the fuck was she?*

He was getting more nervous now. He disliked it when she was out of his sight at the best of times, but when she was like this? When she felt so bad and was likely pregnant? It was torturous while he waited for her to finish whatever she was doing.

To his surprise, it wasn't Hermione who returned first, but Belinda.

"Sir," said Belinda, as she walked in. "Hermione said she's not feeling well, and she's going to be out the rest of the day. And your house elf arrived in the atrium and sent a message with a runner. Here."

Draco went cold as he took the note and unsealed it. Topsy's handwriting looked hurried and frantic.

*Mistress Hermione is at St. Mungo's. She collapsed.*

Draco felt all the air leave the room as he read it.

“Family emergency,” he said quickly as he stood up and strode out of the room. He felt himself starting to panic as he rushed past Belinda and practically threw himself into a lift to get to the lobby. It opened after a couple floors, and he found himself staring at Potter.

Potter took one look at his face and stepped in and shut the lift before anybody behind them could get on.

“What happened?” he asked without any preamble.

“Hermione,” said Draco hurriedly. “She’s been ill, and she left our meeting maybe half an hour ago, and then Topsy just notified me that she collapsed at St. Mungo’s.”

Potter just stared at him as the lift continued to move far too slowly for Draco.

“Ill how?”

Draco shut his eyes. Potter was about to kill him, and he knew he deserved it.

“I’m not certain because she hasn’t told me, but I think she might be... I think she’s...”

He couldn’t finish it. But he glanced at Potter whose eyes widened in understanding.

“Shit,” he muttered.

Draco just swallowed and nodded as the lift opened to the atrium.

He and Potter both strode out.

“Take different floors,” Potter muttered behind him. Draco went to the first available one and Potter moved to one on the far end.

“St. Mungo’s,” said Draco, and he spun away, arriving moments later. He saw Potter step out from another fireplace nearby, and he nodded at Draco to go first. Draco hurried up to the welcome witch.

“I’m here to see Hermione Granger.”

“Are you a family member?” she asked in a bored voice.

“I’m... a colleague,” he choked.

The welcome witch looked down at some magical parchment that had names and room numbers changing every few seconds.

“Miss Granger is in surgery. Only family members are allowed once surgery is over. You may see her when she is released into the recovery room and the Healers clear her for general visitors.”

Draco felt something inside of him absolutely breaking at this. He had to get to her. He *had* to.

"I'm a family member," came Potter's voice from behind him.

Draco spun to look at him.

"But you're... you're..." said the witch, whose eyes were wide as they looked at Harry Potter.

"I'm a family member. It's legal."

The welcome witch gulped and shuffled some papers to pull out a piece of parchment that Draco saw had Hermione's name on top.

"Next of kin... Harry Potter..." she muttered to herself. She furrowed her brow in confusion, but seemed to accept it. Then she looked up at Potter. "Very well, Mr. Potter. She's in surgery in Operating Room 3. There is a family waiting room nearby if you would like to wait there. I will let you the Healers know that you are to be kept informed."

Draco felt something unclench at this.

"Where is the nearest public area to that waiting room?" asked Potter.

She furrowed her brow. "There's a small cafe down the hall, but..."

She broke off as Draco and Potter turned and immediately started walking toward the lifts.

When it closed Potter turned to give him a hard look. "Did you mean for this to happen?"

"I..." Draco felt terrible, but he couldn't bring himself to lie. "Maybe. I'm not sure. I didn't exactly *try*. But I didn't stop it from happening either. I just... decided to leave it in her hands and let the chips fall. We got carried away the first few times."

Potter grimaced a bit. "And are you prepared to...?"

"I've had a ring in my nightstand for a couple weeks," said Draco shortly.

Potter's eyebrows flew up at this, but Draco felt the mood lighten considerably. "Alright then," said Potter. "That's all I needed to know. Just as long as you don't abandon her."

"I would *never*," said Draco shortly.

Potter gave him a satisfied nod as they made their way toward the family waiting area. Potter stopped once they arrived, and Draco kept going to the cafe at the end of the hall, but not before he pushed hard into Potter's mind. Potter didn't resist him at all and let Draco settle in so he could eavesdrop on whatever the Healers were going to say.

Draco was an accomplished enough legilimens that he could usually make himself disappear once he was inside another person's mind. He was sure it had been years since Potter had felt him on the other end. But he was so stressed, so worried, so utterly frantic as he waited for news of Hermione that he didn't even bother to try to disappear. Potter wasn't making any

effort to shield his own emotions from Draco either. Draco sensed worry, a little resentment and frustration, and a keen sense of impatience as they waited for a Healer to arrive.

Finally, at long last, a Healer entered the family waiting room. “Mr. Potter?”

Draco felt Potter rise. “How is she?” he asked.

“Miss Granger will be fine. However, you should know that she was pregnant, but I’m afraid it was ectopic.”

Draco felt a rush of relief that was she OK, but the rest of his words didn’t register.

*Was pregnant? That sounded like...*

“Erm, I’m not sure I understand,” said Potter. “I don’t have any real medical training.”

*Thank you Potter.*

The healer sighed. “An ectopic pregnancy is rather rare, but it occurs now and then. It means the embryo has implanted in a different part of the body than the uterus. In Miss Granger’s case it was in her right fallopian tube. Unfortunately when that happens the pregnancy is not viable.”

Draco felt a wave of sadness and loss wash over him at this.

“So to be clear, you mean she’s no longer pregnant?” asked Potter.

“That’s correct. I’m sorry. I don’t know if you were...” the healer trailed off awkwardly.

“I’m not,” said Potter quickly. “A friend of mine.”

The healer would probably assume it was Weasley then, but Draco didn’t care. He needed Potter to ask more questions.

“And does it... affect anything in the future for her?”

The healer sighed a bit. “She has a marginally higher risk of it happening again. But odds are very good she will be able to sustain a normal pregnancy in the future. That being said, ectopics are very dangerous. If we hadn’t caught it she could have died. Given her higher risk of recurrence, it would be best if she’s... more careful in the future. We can monitor her for it now that we know she has a history of it, but only if she’s aware of her condition early on.”

Draco felt relief and also a keen sense of guilt. She would be fine. But she had almost died because he wasn’t careful. He hadn’t thought about it. He had just harbored these romantic fantasies about her — he had wanted to tie her to him so tightly that he didn’t even think about what it could do to *her*. Merlin, but he was a bastard.

Only then did he notice the healer was still talking.

“...and she was about seven weeks along this time. We can catch it earlier with magical methods.”

*Wait. Seven weeks? That was impossible.*

Draco did some quick math in his head. Seven weeks ago they hadn’t been speaking to each other. She was living in a hotel, or so she had said. It wasn’t possible. It just *wasn’t*.

Potter must have felt Draco’s disbelief in his head because he said, “Are you sure she was seven weeks? That just... doesn’t seem right based on what I know...”

“I can assure you, our dating methods are fairly accurate. She was seven weeks, give or take a couple days on either side.”

Draco felt the bottom drop out of his stomach at this. He only half listened as the healer said his goodbyes and then before he knew it Potter had kicked Draco out of his head and was walking around the corner to find him.

“She didn’t cheat on you,” said Potter firmly. “You two weren’t together then.”

“Don’t you think I know that Potter?” said Draco dully.

“And she’s OK,” said Potter, eyeing him carefully.

Draco just nodded.

Potter sighed and pulled out a chair. “Look, for what it’s worth, she was really hurt after you pushed her away. If you had done that to her for *any* other reason I would have kicked your arse. I’m sure that... what she did... was a one-time thing. The minute you gave her your attention again, she was all in with you.”

Draco just closed his eyes. “It’s all my fault. It’s my fault she was hurt. My fault she felt the need to shag some bloke who wasn’t me. My fault she ended up... like this. And she almost died. It’s all my damn fault.”

“It’s her fault too though,” said Potter evenly. “It takes two.”

Draco just grimaced.

“Look,” said Potter fairly. “As scary as this was, as awful as this was, you can put this behind you and move on with her.”

“But *how?*” asked Draco. “How do I reconcile this? Don’t you get it? I would put a ring on her finger today if I could. Even with all this shit, I still would. I would have claimed some other man’s child as mine. I wouldn’t have been thrilled at first, but I would have done it to keep her close to me. That’s how much I want her. But she’s... Hermione. Her feelings are a fucking mystery. She could have told me she slept with somebody else after I pushed her away, and I would have been a jealous bastard about it, but at least this wouldn’t have totally blindsided me. And if she was having sex only a few weeks ago with somebody else, then

how am I supposed to handle that? How do I manage having feelings that are obviously *much* stronger than hers? I'm a fucking wreck, Potter.”

Draco was breathing hard by the end of it.

“You have to tell her that,” said Potter slowly. “That’s how you reconcile it. She probably didn’t say anything about it because she thought it was none of your business what she did while you two weren’t together. And frankly, she’s right about that. You put her through the wringer Malfoy. Can you really blame her for being cautious about telling you everything that happened those weeks you two were apart? But she’s into you, mate. I can *promise* you that. Whatever she did with somebody else... it was just a bandage for a wound and a piss poor one at that. I have never seen her care about somebody this much. Not *ever*. So just talk to her about it. And if you really are further along than her, then just be patient. She will catch up to you, I’m certain of it.”

Draco sighed and nodded.

“Alright,” said Potter, clapping him on the shoulder as he stood up. “Stay here. I’m going to go get some polyjuice from the auror stores so you can see her once she wakes up. They won’t let you in as yourself until she’s moved to a different room.”

Draco gave him a tight smile in thanks and then began to wait, dark thoughts and questions swirling in his mind.

#### Chapter End Notes

TW: Ectopic/nonviable pregnancy and pregnancy loss in this chapter.

# Chapter 31: Devastation

## Chapter Notes

TW: Aftermath of pregnancy loss in this chapter.

### Hermione

Hermione groaned and stirred. She felt like a herd of hippogriffs had trampled her abdomen. She struggled to sit up.

“Careful there dearie,” said a kind female voice. “Lie back. You’ll be up in a day or so, but you should rest right now.”

Hermione sank back, still a bit hazy, though she felt the cobwebs starting to clear.

“Now tell me dearie, do you remember what happened?”

“I...” croaked Hermione, as she focused on the woman speaking to her. A maternal looking witch with graying hair in lime green robes appeared in front of her with a cup of water.

“Drink, dearie, you’re probably parched.”

Hermione drank, and she felt herself starting to revive now.

“I... realized I was pregnant. Or I thought I might be... I didn’t take a test or anything. It was right before I came here, while I was at work. I felt terrible, and I finally thought I knew why I felt so bad. But it was... wrong. I realized something was happening, and I needed help. I floo’d here, and...”

The witch gave her a sympathetic nod. “Yes you were very smart to come here when you did.”

“Did I... am I still... did it...?”

Hermione couldn’t say the words. But given that she was lying in a hospital bed, she already knew the answer.

“I’m afraid not, dear. It was ectopic. Not viable. You nearly died, but you got yourself here in time. We got you into surgery to stop the bleeding and repair the tube.”

“Surgery?” asked Hermione weakly as her eyes filled with tears.

*Ask questions. Don't think about it yet.*

"Yes dearie."

"And how long have I been here?"

"About five hours, but..."

"FIVE HOURS?" shouted Hermione, as she struggled to sit up again. "Oh Merlin, I have to go... I have to.... He's going to be frantic... he's...."

"Shhhh," said the healer.

"No you don't understand. He will blow this place apart looking for me... I have to go..."

"Dearie, Mr. Potter here has assured me that everybody who needs to know about you does."

Hermione suddenly turned to find Harry sitting in one corner with one ankle crossed on his knee, watching her intently. He had a grim look on his face.

*Harry was here?*

Hermione narrowed her eyes. His expression was intense. It was a mixture of anger, hurt, disappointment, concern, and fierce protectiveness, and suddenly she knew.

*That's not Harry. That's Draco.*

He must have seen the realization on her face, because he gave her a tiny nod.

"Oh," said Hermione, sinking back on the pillows again. "Alright then."

"Now I'm here to answer any questions you may have. But first I need to ask... would you like for us to alert the father for you? Mr. Potter wasn't sure who it was."

She glanced at Draco in confusion, and he just gave her stoney look back.

*He must be keeping it quiet for the mission, she thought. Nobody can know I'm with Draco.*

She knew it was the right thing to do, but God it was going to be awful to pretend until she could get out of here. She wanted nothing more than to cry on his shoulder.

She took a deep breath and tried to compose herself. "No, that's alright. He knows about me."

She glanced at Draco, and she sensed barely controlled anger radiating off of him now.

*Why is he mad? Is it because I didn't tell him? But I only just figured it out myself...*

She just closed her eyes. She felt too awful to worry about Draco's moods right now.

“Very well then. You can tell him what happened in your own time. In that case, do you have any questions for me?”

“Do I have any permanent damage?”

“If you had been a muggle, you would have. Your tube ruptured, but we repaired it magically. It should be as good as new. Though I will caution you that you should be more aware of your cycles when you are having unprotected sex, dearie. Odds are very good that you will have normal pregnancies in the future, but you are at a higher risk of having another ectopic than the general population. You will need to be monitored for future pregnancies.”

“I’m on a potion now,” she said.

“Yes, we saw that. I’m just warning you for the future. You were about seven weeks along this time, give or take a few days, and had we caught it a week ago...”

“I wasn’t,” she said, utterly confused now. “I wasn’t having sex seven weeks ago.”

She glanced at Draco again, and he was frozen now and listening intently. Suddenly his dark mood and anger made sense to her. They must have told him she was seven weeks pregnant. He had spent the last five hours thinking she had had sex with somebody else. And even though they weren’t together then, this was *Draco*. She knew it would send him around the bend if he believed it.

“Oh dearie, that’s not how pregnancy dating works. Common misconception.”

“Pardon?” asked Hermione in confusion.

“We count the first week from the first day of your last period,” she said. “Most women have no idea when they are fertile. But we all know when we get our periods.”

Hermione just stared at her, and she glanced at Draco, who looked stunned now.

“So you’re saying...”

“That you’re two weeks pregnant before you ever have sex. It’s a little ridiculous, I’ll grant you that, and it does cause quite a bit of confusion at times. But that’s how muggles have always done it, and we do it that way too. It helps us get a sense of timing without doing scans. It also makes the average gestation period a nice, round forty weeks.”

“In that case... yes, that timing makes sense to me,” said Hermione quietly.

She was staring at Draco as she said this, and he was now looking at her with such softness and heartbreak that Hermione felt her breath catch. It was a bit odd seeing that expression on *Harry’s* face, but it was so utterly Draco that there was no question in her mind now what had happened while she had been asleep. She was just grateful he had stayed. He hadn’t left her or pushed her away again, even when he thought she had been carrying some other man’s child. And now that he knew it was *his*...

“Oh God, I lost it...” Hermione said, and she felt her face crumple as the thing she hadn’t let herself think about just yet washed over her.

The mediwitch seemed to be expecting this, because she started making comforting noises and actually pulled Hermione in for a hug as she started to sob. But then a moment later, the mediwitch pulled away, and Hermione felt a larger, firmer body pull her close, and she clutched at his shirt as she soaked it with her tears. He didn’t say anything at all, but he rocked her a little. As she melted into the body of her brother, she felt herself wrapped up in the tenderness of her lover.

*He would have stayed. He wouldn’t have left me.*

She pulled away with a large sniff, and looked up at him with watery eyes. She could see he looked emotional too, but he seemed very worried about her.

“I’ll be OK, I just... this happens a lot doesn’t it?” she asked the mediwitch.

“It happens far more often than it should,” she said kindly. “That certainly doesn’t make it any easier when it does though.”

“And was it me? Was it the potion I took? Did I do something or...” she cast around for some explanation for how this could have happened. She could feel Draco’s eyes still on her, and he squeezed her hand hard.

“No dearie,” said the witch gently. “It’s just one of those things. It wasn’t your fault. It wasn’t anybody’s fault.”

Hermione nodded a little glumly.

“Try to look at it this way,” added the witch. “You *can* get pregnant. Not all witches are that lucky. And the father – if he’s somebody you care about – well, he can help you get pregnant in the future if that’s something you both want. You shouldn’t let this put you off from trying again once you’re ready.”

Unconsciously she looked at Draco. How she wished she could see his real face right now. But she knew him well enough and Harry well enough to read his thoughts anyway. He was looking at her like she was made of glass, like she was utterly broken. As much as she was grateful for his concern, *that* expression was too much. She forced herself to just say it to make it clear to him how she felt.

She nodded slowly, still not taking her eyes off his face. “Thank you. That does help a little. And I think... I think not yet. But someday. With him. The father is... the best man I know.”

The witch patted her on the knee, but she was focused on Draco. He was clearly stunned by her words.

“You will heal, dearie,” said the witch. “It feels raw now, but it will get better with time. Now then. We’re going to keep you here for another hour or so and then move you to

recovery. You can have visitors if you wish. We'll try to release you in a couple of days after you have completed your potions for the residual bleeding. Your magic will help your body recover more quickly than a muggle would from this sort of thing, but you should still avoid penetrative sex for a week or so. Other activities are fine once you feel up to it."

Hermione nodded a bit, and then Draco stood. "I'm going to... let the others know," he said with a bit of a croak in his voice. "I'll be back once you're in recovery."

Hermione nodded again, and he leaned in to kiss her on the cheek.

"We'll talk once we have some privacy darling," he whispered. "I need to see Potter."

He pulled away, and she tried to give him a watery smile as he thanked the healer, cast one last worried look at her, and then left.

"Mr. Potter is very fond of you," said the mediwitch knowingly.

Hermione made herself smile a little. "He's my brother. We've been through a lot together."

"I suppose that's true, dearie," said the witch, as she started to bustle around the room.

Hermione sighed and settled back in bed, hoping beyond anything that her broken heart would soon mend.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Draco

Draco was thoroughly wrung out. Between Hermione's collapse, the news that she had been pregnant, his misinformed belief that she had been with somebody else, and then the knowledge that it had actually been *his* baby after all, he hardly knew which way was up. His very first impressions of the situation – that she had been sent to the hospital because of his own stupidity – had returned in full force once he learned she hadn't been with anybody else. But seeing her heartbreak on her face had been somewhat unexpected. He thought she would be relieved, but she appeared as devastated as Draco was. And then she said she wanted to do it again someday with *him*.

Gods but he wanted it too. He wanted it so much, and he knew he would give her anything. But after seeing what it had done to her, he didn't know how he could give her that. The healers said she was at a higher risk of it happening again. How could he put her in that position and set her up for the possibility of additional heartbreak a second time?

They still had not had time to really talk about it either. She hadn't been in the hospital very long, but she had had a stream of visitors. Draco had visited as himself for the fifteen minutes Potter thought was appropriate for a work colleague before coming back as Potter and then a third time as a bloke he confounded in the cafe down the hall. But eventually he

couldn't keep up the ruse that he wasn't incredibly worried about her, so Draco watched everyone else come in under Potter's invisibility cloak. While he did it, he poked Hermione's visitors with legilimency. Anybody he didn't personally know and trust was searched, with no exceptions. He had nearly lost her, and he would be damned if she was hurt again because Draco wasn't paying attention. Draco found that none of her visitors had malevolent intent, but two of her staffers did have a crush on her. He made a mental note to have them reassigned.

And as he observed the visitors parading through, he watched Hermione steel herself and push down the raw emotion she had shown him just after she woke up. She assumed a fixed smile that set his teeth on edge. He knew it was all a show. He could feel the pain in her. But she wasn't showing it to anybody now, and it made the whole thing worse somehow.

And Draco? Draco was a fucking emotional wreck. He had peeked into the head of the lead healer and watched thoughts about Hermione flit across his mind. The healer knew things he hadn't told Hermione because she hadn't asked: that the embryo was genetically normal and a girl. And if it hadn't been for that implantation fluke Draco would have a daughter in approximately thirty-three weeks. Magical healers could detect these things with a spell, even if muggle methods took longer.

So while he watched her put on a show for the others, he died inside just a little bit to think about what he had lost. And he didn't know how he could put her through this again, nor himself. It had been his very first introduction to pregnancy and childbirth, and he had learned a harsh lesson about it: everything was a crapshoot.

Draco didn't blame Hermione for pretending with the others, not really. The only people who knew what really happened to her were Potter and Ginny. The rest of her visitors were told it was a ruptured appendix, and the healing staff played along whenever they checked on her in front of visitors due to her notoriety. They couldn't let it get back to Rita Skeeter. So of course she plastered on a smile and pretended everything was fine. She couldn't act vulnerable over an appendix for Merlin's sake. But Draco still felt so angry because after she moved to recovery, nobody was talking about what they had lost. And he wasn't even allowed to *be* there. So he was lurking under the cloak because it was all he could do until she was released home.

He eagerly awaited bringing her home, pulling her to him, and finally sorting out some of the things that had just happened. Draco planned to give them plenty of time to talk, and it was the thing he clung to while he watched her build her facade. He told his own staffers that his mother was ill, and he would be out for at least a week. They were to communicate with him by owl. He would not be coming back to the office until Hermione had returned herself, and he wanted her to stay away too until she was fully healed.

Hermione, however, decided she would be going back to work the day after she was released from St. Mungo's. And she announced this to him as soon as they were finally alone together at the Manor.

"You will not," he said.

"I will too!" she insisted.

He couldn't believe this. He really couldn't fucking believe this. She had only been released earlier that afternoon. Potter and Ginny had come with them, and they hadn't had a moment alone until it was finally time for bed. And there she was in one of her negligees that drove him mad – though he had to admit that was his own damn fault – and she had just told him she needed to go to bed early because she had to go to work tomorrow.

"You will stay here, with me, and rest," he said. "No work."

"Malfoy you can't..."

"You're calling me Malfoy? Do you even hear yourself?"

"You promised you wouldn't interfere with my career!"

"Asking you to take a few days off to recover is not interfering! It's sensible!"

"I've recovered! And I can't just sit around anymore! I can't stay here, I need... I need..."

She was pacing, and Draco *really* wished she would lay down or at least sit, but of course she wouldn't.

He prayed for patience. "What do you need?"

"To get away from you!" she finally burst out.

Draco felt himself stagger back.

*No. No, she couldn't be doing this. He had been there. He had been there the whole time. He loved her.*

He opened his mouth, but no words came out. He just looked at her blankly and tried again. "Why?"

At that he saw her veneer crack.

"Because you're smothering me! And you keep looking at me like I'm damaged, and you made me fall in love with you, and then I ruined it all, and I can't stand it when you look at me like that!"

She was breathing heavily, and then her face crumpled again, and she swayed. Automatically he rushed forward to catch her, and he felt her clutch at him as her words echoed in his head.

*You made me fall in love with you, and then I ruined it all...*

She was sobbing now, wet gasps, and he pulled her down on the floor with him and rocked her again like he had when she first woke up. "You should go," she choked, as she clung to him even harder. And finally Draco understood what all of this was about: she didn't like to be vulnerable. She didn't want him to see her like this. She was always so competent, so strong. She didn't like *anything* that made her appear weak.

“I’m not going anywhere.”

“But I ruined it...” she said again, between sobs.

“You didn’t ruin anything. Nothing at all darling, do you understand me?”

She took several shuddering breaths so she could finally calm down enough to talk. “But you’ve been looking at me like...” she sniffed.

“Like the woman I love almost died? Of course I have. You almost did.”

He felt her still, and slowly she lifted her head to look at him. He raised a hand to brush some of her tears from her cheek.

“You mean...” she said in a shaky voice.

“I mean I love you. I’m in love with you. I have been for a long time – probably since we were children, actually, though I was too dense to realize it at the time. It’s the only explanation for my absolutely mad behavior when it comes to you.”

“And what I did...” she whispered.

He raised one eyebrow. “You mean what *we* did. I was just as responsible for it, if not more so. It’s been killing me since the moment I found out about it. I just...” he closed his eyes for a moment. “Look, before you I have never *once* had sex with a witch without the contraceptive charm. Not once. I have never trusted a witch who says she’s on the potion, and I don’t even trust the witch to cast the charm herself. If I don’t have my wand with me, then I don’t have sex. It was an ironclad rule of mine that I broke the very first time with you.”

She furrowed her brow. “You never seemed to care about it though.”

“Because some part of me wanted it. I decided to let nature take its course with you. I was selfish and decided that if you wanted to avoid having children with me then you would have to do it yourself. I wasn’t going to help you with it, even when it became clear you weren’t ready for it. I never forgot to cast the charm, darling. I didn’t forget that first night, and I didn’t forget any other time we did it before you got on the potion. You should hate me. I’m the one who did this to you, and I’m the reason you almost died.”

At some point during this speech he had stopped looking at her. He knew it was going to be over now. He had never intended to tell her this, but once he started to talk he couldn’t stop. Now *he* was the one who had ruined it.

“I don’t hate you,” she whispered. “But I’m afraid you won’t be willing to try again someday.”

He jerked his head up to look at her.

“I just... you almost *died mon ange*. I had no idea that could happen.”

She gave him a watery smile. “But I didn’t.”

“But...” he started, and she put a finger to his lips.

“Maybe it’s because I’m female, but some part of me has always accepted that risk.”

He furrowed his brow, and she continued. “It’s just a part of being a woman who wants to have children someday. You accept that your body’s not your own, and things are largely out of your control. I’m not saying I *like* being out of control like that, but it’s a temporary state of affairs, and then you’re rewarded with a baby at the end. Usually...” she said, trailing off sadly. She sniffed again.

She swallowed and then continued. “We know about it now. We know that we need to be more careful than we were. And if you are... willing to do that again someday... I’ll be tracking things very closely. This time...” she sighed. “Well I had a suspicion about it for several days, but I was in denial. I was afraid you’d leave if it was true.”

She said this last thing very quietly, and looked down. He cupped her chin and made her look up at him.

“I would *never* leave you. Not even when I thought...” he hesitated.

“It was somebody else’s,” she finished.

He nodded. “Not even then. I was hurt, but I didn’t leave. I love you. And I love our daughter.”

Her eyes were wide. “Our daughter?” she whispered.

He gave a small nod. “Yes, it was a girl. She was perfect.”

He saw her tears start again. “How do you know?”

“The healer was thinking about it when I did legilimency on him. They have spells to identify that sort of thing very early on.”

She just leaned against his chest again, and he felt the damp spot on his shirt getting larger.

“It’s OK to take some time to grieve for her,” he said quietly. “I know I am.”

“I don’t want you to think I’m damaged.”

“I know you’re not,” he said. “Not at all.”

She nodded a little and then hesitated. “Then will you? Someday I mean – will you do this again with me?”

Draco felt a lurch. It still made him incredibly nervous. But he wanted it. And he could never deny her anything, not really.

"Yes, *mon ange*. You can have a baby whenever you want one," he said, "with the caveat that I will absolutely smother you when it happens. I won't be able to help myself."

He thought he felt her smile a little at this. "Your smothering drives me mad, but I do love you for it."

He felt his heart lighten. She had said that she loved him again. He didn't think he would ever get tired of hearing her say it.

"Then let's go to bed. And *please* promise me you'll take a few days off from work. Just to make sure you're healed, and we've had some time to process it. Together."

She sighed. "Fine. But only if you promise to touch me. Don't treat me like I'm fragile, Draco. I need to know you still want me that way."

"Darling..." he said.

"I'm serious. She said no penetration for a week, but other things were fine. Just treat me normally and don't avoid... things. *Please* Draco."

He felt a reluctant smile tug his lips. "Alright. I'll touch you when you're ready."

"Thank you *mon rêve*."

He helped her up, and they slipped into bed together, and she turned to face him. He ran a hand under her negligee and over her bare hip.

"Draco..." she started.

"Hmmm?" he asked.

"What would we have done? If we hadn't lost her I mean."

He raised an eyebrow. "I would have married you as quickly as possible."

She wrinkled her nose at this, and he felt an uncomfortable lurch.

"What?" he asked a bit nervously.

"That's not a reason to get married. Not really."

He relaxed again. "It would have been the reason for the timing. Not the reason I was asking you in the first place."

She smiled a little at this. "Oh. In that case, alright then."

"Really?" he repeated, stunned by her ready acceptance of it.

"Yes... And I suppose Dolohov..."

He exhaled. "I have no idea what we would have done about that. But it's nothing we have to worry about now."

"I suppose that's true."

They were silent for a long while, and he saw her eyes close.

"Draco," she whispered.

"What darling?"

"I love you."

He smiled. He couldn't help it. "I love you too."

## Chapter 32: Ring

### Draco

It was another five days before Draco finally took Hermione to bed. During those days he tried to give her space to process things on her own, but he couldn't help but hover. The fourth time she caught him waiting just outside whatever room she happened to be in, she rolled her eyes and said, "Oh fine. We can process it together."

It was good, he thought. They cried themselves out. They talked about what it would have been like. They even named her Aurora. And then Hermione approached him and explained her hormones were all over the place, and she knew it probably wasn't appropriate but if he didn't do *something* to get her off she would ignore his rules and just do it herself.

And that was how he found himself running his hands over her naked body, nuzzling her neck and palming those breasts of hers that were still larger than usual from her recent pregnancy.

"Merlin's balls I don't know how I didn't figure it out," he said as he squeezed them. "Your tits have always been glorious darling, but *this...*"

"You're only saying that because they got bigger. God Malfoy, you are so..."

He put his hand over her mouth. "Don't *Malfoy* me *mon ange*. We discussed this. Your tits are mine, remember? I can say anything about them that I like. And these... well, these are the tits of a goddess."

He removed his hand and kissed one nipple, which made her arch a little.

"They're going to be back to normal soon," she said.

"Normal is lovely, beautiful, wonderful. I have no complaints whatsoever."

"But..." she prompted him, with a small smile on her face.

"But if you ever want another baby, just remind me of what your tits look like when you're pregnant darling. I'll blow a load inside of you on command."

She made a sound that was between a groan and a laugh.

"You're terrible."

"You're beautiful."

"Make me come *mon rêve*, I've been so patient."

"Alright," he said as he trailed small kisses around those breasts. He really planned to take his time savoring them. Merlin knew when they would look just like this again, and the oversensitivity she had experienced before her collapse was finally diminished.

"We have to do things a little differently tonight."

"Why?" she breathed.

"No penetration."

"Hands are fine. Or tongue," she insisted.

He lifted his head to look at her. "No penetration."

She suddenly looked horrified. "But how? I have to have... I can't without..."

"You can do it," he said, returning to his slow exploration. "We can use some... mental techniques to help you get there."

"What?" she asked in confusion. "How?"

"By showing me your fantasies darling," he said and then he reached out with his mind and broke into hers.

Gods he had wanted to do this to her for months. He had been aching to see all the things she had imagined with him over the years. And when she insisted on getting off despite the fact she was on pelvic rest, it gave him a perfect excuse.

He gave her a moment to process what he had just done. He felt her surprise and then acceptance, and a keen eagerness jolted through him as he realized that she was going to let him watch while he touched her.

He loved to watch. He had always loved to watch. And at some point he realized he had always, *always* watched her, however he could.

He dove through her memories, and he felt no resistance as he searched until he found that time in the prefects' bath. She had just come around the corner and froze when she saw him drop a towel and get into the bath.

She stared from behind a stack of towels and then turned and walked out, looking flustered. And then he watched as she went back to her room and shut the curtains from around her bed as her hands crept into her pants for the first time.

It took her awhile, but Draco had to see it, and in her mind he could see what she imagined: Draco pulling her into the bath with him and muttering, "I only pretend to hate you," before kissing her and touching her breasts.

Draco was doing the same thing to her in real life as dream Draco was doing in her fantasy, and soon she broke in her memory, and real Hermione gasped.

He pushed forward to find another, and this time it was early in sixth year. She had just smelled something curious in her amortentia, and she couldn't identify it until later on that night when she turned a corner and ran right into Draco.

Draco remembered this part. "Look where you're going you filthy mudblood!" he snarled, and he stormed off. But Hermione stayed frozen, because she just realized the thing she smelled that attracted her was his aftershave. She was almost hyperventilating as she hurried up to her room, shoved the curtains closed, and imagined him pushing her to her knees as he unbuckled his belt.

"Suck my cock, little mudblood. You're so dirty aren't you?"

He could scarcely believe it, but it seemed to turn her on. She felt shame, certainly, but it was mixed with pleasure as she touched herself. Soon dream Draco's words were changing. "So dirty but so good. You are so, *so* good my dirty girl..."

Ok this made more sense to Draco. She had a praise kink, and in her fantasy she was proving to Draco just how perfect she was. Real Draco sucked her nipples and gave them a nip just as she came in her memory.

He pushed again, and he found her in the tent with Potter and Weasley, casting a silencing charm and imagining Draco taking his time with her in the cot, much like he was doing now. Real Draco let his fingers drift toward her clit, and he swirled slowly as dream Draco penetrated her with his fingers until she broke.

Another push, and now he was watching her lose her virginity with Weasley. He didn't love this, but in her mind she was picturing him, instead of Weasley. She secretly wished it was Draco who was getting her first time. She didn't come in the memory, but he heard her say, "That was nice D... Ron."

*Fuck she had almost said his name.*

That jealous monster in Draco's chest purred to know that she hadn't really been present with Weasley. Her mind had been on him the whole time.

Another push, and now she was older and things were getting interesting. He found her on her bed with a vibrator, picturing dream Draco pounding her as she thrust it into herself. Real Draco leaned down and gave her clit a light lick just as she spasmed in her memory, and she moaned.

Another push, and now Krum's hands were in her pants, and she wasn't even pretending to be thinking of him. It was all Draco in her mind's eye: his hair, his eyes, his smirk. She tried to orgasm but couldn't so she faked it, and then as soon as Krum left the room she got out her vibrator again to finish the job.

Real Draco had his head between her legs now, tasting her carefully, delicately and flicking her clit with his tongue.

He pushed again, and soon found her just after his birthday party in Paris. Her fantasy was surprisingly similar to the one he had foisted on the Popas, but in hers he kissed her desperately and ripped the slit higher in her dress so he could enter her at the same time.

“Years,” said dream Draco between kisses, as he latched onto her neck. “Fucking hell Granger I’ve wanted this for years.”

*He had*, he realized. He had always wanted something from her. It had just taken him fifteen years to figure out what it was.

Dream Draco spilled into her, and Hermione’s memory wrenched apart again with a moan, as real Draco gave her a flat-tongued lick that made her shudder.

More pushing, and now he was catching up to the present. He saw her dreams of him, her skepticism of him, but also her deep attraction to him. Then he saw the moment where she was watching him play with the kids when she decided she loved him and wanted to marry him and have her own kids with him someday. He felt the certainty in her mind as she thought of these things.

Draco’s heart seized at this, and he abruptly pulled out of her head, finding her so close to the end. Begging him, pleading with him.

She would give him anything right now, he was sure of it.

“Draco… please… finish me *mon rêve*, I’m so close…”

“What will you give me?” he demanded as he started to speed up the flicks of his tongue on her clit.

“Anything!” she gasped. “Anything at all!”

“Then say you’ll marry me,” he said.

“Yes! Yes of course, I…”

She trailed off, and the beast in Draco’s chest roared so loud he was sure it could be heard all the way to Hogwarts. He latched onto her clit and gave it an almighty suck, and she wrenched apart with his name on her lips.

She was breathing hard as Draco reached over to his nightstand and pulled out the ring.

“Give me your hand *mon ange*,” he said.

She watched in amazement as he put it on the ring finger of her left hand.

“You had it?”

“For a few weeks now,” he said.

He was slightly worried she was going to change her mind now that she wasn't on the brink of an orgasm, but to his relief she sat up, kissed him deeply, and then wrapped her hand around his cock. He groaned as she pumped for just a moment before she slipped off the bed and sank to her knees.

She reached up to grab his lower shaft again.

"Your left hand," he said suddenly. "I want to see it."

She smiled a little at this and switched hands, making sure to hold his cock so her ring sparkled on top with every pump. Then she opened her mouth and took him in.

Draco moaned at the sight. He didn't think he had ever seen anything more perfect than her hand with a Malfoy ring on it, stroking his cock while her throat opened and took him in. He knew he wasn't going to last long, but he didn't care. He had done it. He had locked her down, bound her to him, and now he was sure she would never leave him. A ring for her was a promise, and he had seen how much she wanted this in her memory.

On and on she pumped and sucked, and Draco just stared at that sparkle until he felt his balls tighten. He spent himself down her throat and saw her swallow, her eyes watching him.

"Come here," he said, pulling her up to him. She settled into his lap, and he pulled her hand up to study it.

"It's beautiful," she said softly.

"Like you," he said. "It's a Malfoy heirloom. Anything in our vault will be yours to wear whenever you want it, but my mother shares those things, as will our daughter if we have another one someday. But this ring is only yours for life."

She smiled broadly and pulled him in for a kiss before releasing him and giggling a little.

"What?" he said, smiling at her laughter.

"I just can't believe you proposed while you were edging me."

He gave her an arrogant smirk. "I'm a good negotiator. And I saw the opportunity to lock down the best deal of my life and had to take it."

She put her head on his shoulder and leaned in, wiggling her fingers a bit.

"What are we going to tell people?"

"Tell them I proposed in the library."

She snorted before turning serious. "I meant *when* are we going to tell them?"

He sighed. "We can tell our closest friends and Mother. But we need to keep it quiet until Dolohov is gone. After we have taken care of him we can announce it right away or keep it

quiet for a couple more months while I date you publicly to get the world used to the idea that we're together. That's up to you."

She nodded. "I want to wear my ring though."

Draco felt a fierce protectiveness and satisfaction rush through him at her words.

"You will. We can disillusion it while you're around people who don't know about us."

She nodded, and he nudged her off his lap to slip into bed with her.

"I love you darling," he said, raising her left hand to kiss it. "I can't even tell you how much."

"I love you too," she said. "I know our friends are going to think this is fast but..."

"I don't think they will, actually," he said. "Neither of us are the type to change our minds when we make a decision about something. It's been coming for a while."

She gave him a small smile and nodded contentedly. A few moments later, she drifted off to sleep.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Hermione

Hermione could scarcely believe she was engaged. They hadn't been together for very long, but then again they had gone through quite a bit. She was sure, and he was too, and Hermione was a bit surprised by how calm she felt about the whole thing. She wasn't having second thoughts.

When it came to telling their friends, she used Draco's suggestion and told them he proposed in the library. They all believed it, much to her amusement. And Draco had been correct that all of them were excited, and none seemed to think it was too fast.

"You're twenty-seven," said Ginny. "It's so obvious you two are mad for each other. There's no reason to wait once Dolohov is handled."

Hermione believed this too. She couldn't wait to be past Dolohov so she could be with Draco in public.

With her return to work came a return to the deal she was working on with Draco. And she was starting to be peppered with meeting requests from Damien Gataki, which made Draco, in particular, very grim. Draco and Harry read everything Gataki sent to her and approved drafts of responses back. Hermione was very careful to decline all requests to meet, stating that she was very busy with other matters, and she would not have an opening for several

months. She was vague. She didn't tell him what she was doing or where she would be. And at one point she volunteered to hand Greece off to somebody else due to her full schedule, but Gataki wouldn't hear of it. This made all three of them incredibly uneasy.

Still, she felt safe enough at the Ministry and within the wards of the Manor. Draco had finally confessed to using an advanced blood ward to tie her to the very building itself, and nobody who intended to harm her would be able to enter. Evidently he had cast the spell over the place where the chandelier fell on her in the sitting room. Her blood had seeped into the floor, and traces of it had been there for nearly a decade, her magic lingering in that spot. According to Draco it made the ward very strong. And it also gave her Topsy, who was their only house elf who was bound to the Manor itself and not just the people in it.

"Draco, I don't want a house elf!" she said in horror.

"I know you don't, darling. Truly, that part was an accident. I didn't realize the wards would tie you to Topsy too. I promise you, we will free Topsy once Dolohov is gone or the legislation passes, whichever comes first. But until then, she will help me keep you safe. You know I give her time off and wages."

Hermione didn't have illusions about the house elf legislation. She knew it would take several rounds of voting before it was done, if they ever achieved it in the first place. That meant Topsy's best chance at freedom was riding on Dolohov's demise. After hearing Draco's explanation of the kinds of things Topsy could do while bound, Hermione knew he would never give up Topsy's protection while she was involved with the Death Eater hunt.

Hermione couldn't wait to get the bastard.

And that was how she found herself planning their entry into Romania with Harry and Draco. She had an invitation to go to Durmstrang at the end of October.

"The Popas have invited me to stay," said Draco. "So we need to hold off on announcing our deal until this trip is over. It's so progressive that it will raise questions about my cover, and if we can find what we need at the Durmstrang library then I'll drop them after this trip."

"That's fine," said Hermione. "We've announced it internally. Harvey would really like to make the public announcement at some event with the Minister and others who will need to support it. That will take a little time to plan."

"Good. Let's get Belinda working on that event then, while we're all in Romania. And don't forget, Potter will be with you the whole time you're there with Rosu."

"Yes," said Harry. "Three days of security negotiations. Joy."

"Just keep Rosu in line. He's after Hermione."

"He's after me *romantically*. He's not actually dangerous," said Hermione, rolling her eyes.

"Like I said, keep him in line," said Draco, scowling again.

Harry nodded. "She won't be alone with him."

Hermione huffed, but Draco just pulled her left hand to his lips and kissed it as he touched her ring.

She melted a little at the gesture, slightly annoyed with herself at how easily he won that sort of argument these days, but then again, she couldn't help it. He was devoted, and he kept telling her that seeing his ring on her finger was one of the greatest things that had ever happened to him.

They continued to discuss the plan, and Hermione felt it was the best they could do. She and Harry would be there for three days, but Hermione would fall "ill" on their second day to go to Durmstrang with Draco under the cloak while Harry distracted Rosu. They were sure Rosu would hear about Hermione's invitation to Durmstrang, and he had become a bit dogged in his pursuit of her. Draco was concerned Rosu would follow Hermione if he knew where she was. So Hermione got out in front of it by writing to Rosu to tell him that she had been invited to Durmstrang but would reschedule it due to the full itinerary Rosu had sent her. Rosu responded promptly and seemed pleased with this news, and Hermione just hoped it would work to keep him away. She told herself that even if her excuse was a bit thin, it wouldn't matter as long as Hermione found what they needed.

It was also decided that Hermione and Harry would be entering Romania using the international floo. Draco would be entering the country by flying there using muggle means. Hermione was a bit bemused by the fact that he was taking an airplane, but he just shrugged.

"I've done it before when I didn't want the wizarding authorities to know I've entered a country. The fact that you can use muggle methods to enter a country without wizards knowing about it is the biggest fucking loophole in international travel security that there is."

It was true. And it was one of the things they were leaning on to loosen security checks between Britain and France in their deal.

It was also decided Draco would stay with Hermione at night for her safety — and other reasons of course — but he wouldn't be seeing the Popas until Hermione's last full day of meetings. Rosu had scheduled a farewell dinner for Hermione and Harry on their last night, and they would be flying home directly from the event, while Draco stayed behind with the Popas for a few more days.

The whole plan was a bit convoluted, but they didn't want it to be obvious that their trips to Romania overlapped as much as they did. Draco's visit needed to appear unconnected to Hermione's and Harry's. And Draco had no intention of allowing Hermione to spend even a moment unescorted.

Hermione couldn't deny that she was a bit nervous, though she kept telling herself she had no reason to be. She would be with Draco or Harry the entire time. She was going there to sit in meetings and visit a library she had been to a dozen times before. This visit was for information gathering so they could hopefully find the person who would lead Harry and Draco directly to Dolohov.

Still, she couldn't help but be a bit nervous as she watched Draco packing in a muggle suitcase.

"What on earth are you doing?" she asked as she stared at the things he had spread out on their bed.

"Packing darling."

"But surely you're not taking all *that*."

He shot her a look. "Of course I am."

"But it's..." she trailed off as she surveyed the items.

First, there were a variety of potions. She recognized polyjuice, veritaserum, several kinds of healing draughts, and a few she didn't recognize that she strongly suspected were poison. Then there were several knives, holsters, and something that looked a bit like kevlar. There was an amulet with a protective rune on it. There was a wand she didn't recognize that looked suspiciously like it was made out of yew, which she knew was the preferred wood species for dark magic. She even saw a couple of muggle pistols with several rounds of ammunition. And of course Harry's invisibility cloak was there as well.

"Standard fare," he said casually.

"Unregistered wands and guns are standard fare?" she asked hesitantly. She had to admit the wand didn't really surprise her. But she had no idea Draco even knew what a gun *was*, let alone had the ability to handle one comfortably. She eyed the guns nervously.

"Yes, they work in both the muggle and magical worlds. No electricity."

"But this is just information gathering," she insisted.

"Yes, of course."

"But..." she trailed off at the look he gave her.

"Darling, if you think I'm going to let you go to Romania unarmed, you're mad. These are for all three of us."

She looked at him in confusion as he pulled her arm toward him and fitted a holster to her forearm and inserted a knife into it. "I instructed Topsy to pack long sleeves for you," he said. "I want you to keep your wand and knife on you at all times."

"I don't know how to use..." she said, but he cut her off with a wave and gave her a quick crash course on knives — how to hold them, where to stab, and he made her draw it several times until he was satisfied.

"This is crazy," she said, but he just glared at her.

"You'll also wear the amulet," he said. "It has mild protective enchantments. It will cast a light shield around you. It's not impenetrable, and it won't stop unforgiveables, but it will deflect weaker spells."

"What about you?"

"Don't worry about me darling."

"But you're the one with the Popas..."

"I'll try to rendezvous with you as you leave the country to get the amulet."

"And if that doesn't work?"

"I'll be very well-armed. You have nothing to worry about."

"It's just...." she hesitated as she looked at everything he was packing. He said nothing, but continued to work until finally understanding struck.

"You're planning to go after him aren't you? Alone? After Harry and I come back to England."

He just shot her a look. "I don't know where he is, darling. I plan to stay with the Popas. But I also believe in being prepared in case an opportunity presents itself."

"Draco..." she said, but he moved toward her and cupped her cheek.

"Relax, *mon ange*. I'm very good at my job."

"I just..."

"Shhh..." he said, as he kissed her deeply before pulling back. "I'm going to end this as soon as I can. It's time to be done. It's time to claim you publicly. Odds are good I won't need any of this, but it's better to have it and not need it than need it and not have it."

She hesitated. This was supposed to be a fact-finding mission and nothing more. Yet he was packing an entire arsenal with him. She had a feeling he would stay behind until the job was finished.

"How will you get this on an airplane?" she suddenly asked. There was no way he would be able to bring all of these things through muggle security. She had the hope that he wouldn't be able to get these things into Romania. Then perhaps he would abandon the plan she was sure he was developing without her.

To her consternation he just gave her an amused look. "Notice-me-not charms let me bring anything on an airplane that I wish. Muggle scanners can't detect any of it. That's one reason I'm flying in before you."

Hermione felt her heart sink.

“Hermione...” he said, pulling her toward him again. “I know you’re worried. That’s one of many reasons I never wanted you to know about this side of me. But I’m well-trained. I’ve never failed on a mission, and I’ve never been caught. You need to trust me.”

She just sighed and nodded, as he pulled her close.

“Excellent,” he said. “Now give me your knife so I can pack it.”

She unfastened the holster and handed it to him.

“Thank you darling. You’ll be wearing it from the time you’re at the hotel until you leave.”

“What if you don’t rendezvous with us? I can’t take weapons through magical security.”

“Then you abandon it. We can always get you another one.”

She just nodded.

“Let’s get ready for bed then,” he said. “My flight’s early.”

She sighed and nodded, and within a few minutes she was settling into bed with him. As usual he was running his hands over her bare body and making her shiver.

“You’re so lovely.”

“I don’t know how you can be thinking about that sort of thing right now,” she said.

He just looked at her askance. “How could I not be? My beautiful girl, my fiancée, all ready for me.”

“Because I get the impression you’re preparing to do something very dangerous.”

He just gave her a dark smirk as he rolled on top of her. “But didn’t you know I get off on danger?”

And then his lips and hands were on her, making her weak for him, coaxing her to join him. He was more intentional tonight, and something about the thing he was fully prepared to do cast a sense of darkness over the entire experience. It turned her on in a way that made her feel depraved. She should be scared of him. She should be horrified that he was capable of cold-blooded murder. But instead of making her feel that way it brought her closer to climax. She knew she was safe with him, as long as she let him lead her in this.

“I want to hear you say my fucking name,” he demanded as sheathed himself into her and began to thrust.

“*Draco*,” she groaned.

“Again,” he ordered.

“*DRACO!*”

“And what will your name be?”

“*Malfoy!*”

“That’s right. You’re mine. Every part of you is mine. And I can’t wait to give you everything. I can’t wait until you take my name. I’ll burn Romania to the fucking ground if I have to so you can do it.”

Hermione gasped and broke, and he followed not a moment later.

As he pulled out, he drew her close. “I’m going to kill him for you darling,” he said simply. “If not on this trip, then soon.”

“Draco you shouldn’t tell me that. You could be caught, and now you’ve incriminated yourself, and...”

“Then you’ll just have to go ahead and marry me if that happens won’t you? To claim spousal privilege. That way you can’t be called to testify against me.”

He looked so pleased by this notion that Hermione raised her eyebrows.

“Don’t tell me that’s your plan.”

He shrugged. “I don’t intend to get caught. But the way I see it, there’s a massive silver lining if I am.”

“You’re impossible.”

“And you’re beautiful.”

Hermione just shook her head and she nestled into him, trying to reassure herself that this mission would be nothing more than a library visit.

“Good night *mon rêve.*”

“Sleep tight *mon ange.*”

## Chapter 33: Flight to Romania

### Draco

Draco stared at Potter and Hermione, who were getting organized in the library early the next morning. Draco knew he was being overprotective, but he insisted that Potter come to the Manor and wait there while Draco flew to Romania first. The moment he was out of the wards the mission would begin, and he wouldn't leave Hermione alone for any portion of it.

"Remember, I'll message Potter when I have made it to the hotel. Then you two can floo in and apparate directly to the hotel once you arrive. If Florin Rosu shows up and tries to slow you down, extricate yourselves as quickly as possible."

"I can handle Florin," said Hermione, and Draco got the impression she was struggling not to roll her eyes.

Draco just gave her a severe look. "I'm serious. If somebody gets left behind to deal with Rosu it should be Potter and not you."

"Yes, yes, I *know*," she said.

"Fine," said Draco. "And once you two arrive at the hotel I'll gear you both up."

Potter nodded, and Hermione grimaced. Draco knew she wasn't comfortable with weapons, particularly muggle guns. But Draco and Potter were both well-versed in them. It was Potter's idea to learn how to use muggle weapons years ago, and Draco had gone along with it because of the element of surprise it could give them. Besides, he had many acres on which they could safely shoot targets, and he and Potter were both rather good marksmen now.

Draco cast the notice-me-not charm over his muggle luggage, and he pulled Hermione in for a hug and kiss. "Sit tight. I should be there in about five hours."

She nodded, and he pulled out some polyjuice from his pocket and drank it before transforming into Potter.

"This is always so weird," muttered Potter, as he watched Draco critically.

Draco smirked and then pulled out a pair of contact lenses that corrected his vision and made his eyes brown. It was his standard disguise whenever he flew for a mission because a brown-eyed Potter without glasses had no distinctive features and was completely forgettable. He had an entire second identity that was based off of this brown-eyed version of Potter - muggle identification, bank accounts, credit cards, all of it.

"I'll be in touch," he said, as he turned and left the library.

He pulled his luggage out the front door and down to the end of the lane before apparating to the closest apparition point to Heathrow and stepping outside of it to hail a cab. A short ride later he was being dropped off at the airport, and he assumed an expression of boredom as he made his way through security.

Draco was always tempted to confound his way to the front of the line at Heathrow, but it was too risky. He was surrounded by muggles, and he couldn't allow himself to be drawn into a Statute of Secrecy dispute simply because the security checkpoint was fifty people deep. Instead, he occupied himself with people watching as he slowly wound his way through the rope barriers until he was finally placing his luggage through the scanner.

This was the moment where Draco held his breath. Despite what he told Hermione, Draco was never certain if muggle technology would advance enough to detect his weapons through a notice-me-not charm. He knew muggles were innovating far more quickly than wizards, and every single time he did this he worried that *this* time he would get caught.

He exhaled as his luggage passed through the scanner without being pulled for a search, and Draco was waved through the metal detector before collecting his bag on the other side.

He checked his watch and saw he had about an hour before boarding.

*Perfect timing*, he thought. He would have just enough time to indulge in his favorite airport pastime: eating food from the wrong time zone.

Heathrow, being a major international airport, had restaurants open at all hours of the day. And even though it was breakfast time in London, Draco had no problem finding a restaurant that would serve him a cocktail and a burger, which he ate near some weary-looking travelers whom Draco suspected had flown in from the other side of the world.

This was the one thing he always did whenever he was here. He was sure Topsy and the other elves would look at him askance if he ever suggested eating a burger for breakfast at the Manor.

Feeling more full than he had any right to be this early in the morning, Draco paid and made his way to the gate.

*British Airways, it's nice to see you.*

Draco was skeptical of the low-cost airlines that were starting to move in on the London air scene. Granted, most of them flew out of Luton or Stansted, but the fact remained that Draco had his doubts about them. If he was trusting muggles to fly him through the air, he would be in first class on the legacy carrier, thank you very much.

Truthfully, Draco would really like to fly private, but Potter always put his foot down about that. Potter was worried it wouldn't be quite as anonymous as a commercial flight because it would give him no crowds into which he could disappear, and Potter was never in favor of it when Draco was flying for a mission. Draco wasn't sure that he agreed with this assessment, but he compromised by flying up front.

Draco was cleared to board, and he settled into the best seat in first class, as he pulled out a muggle book and settled in for the flight. Bucharest was three hours away, and he didn't dare work on anything magical, lest his seatmate notice something odd.

"What's your name?" asked a young woman who sat down next to Draco.

Draco mentally groaned.

"Harry," he said. "Harry Pittner."

"Nice to meet you Harry. I'm Charlotte Black. Are you heading to Bucharest for work then?"

Draco blinked at the last name, but tried not to react. The odds of Charlotte being related to his mother were infinitesimal. Black wasn't an uncommon last name, after all.

"In a manner of speaking," said Draco carefully. "It's a mixture of work and pleasure."

"Oh well I'm heading there to follow up with the monitoring report from the European Commission. You know Romania is scheduled to be admitted to the EU on the first of January. I have been monitoring reforms of its judicial system."

"Err, right," said Draco. He frantically ran through his memories about this. Hermione had prepared several reports about EU member states to use as a framework for their deal together. He knew portions of Eastern Europe were still being phased in. He tried to go back to his book, but she was persistent.

"So what are you doing then?"

*Hoping to assassinate a Death Eater.*

"Just some meetings for business. I run a small family company."

"Doing what?"

*Bloody hell woman.*

"Oh my family owns some vineyards, and we have a wine company. Romania produces rather good wine, and we're looking to acquire some vineyards there to expand."

"Really! I had no idea!"

In truth, Draco didn't know very much about Romania, but he knew it produced quite a bit of wine. It was true that the Malfoys had a few vineyards in France. It was categorically untrue that they wanted to expand anywhere else, but he knew wine and could talk wine if he had to. It was far safer territory for him than the muggle European Union at any rate.

They continued to chat for another hour until Charlotte said, "You know Harry, this has been lovely. Perhaps we could get together when we're both back in London?"

Draco winced.

“Charlotte, I’m sorry, but I’m actually engaged.”

“Oh!” she said, and Draco could see she looked mortified. “I’m sorry, I...”

“No, it’s fine. It’s just... yeah.”

*Bloody hell, this is why I prefer to floo.*

It was only then that she gave him a tight smile, and he was finally allowed to return to his book in an awkward silence until the plane touched down a couple of hours later.

“Well then, good luck with your wine,” she said a bit curtly as she exited first. Draco just sighed and rubbed his temples. At least he didn’t look like himself. Maybe he could find some way to blame Potter for this.

He took his time as he exited the plane to make sure Charlotte was well ahead of him before moving through the airport and walking to a section of an adjacent parking deck that was empty enough for apparition. He turned with a *CRACK!* and a moment later he found himself in an alleyway near the hotel where they would be staying.

Draco knew he was several blocks away, and he took a moment to appreciate the scene around him. Romania was a beautiful country, and Bucharest was an odd blend of stunning architecture and communist-era edifices. The Popas lived in the countryside, and Draco didn’t have a chance to see Bucharest by daylight when he last visited for the political event where he ran into Hermione. She had once told him that quite a bit of Bucharest’s architecture was stripped in the 1980s during the communist regime. However, sections of the old town still remained, and restoration efforts were underway. And as he walked toward the muggle hotel where they were staying, he marveled at the Beaux-Arts buildings he passed. He knew Bucharest was sometimes called “Little Paris of the East,” and Draco had to admit that if he didn’t know better he would have guessed he was on a street near his home in France.

He finally entered the lobby of the elegant hotel where Hermione had stayed previously. It took no time at all before he was checking in and requesting keys for both of their rooms, before making his way to the lift. He selected the larger of the two rooms for him and Hermione and at long last pulled out his galleon.

*I’ve checked in. Come straight to Room 328.*

*On it. We are floo’ing in now. We should be there in an hour.*

*Hex Rosu if you have to.*

*Will do.*

Draco sighed and threw his galleon aside as he collapsed back on the bed, trying to settle the gnawing feeling in his stomach. Hermione was on her way to Romania. He didn’t like it. He didn’t like it at all. And somehow he just knew that things wouldn’t go according to plan.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Hermione

Hermione had been on pins and needles as she waited to hear from Draco. He hadn't communicated with them at all during his trip. She knew he couldn't risk being seen tapping a galleon while surrounded by muggles, but the silence felt deafening.

She had eaten breakfast with Harry, but then he settled in to study up on the defensive plans Romania was requesting, while Hermione paced.

"Sit down, you're driving me mad," Harry muttered.

"How am I supposed to be comfortable with this? Draco Malfoy is flying on a bloody airplane as we speak."

"Yes, and he'll be fine."

"But Heathrow is huge! And he might do magic and give it all away! How on earth can you trust him to...."

"Hermione, he flies a few times per year. It's not a big deal. He knows what he's doing."

Hermione opened her mouth and then closed it again.

"He does?"

"Yes, he's part of B.A.'s frequent flyer program."

"Bloody hell," she muttered, as Harry grinned at her.

"Don't worry, he always flies first class."

"Why does that not surprise me?"

"If you want a wedding gift idea, just tell him you'll let him fly private to your honeymoon. He's always wanted to try it, but I don't let him do it for missions."

Hermione rolled her eyes, but she felt her lips twitch in amusement before sighing.

"Just as long as we *get* a honeymoon. I'm pretty sure he's going to stay behind and go after Dolohov."

Harry made a noncommittal noise.

"Oh don't tell me you two have planned this?"

Now he stared her squarely in the eye. “And why not? If the records at Durmstrang are as good as you say we might be able to find the link and end this.”

“And you’re going to let him do it alone?”

“I didn’t say that.”

Hermione scowled. “So what... you’re going to floo home with me and then turn around and floo right back?”

“I was thinking more along the lines of you go home alone, and I watch under the cloak before joining Malfoy.”

“That’s exactly what he did the last time I floo’d home from Romania.”

“I know. He said it worked really well.”

“I don’t like this Harry. I don’t like that you two might...”

She trailed off. She couldn’t bring herself to say it.

“Hermione, you shouldn’t think about it. Malfoy and I know what we’re about. We usually just arrest people, but there have been a few times when it was worth coming up with a more... permanent solution. This is one of those times.”

“But you’re an auror.”

“Yes, but I’ve never really been a rule follower have I?”

Hermione sighed. “Does Ginny know?”

“She suspects. She knows to leave it alone.”

Hermione bit her lip, but dropped it. She could tell from the expression on Harry’s face that he had no qualms about this, not really. She already knew that Draco felt the same way. And if she was being honest with herself, there was a small part of her that was grateful for it. Dolohov absolutely terrified her. He always had. He had come closer to killing her than any other person, except perhaps Bellatrix. The fact that he was still alive and at large was something Hermione had carefully not thought about for years for her own mental well-being.

She realized she was reluctant to stop Draco and Harry from executing their plan – the key word being *execute*. Her biggest problem with it was a concern for their safety. She found herself mentally glossing over the moral implications of it, and she wondered what that said about her.

Finally, at long last, Harry’s galleon glowed with a message from Draco.

*I’ve checked in. Come straight to Room 328.*

Hermione breathed a sigh of relief that he had gotten there without incident. Now it was their turn.

“Ready?” asked Harry, after he sent a few more messages to Draco.

Hermione just nodded and stood, smoothing her skirt and taking a deep breath.

“What are the odds we’re going to run into Florin as soon as we get there?” she muttered to Harry as they left the library together.

“According to Malfoy, exceptionally high,” said Harry.

Hermione grimaced a bit and nodded. “Look, let me handle it if we run into him, and please trust that I know what I’m doing. Just keep Draco in the loop and make sure he doesn’t show up with homicidal intentions.”

Harry cast her a skeptical look. “That doesn’t exactly give me confidence, Hermione.”

She rolled her eyes. “Trust me, Harry. I’ve been dealing with Florin for several years now. I know the best way to manage him.”

He finally sighed and nodded as they floo’d together to the British Ministry of Magic.

Hermione went through the motions of clearing security in Britain on autopilot. She couldn’t wait for her deal with Draco to be made public. She suspected their security preclearance program would be one of the things they could pass first. Every person who was aware of it was deeply in favor, and it wouldn’t surprise Hermione if other countries jumped on board soon after France and Britain had agreed to it.

It took nearly twenty minutes for both of them to clear security. Harry floo’d ahead of her to make sure he was there when she arrived, and then finally it was her turn.

“Romanian Ministry of Magic!” she called as she spun away.

Just over a minute later she exited to find Harry waiting for her, and together they made their way toward the Romanian security desk to check in. This took another half an hour, and as they were finally finishing up she caught the familiar dark head of Florin Rosu striding toward them.

Hermione forced herself not to groan.

“Hermione,” he said, as she crossed the security barrier. He pulled her in for a kiss on the cheek.

“Florin,” she said tightly. “I’d like to introduce you to Harry Potter.”

“Mr. Potter,” said Florin, now turning to shake Harry’s hand. Hermione saw that Harry was also forcing a smile on his face, and he was gripping Florin’s hand rather hard.

*Honestly. Harry will listen to anything Draco says.*

Hermione glanced at Florin's face and saw him studying Harry closely. She sensed he was sizing Harry up, along with his relationship with Hermione. Harry's engagement had made the news of course, but there had always been whispers about Hermione and Harry. Always.

"I know we have a tight agenda tomorrow, but we must get to know each other better. A drink perhaps?" asked Florin. "I am out the rest of the afternoon."

Harry opened his mouth to decline, but Hermione jumped in. "Of course. Our hotel is just down the street. Why don't we head there?"

Florin looked gratified, while Harry looked at her like she had lost her mind. Hermione just gave him a look that said, *trust me*.

Harry gave a slight nod, and they made their way toward the doors. Hermione felt Harry fall back for a moment, and she was sure he was sending a message to Draco to alert him to the slight change of plans.

Hermione, of course, had no intention of taking Florin to their *actual* hotel. But she knew Bucharest rather well, and there was a nice muggle establishment called The Marmorosch where she had stayed on a previous trip just a couple of blocks away.

Sure enough, as they entered the lobby Florin chuckled. "I should have known you were staying here. It's muggle of course, but very nice."

Hermione inclined her head in acknowledgment and led them to a lounge with a bar. She saw Harry start to relax as he realized that she wasn't blowing their cover. She wasn't revealing anything at all. She was simply trying to get Florin's guard down so that when she fell "ill" it would be believable. And if he decided to look for her, he would head to the wrong place.

"Hermione, I failed to tell you how lovely you look today," said Florin as they settled in with their drinks.

Hermione forced herself to smile at this, and she fingered her necklace a bit nervously as she thought about Draco's reaction to this deviation in their plans. "Thank you."

She caught his eyes looking at it. "A gift from Krum?" he asked, and she detected jealousy in his voice.

"No," she said. She didn't offer an explanation, but she saw him studying it more curiously now as she attempted to switch the subject. It didn't work.

"Who gave it to you then?" he asked.

Hermione glanced at Harry, who was giving her a *you-tell-me* look. Hermione was tempted to tell the truth and say that Harry had given it to her. But she needed Florin to like Harry enough to spend hours with him without her there, and she was getting the impression that Florin was almost as jealous as Draco was.

She hesitated before finally saying, “I purchased it. I found it in a muggle second hand shop of all places, along with the matching earrings. I expect the muggles didn’t know what they had. They thought they were just very well-cut diamonds instead of goblin made jewelry. I felt so bad about the price they were asking that I left some extra money behind after I purchased them.”

Florin’s expression immediately cleared. “Well that was a stroke of luck. I must say you have excellent taste.”

Hermione relaxed, and Harry shot her a look that told Hermione he was reluctantly impressed.

They chatted through two rounds of drinks, and Hermione couldn’t help but notice that Harry was a bit distracted by something under the table. She strongly suspected he was doing everything he could to make Draco stay away. Eventually Hermione felt they had been there long enough and finally stood. “Florin, this was lovely.”

“Can I tempt you both with dinner?” he asked.

“I’m afraid not tonight,” said Hermione. “Harry and I need to settle into our rooms and then go over your requests this evening before we meet tomorrow. He and I didn’t have much opportunity to discuss them in advance. But we will see you in the morning.”

Florin looked mildly disappointed, but not at all suspicious, as he bowed over Hermione’s hand and then shook Harry’s.

“Tomorrow then,” said Harry, and Florin nodded.

Hermione and Harry lingered near the reception counter until Florin exited the hotel before making their way to a deserted corridor off the lobby and apparating to the ally near their actual hotel.

“You should know Malfoy’s going spare,” said Harry, without further preamble.

Hermione sighed. “Dealing with Florin this way was really for the best.”

“I agree with you,” said Harry. “He’s not suspicious at all, and you were smart to take him to a hotel that wasn’t ours. But I doubt Malfoy is going to see it that way.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and mentally groaned as they finally entered the lobby and immediately made their way to the lifts and Room 328. They knocked, and a moment later Draco opened the door, glowering at them both.

“What the actual *fuck* was that?” he insisted as he pulled them both in and slammed the door behind them.

Hermione turned to frown at her fiancé. “A diversion, Draco. Florin would be suspicious of me or jealous of Harry if we declined to have drinks with him. It’s the only way he will believe us when Harry tells him I’m ill and be content to spend all day with Harry instead of

me. Besides, we took him to the wrong hotel. So if he tries to find me in a couple of days, he won't know where to look."

She saw a muscle twitching in his jaw, but he finally gave a stiff nod before leaning down and whispering in her ear, "Did he touch you?"

"Only to be polite," she whispered back. Of course, this wasn't *strictly* true. Florin had kissed her on the cheek. But she didn't trust Draco's temper like this. "Please Draco."

He seemed to deflate a little and nodded. She cast a look at Harry who appeared relieved.

"Let's order room service for dinner," she said with some forced cheerfulness. "We'll eat and go over the plan for Durmstrang. There's no need for us to leave the hotel tonight."

Draco looked pleased by this suggestion, and his mood thawed further.

"I'll just give you two some time then," Harry said. "Message me when the food arrives."

Draco nodded, and Harry gathered the supplies that Draco had brought for him before slipping out and toward his own room down the hall.

Draco turned back to Hermione. "Darling," he said, as he opened his arms.

She moved toward him, and she felt him reach up for her left hand to tap his wand against her ring finger. Immediately her ring reappeared.

"I don't like Rosu," Draco groused.

"I know you don't *mon rêve*. But we have to play nice with him for a few more days. I'm yours though. Just yours."

This seemed to soothe Draco's temper as he sat on the bed and pulled her down onto his lap before kissing her deeply.

"The last time we were here I didn't get to do this," he murmured as he moved to her neck.

"Mmmm, that's true," she sighed. "But we should eat. I'm famished."

Draco pulled away slowly. "Fine. Food and plotting, and then I'm kicking Potter out. I have half a mind to just bend you over right here and..."

"*Draco*," Hermione insisted. He just raised an eyebrow at her. "Food. Please."

He grumbled a bit, but slid her off of his lap to head to the phone to order room service. She only caught the last part of it as he said, "...and a bottle of champagne and strawberries.... Yes, thank you." He was giving her a practically dangerous look as he said this bit, and Hermione gulped.

"Done," he said, as he hung up and walked back toward her with the same expression on his face. "Now then. We have at least twenty minutes before the food gets here. That's plenty

of time for something quick," and then he spun her around and bent her over the bed.

"Be a good girl for me," he crooned as he lifted her dress and hooked his fingers around her knickers.

It didn't take long before Hermione began to moan.

# Chapter 34: Durmstrang

## Chapter Notes

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

### Hermione

To Hermione's relief and Draco's surprise, the first full day in Romania passed exactly as planned. Draco stayed behind in their hotel to catch up on work while Hermione and Harry joined Florin at the Romanian Ministry and took a tour of their auror department before settling in for long meetings about Romanian security.

According to the briefings, the Romanian auror department was aware that there were growing dark forces in the country, but they had been unable to identify the source. Over the previous two years more than twenty muggles had died by the killing curse or an odd crushing curse that they had never seen before, and their muggle relations department and obliviators were spread far too thin trying to control the mess. Every single muggle who was killed was either high up in the muggle government or linked to a prominent muggleborn witch or wizard.

It only took one glance at Harry's carefully blank face to tell Hermione that he knew *exactly* who was behind it, or rather, he strongly suspected it. During their preparations for this visit, Harry told her that he was aware of the muggle killings. He made a point to get briefings about muggle killings from every country in Europe, though he was the only auror in the department who bothered to do so. Harry said it was so similar to how Voldemort behaved that he and Draco learned it was a way of narrowing down the location of high-ranking Death Eaters. As soon as those murders started to occur in Romania, Harry knew there was a Death Eater there. And narrowing it down to Dolohov was relatively simple too: over time Harry and Draco caught all the others, so the process of elimination told them it was Dolohov. Besides, the unique crushing curse that had appeared on several of the muggles was awfully similar to what happened to Hermione in the Department of Mysteries. It was a signature spell of his.

Yes, Dolohov was in Romania, and from the sound of it, he was trying to bring about his *own* rise to power, using the same methods Voldemort had used. He simply had not moved out into the open yet.

To Hermione's relief, the meetings from their first day were comprised of security briefings and a litany of the things the aurors had been doing to try to find the person or people responsible for the muggle killings and threats to muggleborns. Harry and Hermione had very little to say that day. The real negotiations would start the following day, while Hermione was at Durmstrang. She knew Harry was prepared to handle this without her. After all, it was *his* department that would be helping and not hers.

Florin tried to coax Harry and Hermione into dinner and drinks again, but this time they declined, claiming a need to go over the information they had learned that day. The *real* reason they declined was because Hermione was about to get “food poisoning” from the room service they would be ordering instead. It would be no good if Florin actually watched her eat.

Satisfied that they had put him off until at least the following day, Harry and Hermione went back to their hotel, where Draco immediately grabbed Hermione to pull her into the room and said, “Dinner in an hour,” to Harry before shutting the door in his face.

Immediately he pushed Hermione against the door and unconcealed her ring.

“Draco,” she breathed, as he started kissing her neck. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I missed you, and I was bored out of my mind,” he said roughly. “All I could think about all day was that fucking *Rosu* got to spend time with you, and I didn’t.” He unfastened her skirt as he was starting to yank it down before working on the buttons of her blouse. They were small and fiddly, and eventually he got so frustrated that he just ripped it open.

“*Draco*,” she gasped.

“Hush, I’ll buy you another one,” he said as he dipped his head toward her breasts. “I gotta get in you.”

He stepped back just long enough to deftly unhook her bra and pull down her knickers before pinning her arms against the door and kissing her deeply.

“My knife...” started Hermione, but she lost her train of thought as Draco bit her earlobe.

“Keep it on. It’s fucking hot,” he said as he nudged her legs open with his knee before working his way down her body with his tongue.

“Of course you would think a knife is hot...” she murmured.

“I told you I get off on danger. If you tried to disembowel me with it I’d probably cream my pants darling.”

“Merlin,” she muttered, before groaning as his tongue met her center.

“Get wet for me, *mon ange*,” he said, and Hermione couldn’t help herself. She felt herself responding to his words and his tongue.

“Just like that. I’m going to fuck you so hard darling, you’ll forget every minute with *Rosu* today.”

Hermione felt her breath getting shallow and those telltale signs of her orgasm approaching, and he hadn’t even entered her yet. Suddenly he stood, and she heard him unfastening his pants as he spun her around to face away from him. She felt him nudge her legs apart even more before lowering himself enough to slide inside of her. To her surprise he wrapped one

arm around her waist, as he used his free hand to grip her breasts before he started to bounce her on top of his cock.

“Oh *God*,” she gasped. He was physically holding her up, her toes barely brushing the ground with each bounce. Hermione felt herself coming apart, and with nothing to hold onto, she reached behind her and grabbed Draco by the hair.

“Fuck *yes*, just like that,” he said as she tugged hard. Draco’s own grip tightened, and Hermione felt his pace pick up as she got ever closer to that perfect moment.

“Scream for me,” he ground out. “Scream my fucking name.”

“D... *Draco!*” she shouted as she felt herself start to spasm and lose control. She expected to feel Draco finish just behind her, but to her surprise he didn’t. Instead he pulled out for a moment before lifting her and tossing her onto the bed.

“Oomph,” she said, as she landed and looked at him askance. “What the hell was that?”

He just smirked at her as he laid down on the bed and then hauled her on top of him. For some reason she was facing the wrong way.

“Honestly Draco, there’s no need to manhandle...” she started, but he cut her off as she felt herself being pulled backwards.

“Stop talking and start sucking, darling,” he said, wiggling his hips a little.

Hermione turned to look behind her and raised her eyebrows. “Say please,” she said primly.

He just gave her an evil smile. “No. In fact, I think *you* will be saying please before we’re done here. Please *and* thank you. Now put my cock in that perfect little mouth of yours *mon ange*.”

Hermione hesitated for a moment, but something about the way he was looking at her and the filthy words he was using turned her on more than it should have. Finally she turned back and bent forward, and she heard Draco groan as she opened her mouth and took him in.

“Yes,” he hissed. “Fuck me with that mouth, and I’ll fuck you with mine.”

To her surprise she felt him grip her hips and pull her backwards even further until she was straddling his face. He pulled her hips directly down on top of him and started to lick.

Hermione gasped and released him for a moment. “Draco, what...”

He lifted her hips ever so slightly so he could talk. “Keep sucking darling.”

“But you won’t be able to breathe...”

“Then I’ll die happy, just like this. I want you to sit on my face and come all over me.”

And with that he pulled her back down, and Hermione leaned forward and she continued to pleasure him too. It was difficult though – the things he was doing to her were distracting, and her thighs were quivering trying to stay upright.

Eventually she felt herself start to shake, and Draco began bouncing her hips again on top of his face to help his tongue penetrate her further.

She gasped, and released him for a moment. "D...*Draco*..." she said hesitantly.

He just went harder, and then she groaned, "Draco... *please*..."

She felt him pull away for one more moment. "Back on my cock, and I'll give you what you want."

With this she gave up and just opened her throat and hollowed her cheeks, as his cock slid in and out with the same rhythm he was setting for her. She felt herself coming completely undone, and before she knew it, she was moaning, though it was muffled by her very full mouth. Finally, he started sucking, and then she was jerking and spasming as he brought her to that place a second time.

This time he didn't stop, but he continued to draw out her aftershocks as his cock thrust deeper into her throat. It was only moments later when she felt him tense too, and he was coming down her throat. Hermione barely had the presence of mind to swallow before releasing him and collapsing forward. She sighed deeply and closed her eyes.

She felt him brushing her bum with his hands affectionately as he said, "Well?"

"Fucking fine," she groaned, with her eyes still closed. "Thank you."

He just chuckled as he swatted her lightly on the rump. "Up you get then darling. Time to get dressed for Potter."

Hermione's eyes flew open. "But you ruined my blouse! I didn't bring any extra clothes, and you have those bloody rules about nightwear..."

To her consternation he just laughed before extricating himself. "You'll have to wear something of mine then."

He threw her a T-shirt that Hermione knew would be far too large on her.

"Draco, he'll know this is yours."

"So? We're engaged."

"But he'll know we just..."

" Fucked?" he asked innocently. She glared at him.

"Relax, *mon ange*. He wasn't born yesterday. And it's not like we're giving him a show like he gave to you that one time."

Hermione huffed as she yanked the proffered T-shirt from Draco's hands.

"Fine. But next time, be gentler with my clothes. Or wait until we're done for the evening to..."

"Start fucking?"

"I was going to say, have sex."

"That wasn't just sex *mon ange*. That was a good old fashioned fucking."

Hermione felt her lips twitch a bit reluctantly. "Fine. That then."

"Very well," he said as he leaned down and kissed her on the nose. "Now get yourself decent. And make sure you're ready to go again once he leaves."

"You're insatiable."

"I'm just in love with my fiancée."

He gave her a dashing smile and kissed her left hand, before touching her ring. As usual, she felt herself melt at the sweet gesture.

"True. And I suppose I love you too."

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

Draco was wearing an arsenal as he geared up to go to Durmstrang: two knives, a muggle handgun, his spare wand that was more suited for dark magic that he had acquired on the black market to make it untraceable to him, the magical equivalent of a hand grenade, and several very fast-acting poisons. Hermione just stared at him.

"Draco, this is just research."

"You're doing research, darling. I'm guarding you."

And it was true. Draco was sure that when Hermione didn't show up to the meetings today, Rosu would take it upon himself to look for her. Draco had to admit that her idea about giving him the wrong hotel on their first day there wasn't a terrible one, but it was still a weak cover. The hotel was walking distance to the Romanian Ministry, and Rosu would probably slip away during lunch and learn the truth. Once he learned that Hermione had lied to him about *that*, he would probably assume she lied about being ill as well. Then he would hunt for her, and Durmstrang was an obvious place to look since she had an invitation to be there.

Draco figured they had at most three or four hours before Rosu arrived.

Not that Draco was afraid of Rosu, not in the slightest. But Rosu was a complication for their overall plan, and he desperately wanted Hermione. That last thing was the sin Draco couldn't forgive. Of course Rosu didn't know that Hermione was very much off the market. But that didn't stop Draco from fantasizing about seriously maiming him for the way he looked at her and his dogged persistence when it came to her.

Yes, if Rosu showed his fucking face then Draco would consider it a threat to the mission, and he could fulfill one of his darker fantasies and make the bastard pay. Potter had readily agreed to this as well. He pulled Draco's aside the previous evening and told Draco that he poked Rosu with his own brand of legilimency during cocktails. Potter wasn't a fan of what he saw in Rosu's head. Rosu wanted Hermione in an obsessive and near-predatory kind of way.

Draco was self-aware enough to realize that Rosu's fascination with Hermione was somewhat similar to the way he felt about her too, especially before they were together. The key difference, of course, was that Hermione was in love with him, and Draco was in love with her. She wanted that kind of attention from Draco while she wanted nothing at all to do with Rosu. In Draco's mind – and Potter's as well – this made Draco's obsession with her perfectly acceptable and Rosu's intolerable.

So yes, Potter was very willing to cover for Draco if Rosu showed up. In fact, Draco rather got the impression that Potter was secretly hoping Rosu would drop by after lunch.

Hermione really did not know her brother as well as she thought she did.

Draco made sure Hermione was wearing her own knife and amulet before donning the invisibility cloak. "Ready darling?"

She nodded, and he gripped her arm through the cloak. He felt her turn on the spot to pull him through the darkness, and a moment later he was standing on the edge of a cliff, looking down at a lake with a mountain on the other side of it. Draco thought he recognized the Durmstrang ship moored on the edge of the lake. Perched on the very top of the mountain was a squat castle.

"We're in the Carpathian Mountains," she said. "The wards extend all the way to this cliff. We will have to climb down and back up again."

She pointed to a rickety staircase built into the side of the mountain.

"Fucking hell," he muttered. Nothing about this was appealing.

"You really think you can break the wards?" she asked nervously.

Draco bit his lip under the cloak. This was the hard part of course. Only Hermione was invited in today, and if Draco crossed the wards as well, the headmaster would be alerted to the second person joining her. Then again, Draco was as much an expert in ward magic as

anybody. It was so important for his work with Potter that he studied it extensively, and he had brushed up before coming here.

“I’ll do my best,” he muttered, as he started to cast a series of complicated spells. Within a few moments the various wards began to shimmer. He couldn’t help but notice the impressed look on Hermione’s face, and he smirked a bit under the cloak. She was the type to get turned on by advanced magic.

Draco forced himself to focus now as he studied them. As he began to sort through them he came to a ward near the end that made him pause for a full minute.

“There’s no way...” he muttered, but as he continued to stare at it, he knew his eyes weren’t deceiving him. This precise ward had been placed on the Manor during the war. It was the primary reason he had given information to Potter the very first time so his mother could move to Grimmauld Place.

“I don’t have to break anything,” he said softly. “I can go right in. He won’t know.”

“Pardon?” asked Hermione incredulously.

“There’s a ward here,” said Draco. “It’s very obscure, but I’ve seen it once before. The Dark Lord placed it on the Manor just after he rose again. It overrides most of the other wards to allow anybody with a Dark Mark to enter. My father was never informed when a Death Eater came to the Manor. The headmaster won’t know either. It was incredibly difficult to break it when I rewarded the Manor after I graduated from Hogwarts. I had to contribute blood from every living Malfoy to do it, which took a special visit to Azkaban and everything. That’s probably why the headmaster has never bothered to break it. In fact, I’m not even sure he *could* break it because nobody really has a blood tie to Durmstrang.”

Hermione sucked in a breath. “How old is it?” she asked.

Draco studied it. “It’s definitely older than the one the Dark Lord cast on the Manor. It must have been from the first war, and that would fit. Karkaroff was in favor then, and Durmstrang was intended to be a feeder school for Death Eater recruits once the Dark Lord’s power spread to the continent. But of course the Dark Lord fell before he managed it, and Karkaroff turned and sold out fellow Death Eaters to stay out of prison. You know he fled the night the Dark Lord rose again. The Death Eaters found him in a shack in Northern Britain instead of Durmstrang. He must have known he couldn’t come back here because anybody with a Dark Mark would be able to cross the wards, and he would have no idea they were here.”

“Bloody hell,” muttered Hermione. “I’m not sure if that’s horrifying or incredibly lucky for us.”

“Both, I’d wager,” he said. “So let’s go then. We can cross together, and they won’t know.”

Hermione still looked a bit nervous that he had come to this conclusion, but she seemed to steel herself as she nodded and crossed. Draco crossed as well, and together they descended

the uneven staircase until they made it to the bottom of the valley. They walked around the small lake and then began to climb back up the other side.

“Merlin’s tits, you have to really want to come here don’t you?” he said, as he huffed.

“Yes,” gasped Hermione. “That’s why it’s always been a last resort for me.”

Draco was exhausted by the time he reached the top of the mountain. Then again, the climb was keeping his balls from freezing off, which was a real threat given how cold it was for October. He recalled the Durmstrang uniform had heavy fur cloaks as part of it.

“In we go,” Hermione muttered as she raised a hand to knock.

Immediately Draco entered her mind to guard it too, and he saw her give a little jerk as she turned to look at the empty space right next to him. He chuckled.

“Not necessary,” she hissed under her breath.

“Very necessary. Now quiet,” he muttered, as they heard the doors begin to unlock from the inside.

The heavy wooden doors opened to reveal a rather small and dark wizard, who was barely as tall as Hermione. He strode forward with a smile on his face. “Miss Granger.”

“Headmaster Balan, I thank you.”

“Yes, yes, of course!” he said. “Right this way, please.”

He sensed Hermione relaxing a bit, once she was sure the headmaster did not recognize a second person was with her. Draco silenced his feet and walked along behind them, looking around curiously as he did so.

Hogwarts, he knew, was high gothic in design. It had vaulted ceilings, lancet windows, spires, and even flying buttresses around the perimeter in several places. Durmstrang, in contrast, was built from earth-colored stone, with several perfectly round towers and battlements. He thought it looked more Romanesque and was simpler in design and likely older than Hogwarts. The castle was drafty and devoid of the colorful tapestries that warmed the Hogwarts halls. The only portraits were those of headmasters, professors, and graduating pupils, all wearing the same clothes and in the same pose for centuries. Only the eyes of the portraits moved, as they watched Hermione and Headmaster Balan walk toward the library.

Draco shuddered a bit. Something about this place reminded him of the muggle military academies that Potter had once described to him.

Headmaster Balan led the way through several corridors, and Draco suddenly realized the floor was sloping downward rather sharply. Soon they were approaching large double doors made out of wood and iron, which magically opened for them. Behind the doors Draco could see the library, which was darker than he was used to and crammed full of scrolls and old books. He wrinkled his nose when he walked in. The entire place had an air of mustiness

about it that was notably absent in the Hogwarts library. Draco thought it must be because there was no natural light here. They were clearly underground.

"I will leave you now, Miss Granger," said Balan cordially. "Please take the time you require. Madam Tache will inform me when you are ready to leave."

Hermione thanked him graciously, as he bowed over her hand, and then he turned to leave, as she spun to address the librarian with a few Romanian phrases before switching to English.

"There is no need, Madam Tache, I know exactly what I'm looking for today."

The librarian nodded, and Draco sensed a bit of relief from her. He grinned to himself, wondering how many times Hermione had roped her into a research project.

Hermione strode to a part of the library that was blessedly away from Madame Tache or any of the students whom Draco saw scattered about. She was facing an enormous row of filing cabinets.

"This could take awhile," she muttered. "You might as well sit. And exit my head please, nobody will disturb us back here."

Draco said nothing to this, but he did leave her mind while positioning himself in a way where he would be able to see anybody who was approaching the small table Hermione was using to spread out records.

On and on she worked, pulling files, cross-referencing records, and making dissatisfied noises. Finally she said, "I'm going to check some old newspapers, come along."

Draco followed as she led him to a different section of the library and began pulling out paper after paper. Draco couldn't read any of it, but based on the photographs she appeared to be studying society pages. Finally, after a couple of hours of searching she said, "Damn. I have it. I have all of it. Come over here."

Draco could scarcely believe it, as she pulled out several records and a copy of one of the papers and began casting the *geminio* charm on them to duplicate everything.

"Tell me," he muttered softly. "What's the link?"

She took a deep breath and looked down in her lap for a moment. Draco looked at her more closely and noticed she was very upset by something, but she was trying to present a stoic face.

"Darling," he said quietly. "Whatever it is, we'll be fine. Please just tell me."

She swallowed and nodded. "Very well. As you know, Damien Gataki's mother was Ana Peycheva. She was born in Tryavna, Bulgaria in 1950. Her birth certificate indicates that she was part of a multiple birth, and I found her sisters. Ana was actually a triplet, all girls. Her sisters were Alexandra and Adelina. Ana, of course, married Damien's father in Greece. Alexandra married Daniel Dascalu, who's Romanian. Adelina's marriage records were

illegible, as was her husband of record on her death certificate. But I finally found a small marriage announcement in one of the papers. She married Antonin Dolohov.”

“Fuck,” muttered Draco.

“Yes,” said Hermione. “And that’s not all. Adelina died from dragon pox a couple years after she married Dolohov. It doesn’t appear that they had any children. But Alexandra did. As I said, she married Daniel Dascalu, and they had a daughter named...”

“Lola,” he finished, now understanding why Hermione looked so upset. “Fucking Lola Dascalu is Dolohov’s niece.”

“She is,” said Hermione. “I’m almost sure of it. Her birth date puts her in the correct year at Durmstrang. That also makes her Damien Gataki’s first cousin. Dolohov is his uncle too, of course.”

“Fuck. Fuck,” groaned Draco.

“I haven’t been able to find much about Dolohov himself, but as far as we know he didn’t have any siblings. So his niece and nephew are probably the closest things to children that he has. And given that he’s in Romania...”

“He’s working through Lola. She’s the link here.”

“I think so. Lola and Damien have used their connections from Durmstrang to build a circle of people who are loyal to them and possibly Dolohov as well. Lola is working in Romania, and Damien is working to get back to Britain through his job. I’d wager he’s after Harry and plans to use me to get to him.”

She said all of this in a dull voice, and Draco couldn’t help but notice a slight dampness around her eyes.

“Darling...” he said desperately.

She took a deep breath. “Look, I know. I know you have to do it. She’s here, and she’s the link. I doubt you’ll let me draw out Gataki for you...”

“Absolutely not,” he said quickly. She just sniffed and nodded glumly.

“Well then. You should write to the Popas and see if you can meet with her. And then do... whatever it is you usually do.” Her voice trailed off to a whisper at the end, and she looked down dejectedly.

Draco felt sick, but he didn’t know what to say. The fact of the matter was that they *were* here in Romania. He could probably meet with Lola tomorrow, and she would be excited to see him again. He could surely find some way to get Dolohov’s location out of her. Manipulating Lola was far quicker and safer than using Hermione to lure Gataki. Draco absolutely would *not* allow Hermione to risk herself in that way.

“Come on,” he said. “We’re done here. Let’s get you back to Bucharest before Rosu comes looking for you.”

She nodded and tried to put on a brave face as she shoved the copies of the records and newspaper clipping into her bag. She said very little as she let the librarian know she was done and waited for the headmaster to lead her out of the castle. Soon they were descending the staircase built into the mountainside, walking around the small lake, and making their way back up the other side again.

Hermione held it together until they crossed the wards, and then she immediately sank down to her knees and started to cry.

“Oh darling,” muttered Draco, as he yanked the invisibility cloak off of himself and pulled her to him.

“I’m sorry,” she hiccupped. “Just ignore me. I’ll be fine in a minute, I just need...”

She took several deep breaths and tried to choke back her tears.

“Hermione, it probably won’t come to that. I only do... that... as a very last resort.”

She just sniffed again and nodded. “It’s fine. Really, it’s fine. I know it doesn’t mean anything.”

“Never,” he said fervently. “You’re the only one. The *only* one, do you hear me?”

She nodded, and Draco sighed as he pulled her to her feet. “Lunch should be ending soon, *mon ange*. It’s best for you to make an appearance with Potter this afternoon if you are up to it. We don’t want your visit to Durmstrang to get around, especially now that you’ve figured it out.”

She looked like going to meetings was the very *last* thing she wanted to do, and Draco really couldn’t blame her. But he knew he was right about this.

“Come on, I’ll apparate with you under the cloak and stay with you until you’re back with Potter.”

“Alright,” she said softly, and she grabbed Draco by the arm and pulled him through the darkness. He opened his eyes to find himself nearly face to face with Rosu. He instinctively took a step back.

“Hermione!” he said. “Are you alright? Mr. Potter said you were ill. I was just going to check on you...”

Hermione gave him a weak smile, and Rosu rushed forward to take her arm and lead her into the building. Draco felt a strong lurch of anger at this. He absolutely *despised* Rosu. Then again, he imagined Hermione felt the same way about Lola. He felt another surge of guilt as he realized he might have to cross some lines with Lola that Hermione would never have to cross with Rosu to maintain the fiction.

*No, he told himself. I won't. I can't do that to her. I'll have to find some other way.*

Draco followed behind them and touched her mind with his to let her know he was still there. He could now feel exactly how painful this was for her. She felt a bit threatened by Lola, he realized. Even though she knew that his time with her was all an act, it had hurt her so much when she saw them together at the gala. And this would hurt her even more. He sensed she was desperately trying to think of some way to convince him to go through Gataki instead, but she was sure he wouldn't budge on it. She was resigning herself to the fact that Draco would have to get intimate with her. And she was worried that when he did, he would think Lola was more beautiful than her and find Hermione lacking.

*Not ever, he thought. He would never find Hermione lacking. He loved her far too much, and he disliked Lola almost as much as Hermione did.*

There was nothing for it though. He had no idea if he could make Hermione feel better about this in the next twenty-four hours. He would simply have to prove to her that he could be naked with a hundred Lola Dascalus and none of them would hold his attention like Hermione could. He committed to cherishing her body at the earliest opportunity and then doing it again the moment he was done with his mission.

Finally, at long last, they made it to the meeting rooms, and Draco watched as Hermione walked toward Potter. Potter gave her a slightly alarmed look when he saw the state of her, but she shook her head slightly. Draco watched Potter back down a bit, though Potter still made a point to sit next to Hermione and keep her close.

Satisfied that she was safe, Draco left her mind and turned around to head back to the hotel. He had to send a letter to Andrei Popa.

## Chapter End Notes

A/N: Dodges objects hurled at my head...

## Chapter 35: Lola

### Hermione

The only saving grace about Hermione's discovery at Durmstrang was the fact that she truly did look like shit by the time she arrived back at the Romanian Ministry. Hermione brought some of the Weasley's puking pastilles to Romania to give her a nice sickly pallor if she needed it in order to convince Florin Rosu that she had indeed gotten food poisoning. But the moment she saw his face, she knew she didn't need to bother. The knowledge that Draco would probably have to get intimate with the woman Hermione disliked more than anybody else evidently made her look as ill as she felt. Florin was none the wiser about what she had really been doing that morning.

As the day dragged, she saw Harry watching her worriedly, but Hermione forced herself to power through it so they could finish their meetings. Rationally she knew she was being ridiculous. Draco was devoted to her. He had committed himself to her so thoroughly that he had even crossed some lines in an effort to have her. She knew he didn't care about Lola. She *knew* it. But she was only human. She had flaws, and confidence in her body and looks was one of them. Draco had done more than anybody to convince her that she was beautiful, but Hermione still found herself struggling when she compared herself to Lola. Fucking Lola looked like a damned supermodel. She was tall and thin and had perfect, dark hair and liquid eyes. She had worn a slinky dress to that gala that did little to hide her figure, and Hermione was sure her arse was tighter and her tits were perkier than Hermione's.

*He loves me. He thinks I'm beautiful. He loves me. He thinks I'm beautiful.*

This had become her mantra all day long. She hated that she felt this insecure about it, but who could blame her, really?

As the afternoon wore on, she kept repeating this to herself, and she did settle into something certain: she decided that she did not blame Draco for this, and she wasn't angry with him about it. None of them had asked for Lola Dascalu to be the link. He had been nearly as upset about it as she was. But this was their reality, and there wasn't anything else they could do to find Dolohov, short of going through Gataki instead.

Hermione's first instinct had been to throw herself to the wolves and try to convince Draco and Harry to let them use her as bait. She was a Gryffindor after all. But Hermione was also smart enough to know that Draco would never let her do that. Harry wouldn't either. Hell, even *Hermione* didn't really want to after she calmed down enough to really think about it. She hadn't seen Draco or even Harry duel in years, but she had watched as they calmly geared themselves up the last couple of mornings. They handled the weapons and tools with a nonchalance that spoke of great aptitude. It was almost chilling. She was certain that they had far more experience in handling truly dangerous situations than she did these days. So if that meant that her fiancé had to offer himself up to Lola instead of Hermione drawing out Gataki, then so be it.

Hermione might not like it. It might make her insecure. But she trusted Draco to be honest with her about it. Ultimately she would have to shelve her discomfort and get over it.

To Hermione's relief the negotiations ended a bit early that day, and for once Florin Rosu didn't push her to have dinner with him.

"You must rest," he said, eyeing her sallow face. "We need you feeling better for our meetings and dinner tomorrow."

Hermione agreed, and Harry quickly escorted her from the room, hand on her elbow. He didn't say a word as they strode to the apparition point, and he apparaeted her as close to their hotel as he could get.

"What the hell happened?" he asked immediately.

Hermione just shook her head. "Let's get back to Draco, and we'll explain. We found the link. But it's... not great."

Harry furrowed his brow, but said nothing more as they quickly made their way back to the hotel and then to Hermione and Draco's room.

"Tell me," said Harry. "I have no clue what happened."

To Hermione's relief, Draco started to speak, explaining the family relationship and how he had a connection to Lola Dascalu through the Popa twins. Draco had already written to the Popas, and they assured Draco that Lola would be invited to their home the next evening while Harry and Hermione were at dinner with Florin.

"I'm sure I can get his location out of her," said Draco simply. "It may not be easy, but..." he trailed off as he eyed Hermione a bit cautiously.

Hermione was pleased to see that Harry looked almost as unhappy about this turn of events as she and Draco did.

"I don't like it," he said simply, as he gestured between them. "You know I'd never ask you to..."

"It's fine," said Hermione curtly. "None of us are thrilled about it, but it's the best way. It's the fastest way. And Merlin knows she seemed enamored with him at that gala..."

She tried not to let her bitterness show, but she was pretty sure both wizards could see right through her.

Harry sighed. "Look, I'll let you two hash this out. It's really none of my business. But Malfoy, I'll be sure to stay behind tomorrow night after Hermione is through the international floo just in case you get it."

Draco nodded in acknowledgment of this, and Hermione just gave him a tight smile as Harry leaned in to give her a hug. "Hang in there sis," he whispered as he pulled away and left to go to his own room.

Hermione looked at Draco, who was sitting on the bed, and he just held his arms out for her. She sighed and lowered herself onto his lap, and he pulled her in for a deep hug.

"I want you to understand something, *mon ange*," he said quietly. "When I tell you I love you, that means for life. There aren't many people who are important to me, but you top my list. I don't care what other women look like, how much they might want me, or what they would be willing to give me. I don't care about any of it. I have *never* cared about any of it. The first woman and the only woman I have ever cared about romantically is you. When I say I'm yours, I mean it. And I promise you, *absolutely promise you*, that I will not cross certain lines with Lola tomorrow, OK? I wouldn't do that to you, darling, not even for the mission."

Hermione felt something in her chest ease a little at his words. "You may not have any choice..." she started, but he put a finger to her lips.

"I always have a choice. I told you I only use sex as a last resort, and that's always been true. But I've been thinking about it all afternoon, and there are tactics I have never used before because they could expose me for future missions if anything went wrong. This time though? I have no future missions. After Dolohov I'm done. I'd rather she tell me voluntarily, and that means I'll flirt and act interested to get her alone and to open up. But if she won't tell me willingly, then I will simply force it out of her. And I won't sleep with her while I do it. I promise you that."

Hermione melted into him, and she felt his arms tighten around her.

"I'm sorry I'm so jealous," she murmured.

He just chuckled. "I'm the last person you have to apologize to for jealousy, darling. If I thought you would be happy locked away in the Manor with only me for company for the rest of your life, I'd do it in a heartbeat so that no other bloke could ever even look at you. I get it. I really do."

"I shouldn't be so insecure, though. I believe you when you say I'm beautiful. It's just..." she trailed off with a sigh.

"I know," he whispered, "but I promise you my attention has never been held by another witch. Not ever."

With that he started to kiss her deeply, languidly, and Hermione felt herself sinking into him even more as he laid back on the bed and pulled her to him.

"Let me show you," he whispered. "Let me make you feel good..."

Hermione just nodded, knowing that she needed this. *They* needed this. She needed to feel beautiful, and she sensed that he needed to take care of her.

He undressed her slowly, bit by bit, making sure to cover every inch of her skin with his lips. And when she was finally bare for him, she felt the press of his mind against hers, and she let him in, sure he wanted to see what she was thinking, how she was feeling.

Every other time Draco had been in her head his presence disappeared. Even when he crafted the false memory for Luca Popa or took her through her own memories and fantasies, she felt like they were her own – she didn’t really sense *him* very much. So when he broke into her mind this time, she expected more of the same.

She was *not* expecting to feel his emotions. That had never happened before, and she assumed legilimency was one-way. But this time, as Draco broke in, she felt more than just his presence. She felt *him* and discovered he was letting her see and feel everything he was thinking too.

As he took a nipple into his mouth, she felt his almost obsessive need to claim her. He loved her breasts, he had always told her that, but she never truly understood just how much. Tasting them tapped into some primal part of his brain that made him want to ravage her but also protect her and keep her all to himself. And she saw that he had always told her the truth: he thought they were perfect, truly perfect, and he had never been attracted to a pair in quite the same way he was attracted to hers.

When his mouth moved to her core, she felt his lightheadedness as he inhaled his favorite scent on earth. She sensed that he loved oral sex more than he would ever admit. It made him hot and heavy, and now he ached for her. She felt his joy in every gush that came out of her, and it stroked his ego to know that he could make her wet for him. She discovered that he truly loved the way she tasted, and he wanted to do it every day, twice a day, all the time. He could taste her for years and never tire of it.

When he finally lifted himself and slotted into her, she felt him watching her to make sure she was taken care of first. He wanted her so badly that he had to disassociate a bit from what they were doing so that he wouldn’t come early. Even after all this time, he knew he would finish too fast if he really allowed himself to think about what he was doing with her. So instead, he focused on her face, watching every twitch, every expression, every gasp. When he felt her walls clench around him and he saw her finally break, only then did he allow himself to think about what he was doing and focus on the feeling of Hermione all around him. And she was stunned to discover that the knowledge and feeling of him inside of her made him so excited that it took almost no time at all to bring him to completion.

*That* was why he always finished right after her. Every single time. He wanted her so badly that he only had to think of it for a moment before he came.

And lastly, as he pulled himself out and drew her close to trace the planes of her face, she observed that he had that same expression of adoration she had seen a few times. But this time, for the first time, she could actually feel it too. It made her nearly breathless with wonder that he loved her so deeply. Everything he did was for her. Every decision he made was for her. She was the first thing he thought of in the morning and the last thing he thought of every night. He knew she was it for him, and he was absolutely confident that no other woman would ever make him feel this way.

Lola didn’t matter. None of it mattered. There was no space for anybody else because his entire heart belonged to Hermione and little Aurora whom they had lost. He was thinking of her now, and Hermione’s eyes filled with tears as he let her feel that too. They hadn’t talked about her very much once their planning for Romania got underway, but now Hermione

could see that he thought about her often. He kept track of how many weeks Hermione would be if they hadn't lost her. He read up about ectopic pregnancies so he wouldn't miss those signs again. And he harbored fantasies, deep fantasies about Hermione marrying him and growing round with his child. He wanted to see it happen and know that it was all because of him.

And finally, lastly, he let her sense his feelings about Lola. He had spent hours in her presence before and knew what she looked like better than Hermione did. He felt nothing for her but distaste and revulsion. He would do what he had to do to finish Dolohov because it was the fastest way to claim Hermione and fulfill his fantasies with her. But he saw Lola as a tool, a means to an end, and that was all. Hermione had absolutely nothing to fear from her.

Hermione knew this now, beyond a shadow of a doubt. And as Draco let her see everything he felt, she no longer considered Lola Dascalu to be anything more than the next step to the finish line. A sense of peace settled over her at this realization.

Perhaps sensing that she was finally convinced, Draco severed his connection and looked at her. "Do you see darling?"

Hermione was speechless and just nodded.

"Good," he said simply. "I'm going to finish this for you because I love you. I love you more than the world."

"I love you too," she whispered. And she did. She really did.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

Draco was sipping on a drink, waiting for fucking Lola Dascalu to arrive. After the revelations of the previous day he decided there was no woman on earth he could possibly want less. The feelings of pain and insecurity he sensed in Hermione's mind had made him want to rage at Lola for making Hermione feel that way. How dare the woman he loved be so hurt?

He was relieved when Hermione finally understood Draco's own feelings about it. By the time he was done worshiping her body, he sensed her confidence building and her insecurities about Lola diminishing. That was good, that was necessary, because if Draco had gone into this night with Hermione still feeling so desolate, he would have been sorely tempted to murder Lola on the spot.

He no longer wished Lola dead – no, she would be going to prison for a very long time if Draco had his way. But it was still going to take every bit of acting skill that he possessed to

convince her that he was interested. He couldn't remember ever being *less* interested in a witch in his entire life.

He checked his watch. She should be here any minute. The Popas were delighted that Draco wanted to take a second look at Lola and promised to make themselves scarce for a few hours. Draco's plan was to seduce her and suggest a visit to a nearby hotel for privacy. With any luck he could lure her there and then get Dolohov's location out of her. He didn't dare risk doing it in the Popa household in case she turned uncooperative or the Popas returned early.

"Draco!" came Andrei's voice, as he walked in. "Your special guest has arrived."

"Mr. Malfoy," murmured Lola, as Draco stood.

"Please, you must call me Draco," he said, reverting to the perfect manners that had been bred into him from birth. "We are already acquainted, and I certainly hope we can become... better friends."

She gave a demure smile at this and looked up at him through her eyelashes.

Draco felt nothing for her, but he had done this routine so many times he simply went on autopilot as he reached for her hand and kissed the back of it.

"Please," he said, as he led her toward a small bar cart. "I can't claim responsibility for the excellent drink selection my hosts have provided, but I won't hesitate to take advantage of it by offering you a glass."

She gave him a grateful smile and followed, as Draco caught Andrei's eye. Andrei just smirked at him before saying, "Luca and I have some business to attend to this evening. We'll be back later."

"Please do not worry about us," said Draco swiftly. "I'm sure Miss Dascalu and I will do very well together."

Andrei winked at him, having already been informed that Draco had been thinking about Lola ever since his last visit to Romania. He wanted to get to know her better in any way she would permit as he considered something more lasting with her. Andrei was thrilled with this news and readily agreed that he and Luca would make themselves scarce.

Draco was pulled out of his thoughts by Lola's voice. "If I am to call you Draco, you must call me Lola."

He gave her an easy smile as he sat down in a chair near the fireplace. "Very well Lola. Tell me more about yourself. I'm afraid the last time we met there were far too many other people."

She began to chat, and Draco paid close attention to everything she was saying. She mentioned that she was an only child, her mother was born in Bulgaria but had lived in Romania since marrying her father, and they could trace their lineage back several hundred

years. Draco asked her probing questions, but to his consternation she didn't bite. She said nothing about her mother's extended family, nor her cousin Damien Gataki.

*She's on her guard*, Draco realized. This wasn't great news, but he had been expecting it. He was going to have to push her a little bit.

Lola rose to get herself another drink, and Draco motioned for her to come closer as she started to walk back to her seat.

She arched an eyebrow, but approached him, and Draco grabbed her hand and pulled her down into his lap.

She looked gratified and leaned into him. Draco tried not to gag on the scent of her perfume.

"Now tell me all about your father's family," he said as he ran a hand up her thigh. "You said you could trace your lineage back several hundred years. Did he have siblings or was he an only child?"

She spoke a bit breathlessly as Draco leaned in and blew some air on her neck. He felt goosebumps erupt on her skin, and he barely resisted rolling his eyes. She was so fucking easy. When he heard her trail off he said, "And your mother's family? Was it the same or did she have siblings?"

"The same," she said, as she leaned into him to give him a view down her dress. "She was an only child too."

*Lying bitch.*

That sealed it. Draco was going to have to execute Plan B.

"Lola," he said in a needy voice. "Can I take you somewhere else?"

"What?" she asked, clearly not expecting this.

"I want to get to know you better," he said, pulling her closer to him and running his hand further up her thigh. "But I don't know when the Popas will be returning. Let's go somewhere more... private."

"What do you have in mind?" she asked, as she craned her neck toward his mouth. Draco nuzzled it a bit, but refused to actually kiss it.

"Mmmmm I may have booked a room at The Dove. Their penthouse of course. You deserve nothing but the best."

"Draco, don't tell me you were hoping for..."

"Nothing you aren't comfortable with," he said quickly. "I'm a gentleman. But yes, I rather was hoping for something more private than the Popas' sitting room..."

*For fuck's sake just say yes already or I'm going to imperius you.*

“What do you say?” he continued. “We can order room service. Champagne. Anything you want. Their elves are exceptional.

“Anything?” she asked.

“Anything at all. Your wish is my command.”

“Alright then, I suppose I can’t say no to an offer like that,” she said, and Draco was pleased to see she was giving him a coy smile again. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Come along, then,” he said, as he nudged her off his lap and led her to the fireplace. He found some floo powder in a jar on the mantle, and he threw it in the fire. “The Dove!” he shouted as he spun away. A moment later he stepped out onto the threshold of the elegant wizarding hotel, and he saw Lola arriving directly behind him.

“This way then,” he said. “I already checked in.” He winked at her, and she laughed a bit, as he grabbed her hand and led her to the lift. He pressed the button on the very top, and soon the doors were opening to reveal an enormous suite. He heard Lola gasp as she walked forward.

“Draco,” she breathed. “It’s gorgeous.”

“All for you,” he said easily, as he gestured toward the room. There was a large display of flowers, and a bottle of champagne already chilling. “I took the liberty of ordering champagne in advance. But please, if there is anything else you wish to drink, do not hesitate.”

“Champagne would be lovely, thank you,” she said. Draco nodded and turned to uncork the bottle. He pulled the champagne flutes toward him, one of which already contained a few drops of veritaserum thanks to the visit he had made to the room right after check-in. He glanced down and saw the clear liquid was still at the very bottom of the glass. He smiled to himself as he poured and turned to hand the glass to her.

He froze. Her wand was pointed directly at him.

Immediately adrenaline flooded his body, but he forced himself to remain calm. “Lola, what’s wrong?” he asked in what he thought was a very convincing voice as he slowly lowered the champagne glass back to the tray.

She got a harsh look on her face. “You,” she spat. “It’s been you, hasn’t it? You’re the one who’s been selling out Death Eaters to Potter.”

Draco arranged his face in what he hoped was a confused expression. “Pardon?” He started to walk toward her.

“Don’t move!” she screeched. “Don’t you dare!”

Draco came to a halt and raised hands slightly. Any second. It would be any second now, and he would draw and take this bitch *out*.

“Lola, I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Bullshit! They’re all caught or dead aren’t they? All except for Uncle Antonin! The Popas think you’re loyal, but I know better!”

“Uncle Antonin?” he asked. “Surely you aren’t related to Antonin Dolohov. I thought you said your parents were only children?”

She blinked and Draco sensed something falter in her. She obviously wasn’t expecting him to play dumb this long. She steeled herself again. “I lied,” she threw out. “He’s my uncle.”

Draco suddenly knew exactly what to do.

“Then you might be perfect,” he breathed.

“I... what?” she asked, clearly thrown off.

Draco started to walk toward her again.

“I said stay where you are!” she said, and he saw her wand was shaking a bit.

“But Lola,” he said, and he forced a look of devotion on his face as he ignored her and continued to approach. “Lola, you might be perfect. If you’re related to him.... then I *know* you’re pure. And you’re so beautiful. That’s all I’ve ever wanted...”

She was watching him with wide eyes, and Draco could see the confusion and doubt in her face now. She *wanted* to believe him. She hadn’t been feigning her interest in him. But Dolohov must not trust Draco and so she didn’t trust Draco either, not really. But she wanted to. She *really* wanted to.

He was so close now her wand was under his chin. “Don’t come closer!” she said nervously. “I’ll do it! I swear I’ll do it!”

“Do what?” he said, as he grabbed the tip of her wand and pushed it aside. “Become mine? Because I’ll say yes to that all day long, once you make me certain of your loyalties.”

She was almost spellbound now as he reached up and stroked her face.

“The Popas are right?” she whispered. “It wasn’t you?”

“I confess that I’m not sure what I’m meant to have done,” he said. “But whatever it was, I’m just glad we are beginning to understand each other.”

He felt her start to relax ever so slightly.

“I thought you wanted that mudblood,” she whispered. “Granger. I saw how you looked at her at the gala, and I thought...”

“She’s a colleague Lola,” he said.

"That's what Luca said... But I thought... and Uncle Antonin thought..."

He tried to give her an encouraging look. She was talking now. She was off her guard. He was holding her wand hand gently with his as he continued stroking her cheek.

"I'm loyal to the pureblood cause Lola. I have nearly a millennia of pure blood behind my name, did you know that? What could possibly make me stray from that? What would convince me to be the Malfoy to break the chain? No, Lola, I am loyal. And I have been searching for a partner who is loyal too. I admit I was hoping I could learn more about you tonight. You're beautiful, and I haven't been able to stop thinking about you since the last time we met. But I have to know for sure, Lola. Are you truly loyal to the things the Dark Lord stood for? Are you prepared to do the things you must do to stand by my side so we can right the wrongs inflicted on pureblood society? Tell me something to convince me, Lola... because if I know you're that woman, then I'm prepared to lay the House of Malfoy at your feet."

At this her eyes lit, and Draco knew he had her.

"I traded her," she said eagerly.

Draco furrowed his brow. "Traded who?"

"Your mudblood colleague. Tonight. It's happening tonight."

Draco felt an enormous pit open in his stomach, but he forced himself not to react.

"What do you mean?"

"Florin Rosu is desperate for her. She's in Romania, you know. I helped Rosu set the stage to finally get her tonight in exchange for his help with certain targets of ours."

That was exactly the wrong thing to say.

"Did you now?" he asked in a dangerous voice.

Lola looked confused for just a split second before she suddenly looked terrified as Draco gripped her wand hand hard and moved the hand that had been on her cheek to her throat and started to squeeze.

He reached out and broke into her mind so violently that she tried to gasp, but she couldn't quite manage it because she couldn't breathe properly. Draco was giving her barely any air. He felt her try to put up her mental defenses, but she was already lightheaded, and Draco ripped her mind apart as he went looking for everything he needed to know.

First, he found Dolohov. He had been hiding in Constanta, a small city near the Black Sea. Draco studied his face to see what he looked like eight years later, and he quickly searched her memories to find various polyjuice disguises he liked to use too. Draco catalogued them all.

Next he looked for her contacts, and he learned that Hermione had tracked almost the entire circle. There were only three or four names they didn't already have, and he mentally added them to the list. Every single one of them would be going to prison if Draco had his way.

Finally, he looked for Hermione and Rosu, and he found memories of Lola talking to Rosu about her.

"If you want her, Florin, we can help. But in exchange we need help removing Harry Potter."

He watched as Rosu hesitated. "It will need to be after we sign the security deal with Britain," he said slowly. "I'll be fired if that slips through my fingers, and he's in charge of it."

"Very well," said Lola. "We just need you to bring him out into the open, away from the aurors, and we'll take it from there. He's notoriously antisocial and almost always has security."

"And Malfoy?"

"His trip to Romania only overlaps with theirs by a single day. But I'll handle Malfoy if you want to be sure he's occupied," said Lola. "He liked me."

Rosu gave her a skeptical look. "He likes Hermione."

Lola scowled a bit. "I'm certain I can draw his attention back to me," she said. "Besides, I said we would give you our special potion, yes?"

Rosu got an almost crazed look on his face at this. "Will she really do anything I want?"

"Yes," she said calmly. "It removes free will. It's a bit like the imperius curse, but much harder to fight. It's my uncle's special brew."

Rosu ran a hand over his face. "And how long does it last?"

"At least a week, but we'll give you a large supply if you help us with Potter. You can have her for as long as you want her."

Rosu closed his eyes for a moment as though imagining it. "Deal," he said. "I'll draw him out for you."

Draco was nearly breathless with rage now as he pulled himself from her mind. She was barely conscious as he stared down at her.

"I want you to know that you sold my fiancée to that bastard. And you will pay. Every one of you will fucking pay."

Lola looked truly terrified now, as Draco squeezed harder. A few moments later her eyes rolled, and he felt her go limp. He released her.

He stared down at her body. She was still alive, but only just. He wanted nothing more than to finish it, but he knew her information was too valuable. She had to stay alive to put all the others away.

“Topsy!” he called, and his elf appeared with a *CRACK!*

She squeaked when she saw Lola. “Topsy, please fetch the Weasley bruise paste from the Manor. Hermione has some in our bathroom and swears by it. Once you find it, return immediately.”

Topsy disappeared as Draco reached for his wand and murmured, “*Obliviate.*”

He removed her memories of his legilimency, and instead made her believe that they had had a drunken snog before falling asleep. It probably wasn’t his best work, but he was so angry it was all he could do. He also stupefied her for good measure, hoping to keep her out long enough until they could retrieve her so his memory charm wouldn’t be tested.

Topsy returned a moment later with the bruise paste, and Draco slathered some on her neck and wrist where he had gripped her.

“That will be all Topsy, thank you,” he said. The elf disappeared again, and Draco rose, casting one last disgusted look at Lola as he moved to the lift.

The door shut and began its descent. A moment later his galleon started to burn.

## Chapter 36: The Marmorosch

### Hermione

Hermione was on pins and needles. She told herself it was because Draco was about to throw himself onto Lola this evening, but she had to admit that wasn't really what was bothering her. Draco had done an excellent job the night before of convincing her that he would never feel anything but disgust for Lola Dascalu, and her only concern about his plan *now* was that he might put himself into danger while he was doing it.

No, something else felt off. And as the day moved on and the security deal was signed with Romania, Hermione thought that the thing that might be off was Florin Rosu.

Florin had been uncharacteristically quiet all day. He had chattered almost nonstop for the last two days of meetings, but today he watched intently as Harry signed the deal on behalf of the British Ministry and then turned his attention to Hermione.

In fact, he had barely stopped looking at Hermione all day, and she was starting to squirm with discomfort under his gaze. She knew he was attracted to her. Draco and even Harry had poked his mind with enough legilimency to be certain of that. Hermione had grown used to ignoring it and managed him with a firm hand.

But today something about him felt almost unmanageable. Even Harry, who wasn't the most socially observant one of her friends, had noticed and was growing deeply uncomfortable with it.

"What the hell, Hermione," he muttered under his breath, as he watched Florin stare at her from across the room.

"I have no idea," she hissed. "It's almost... creepy, isn't it?"

"I'll poke him with some legilimency tonight after he's had a drink," Harry muttered.  
"Unless... I don't suppose we can just cancel dinner? Something about this feels wrong."

"I don't think so," she whispered. "It would be incredibly rude of us..."

"Fine," he whispered back. "But I don't want you going anywhere alone, not even the loo, do you understand? He's giving me all sorts of bad vibes."

"Agreed," she said.

Normally Hermione would fight Harry or Draco a bit more when they were that heavy-handed with her, but she had to admit, Harry was right. Florin *was* giving off all sorts of bad vibes. Hermione didn't like it. She didn't like it one bit.

Finally the meeting broke up and Florin moved over to them.

“Hermione, Harry, ready for dinner then? We must toast our success today.”

Hermione gave a tight smile, and Harry just grimaced, but they both nodded and followed Florin to the door.

“Who will be joining us tonight?” asked Hermione, in an attempt to make conversation.

“Ah, just a special guest,” said Florin. “A surprise for you, Hermione.”

Hermione felt Harry tense next to her. “But what about the rest of your department?” she pressed. “Won’t they be joining us?”

“I’m afraid it’s not in the budget,” he said blithely. “We are not as well-funded as your Ministry is, after all.”

Hermione felt her stomach clench, but she just nodded.

*It’s one dinner. We can manage one dinner, and then I’ll be gone, and Harry will be joining Draco.*

Still, Hermione made a mental note to stay away from Romania after tonight until she had actually married Draco. Florin had never been this pushy while she was with Viktor Krum.

They walked a few blocks to the The Marmorosch, where Hermione had brought them on their first day.

“Here?” she said in surprise.

“Yes of course,” said Florin. “I know you said you usually eat room service, but the restaurant on site is truly fantastic.”

Hermione gave a tight smile as he led them down a small corridor off the lobby and toward a pair of double doors, which he opened for them. Hermione walked in, Harry close behind her.

Hermione had to admit she had not been expecting this. The restaurant was named Blank, and it was white table cloth, but *muggle*. She had been certain Florin would take them to a magical restaurant for dinner tonight, and the fact that he had chosen a muggle place made her feel even more tense. She and Harry couldn’t do obvious magic here without a Statute of Secrecy headache. It made her feel exposed. Hermione flexed her forearm and felt the straps from her knife holster bite into her skin, and she was suddenly grateful that Draco had insisted she wear it at all times. Hermione knew that Harry was geared up even more so than she was.

*It will be fine. You’re being completely ridiculous, Hermione. You had drinks with him in this same hotel on the first night. There’s no reason at all to think this will go any differently.*

Hermione glanced around and saw the restaurant was rather small, but there was a handsome bar on one end with a bartender who nodded to her when she walked in. The waiters were dressed smartly, with about twenty tables to attend. She was pulled out of her musing by the sound of the hostess informing them that their table was ready, and the last member of their party still had not arrived.

She led them to a table in the corner, and Hermione stepped forward to take the seat facing the doorway. Florin looked at her with a bit of confusion, but he walked around to sit across from her, and Harry slid into the chair next to her. She felt him reach under the table and give her hand a little squeeze before shifting a bit, and she was sure he was pulling out his galleon to tell Draco where they were.

“Can I tempt you both with a drink?” Florin asked. “The bartender here is fantastic.”

“Just water for me, thanks,” said Hermione curtly.

She noticed Florin give a slight jolt of surprise at this. “But Hermione, we must celebrate.”

“And we will,” she assured him. “But I’m still feeling rather off from last night, you know. I’d better not risk it.”

“Water for me too,” said Harry. “I’m not much for muggle alcohol.”

This was categorically untrue, but Hermione knew Harry wouldn’t do anything to slow his reaction time tonight. He was very on edge.

Florin looked displeased by this, but he gave a brief nod as the waiter came over to take their drink order.

“Who is joining us tonight then?” Hermione asked as the water hit the table.

“As I said, a surprise,” said Florin. “He should be here any… ah! There he is now!”

Hermione and Harry both turned to look at the person Florin was gesturing to behind them.

*Where had he come from? He hadn’t walked through the front door.*

Hermione suddenly felt more exposed than ever. She always faced the exit whenever she could help it. But as she turned to look behind her, she couldn’t help but notice there were several other doors, all of which appeared to be for staff. Had this mystery guest come through the kitchens to get here?

The sense of wrongness was increasing by the minute, as a familiar-looking young man walked over to their table. He had wavy dark brown hair and eyes that reminded her of… No. It couldn’t be.

“Hermione, I thought I would give you a little surprise,” said Florin, gesturing to the man who was smiling at her. Hermione couldn’t help but notice that his smile didn’t reach his eyes. “We have recently become acquainted, and he mentioned you two work together now but hadn’t met in person yet. May I present Damien Gataki?”

Hermione felt the bottom drop out of her stomach at this, and Harry tensed next to her. But then a moment later she saw Florin's mouth whisper, "*Imperio*," and Hermione's entire mind went blissfully blank.

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

Draco apparated the moment he got to the apparition point at the Dove and was sprinting down the street to the hotel with the restaurant where Potter and Hermione were eating with Rosu. Potter's single message to him had sent his anxiety through the roof.

*Rosu took us to Blank at The Marmorosch. Feels wrong.*

Draco knew that was the same muggle hotel Hermione had taken them to the first night in Bucharest. They had gone to the cocktail bar that night. Blank must be one of the onsite restaurants. Draco frantically messaged Potter back.

*It's a trap. Get Hermione and get out of there.*

But his galleon stayed stubbornly silent, and Draco wasn't sure if Potter had been able to read his message under the table or not. He knew it was risky for Potter to send him the first missive at all.

There was nothing for it, Draco would have to intervene. He briefly considered polyjuice, but decided it would take too long. Besides, he fought better in his own body. He sensed that Hermione and Potter were both in danger, and he wouldn't do anything that might slow him down.

He burst into the lobby of The Marmorosch and looked around quickly for signs that pointed to Blank. Soon he was tearing across the lobby, all the muggles coming to a complete halt as they watched him sprint away.

Draco felt something odd as he moved toward Blank, and he suddenly realized what it was: he crossed an antiapparition ward. Somebody had actually erected antiapparition wards in a muggle hotel. Draco wondered if Potter and Hermione had noticed this too, or if it was only Draco who sensed it. He was a ward expert and was hyperaware any time he crossed one. Draco grimaced. He was sure that whoever had done it meant to trap Potter and Hermione here.

The possibilities of what he was about to find when he reached the restaurant were swirling through his head, but Draco knew there was one thing that would give him an advantage: they were in a muggle place, so he would have to pretend to be a muggle, at least until he knew what he was up against.

That was fine by Draco. Bullets were faster than spells anyway.

He finally reached the double doors of Blank and shoved them open, looking around frantically for Hermione. He ignored the gasps of the hostess as he spotted Hermione and Potter in the far corner of the room. She and Potter were facing the door to the restaurant, while two other men had their backs to Draco. Draco thought he recognized the sandy hair of Florin Rosu across from Hermione, and the wizard across from Potter had dark wavy hair that looked almost like...

*Fuck. Gataki is here.*

To Draco's relief, neither Rosu nor Gataki noticed him, as Draco took the briefest moment to observe Hermione and Potter. They both had oddly absent expressions on their faces, and as he watched, Rosu dumped something into Hermione's glass of water, and she reached for it.

Draco's heart seized. They were both imperiused, he was sure of it. Draco knew Potter could throw the imperius curse, though it took him several precious seconds to do it. Draco had no idea if Hermione could throw it though, and based on what he had seen in Lola's mind, Draco was certain that Rosu had just spiked her water with Dolohov's potion.

Draco sprinted forward, and he heard somebody who might be the bartender give a shout as he reached Hermione just as she was about to drink and knocked the water out of her hand. He spun around and drew his gun with his right hand and his wand with his left to aim them both directly at Rosu's face. People in the restaurant started to scream and rush for the exit, but Draco didn't tear his eyes from Rosu, though he was watching Gataki in his peripheral vision, who was gaping at Draco now.

To his relief, Potter broke his own imperius at that moment and drew nearly as fast as Draco and aimed his own wand and gun at Gataki, who suddenly looked terrified.

*Fucking right he better be terrified.*

Draco and Potter had practiced extensively with using both hands in a fight. They were both naturally right handed so they held their pistols with their right hands since guns required more precision and control than a wand. But they had also spent years working on spellwork with their left hands so that their wandwork was practically ambidextrous. Again, it was one of those odd ideas Potter had thought of years ago, and Draco was suddenly grateful that they had practiced this so much.

Draco now focused all of his attention on Rosu, knowing that Potter would be able to handle Gataki.

"That's my fiancée you just imperiused," he snarled. "Break the curse now or I will blow your fucking brains out and do it for you."

Rosu swallowed hard, as his eyes widened. "Fiancée? She's your—"

"She's mine you fucking bastard. Break it now."

Draco cocked the gun with an audible click, and Rosu blanched. He may be a pureblood, but evidently he knew enough about muggle weapons to know that the muggle gun pointed at

him was deadly. Draco watched as he muttered the countercurse, and he glanced down at Hermione to see her blinking in confusion, before glancing between Draco and Rosu in horror.

“Why you little –” she started, as she stared at Rosu indignantly, but Draco interrupted her.

“Not now, darling. Get under the table for me.”

He sensed her hesitation, and he said, “*Please mon ange. Do as I say.*”

He watched out of the corner of his eye as she turned to crouch under the table, but then suddenly she shouted, “Behind you!”

Without even thinking about it, both Draco and Potter turned ninety degrees to keep their wands trained on Rosu and Gataki while aiming their guns at whoever was coming behind them. They fired at nearly the same time, as they both shouted, “*Stupefy!*” and Rosu hit the deck, but Gataki sprang sideways and dodged Potter’s spell.

He heard Hermione’s own muffled “*Stupefy!*” coming from under the table, and a thud that told him she had managed to stun Gataki from somewhere around his knees.

*Excellent work darling,* Draco thought with some pride as he and Potter turned to fully face their attackers from behind.

Draco felt like he was moving in slow motion as spells started flying. He saw both Popa brothers, Sorin Cazacu, and a man he didn’t know but that he recognized from Lola’s memories. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the bartender crouch down and start to crawl toward one of the side doors, using the wizards in front of him as a shield. Something about it niggled in Draco’s mind.

*The bartender:*

That bartender looked very familiar to Draco. In fact, he had seen that bartender in Lola’s memories less than thirty minutes ago when he was studying Dolohov’s polyjuice disguises. Dolohov was here, and he was escaping. But Draco couldn’t leave Potter to deal with four other wizards on his own. Even with Hermione’s help and Potter’s superior training, those odds weren’t good enough. Besides, Hermione was here. He couldn’t, *wouldn’t* leave Hermione for anything while she was in danger.

“Let’s do this fast Potter, Dolohov is trying to escape!” shouted Draco, as he fired his gun directly toward Luca Popa’s knees. To Draco’s slight surprise, the bullet connected, and Luca went down with a scream as blood spattered across the floor. Draco stunned him a moment later.

Potter didn’t respond, but kicked it up a notch, and he and Draco went on the offensive together. They certainly hadn’t planned this in advance, but Draco was suddenly struck that he and Potter were an incredible team. They had never practiced very much *with* each other, but they had dueled *against* each other so often they instinctively knew what the other was going to do.

Without hesitating, Draco started raining bullets in the direction of the door that Dolohov was eyeing, while he dueled with Andrei Popa using his left hand. Potter seemed to understand what Draco was doing because he began to do the same thing to keep Dolohov trapped in the room with them.

Andrei was now snarling at Draco as he sent cutting hexes and even the occasional killing curse toward him, but his aim was rather bad. Draco had no trouble dodging them, until to his surprise a red spell came from behind Draco and hit Andrei squarely in the chest. He dropped like a rock.

Draco spun around just in time to see Hermione's wand poking out from under the table. "Good girl!" he shouted as he turned back to Sorin Cazacu, but Draco was suddenly distracted by Dolohov. In the moment Draco turned to find Hermione, Dolohov had made a break for the door and was wrenching it open.

Out of the corner of his eye, Draco saw the wizard he had identified in Lola's memories fall, and Potter shouted. "Get Dolohov! I'll take it from here!"

Draco hesitated, but decided that Potter was right. Potter was more than a match for Sorin Cazacu, and Hermione's own spellwork was clearly just as good as he had seen in Potter's memories all those years ago. They couldn't let Dolohov escape, not now that he had seen Draco. He was smart. He would assume his hiding place was compromised. He would go underground tonight, and they might never find him again.

Draco aimed one last shot toward Cazacu as he tore through the restaurant, ignoring the few muggles who were still huddling under their tables in fear as he wrenched the door open and found himself sprinting through a commercial muggle kitchen.

*I have to get him. I have to get him before he reaches the edge of the wards.*

Suddenly those antiapparition wards that had made Draco so uncomfortable on his way in were the most important part of the rough plan Draco was developing on the way out. Dolohov would have to flee on foot until he reached the edge of the wards so he could apparate. They were keeping him here, just within Draco's reach if only he could run fast enough.

Draco burst through the door on the other end of the kitchen and found himself in what was clearly a staff corridor. He looked quickly in both directions and saw the edge of a coat disappearing around the corner at the end of the hall to his left. Draco sprinted after him, knowing that they were surely getting close to the edge of the wards, and when he threw himself around the corner his heart nearly stopped as Dolohov was starting to turn in place to disappear forever.

"*Accio!*" Draco shouted desperately, aiming right for Dolohov. To Draco's utter shock, the spell connected with Dolohov just before he was able to finish turning. It knocked him to his feet, and he grasped at the carpet with his hands, but Draco's magic was too strong. Draco's spell pulled him back within the wards, all the way to Draco himself.

Draco felt a rush of dark satisfaction as Dolohov's body came hurtling toward him, and Draco braced himself for the impact.

"Oomph," he grunted as Dolohov's body slammed into him. Draco moved quickly to wrench Dolohov's wand from his grip before closing his hand around his throat and another arm around his waist.

Dolohov was struggling, but Draco squeezed, as he half-carried, half-dragged Dolohov toward the nearest door in the corridor. Draco shoved his shoulder against it and was pleased to find a supply closet that was blessedly vacant.

Draco slammed Dolohov against the wall, his hand still on Dolohov's throat as he reached for his wand to lock and silence the closet. He also cast a notice-me-not for any muggle security cameras nearby.

"So pleased you could be here Dolohov," said Draco, as he stared down at the young face that was suddenly starting to melt.

"Let's let you turn back into yourself, shall we? I *so* want my memory of this to be exactly right."

A few moments later Dolohov was back to normal: he was smaller and darker than the bartender he had polyjuiced, and that made Draco tower over him even more.

Dolohov made a strangled sound that Draco thought might have been his name, but he couldn't be sure. Draco was holding his throat so tightly he couldn't speak.

"Do you know what I'm going to do to you?" he asked quietly. "I'm going to gut you. Because you cursed my fiancée. And you killed my cousin's husband and her son's father. I have been dreaming about this for months, Dolohov. You have no idea. Having you like this is the best thing that's happened since Hermione agreed to marry me."

Dolohov made another strangled sound, and Draco could see the look of fear in his eyes. It wasn't surprising. Draco was entirely serious, and he was sure Dolohov could see the truth of his words on his face. These were not empty threats, they were promises of what Draco was about to do to him.

"Now then," said Draco as he reached into his sleeve and drew one of his knives. Dolohov's eyes were huge, and his Adam's apple bobbed as Draco turned the blade to the side and stroked the side of his face with it. "I could cut you on your carotid of course, and you would bleed out very quickly."

Draco dragged the blade down to Dolohov's neck as he contemplated this.

"However, I think not. After all, that's not where you hurt Hermione, was it? You aimed for her stomach and chest the last time you hit her with a spell. You collapsed her lung. You almost killed her with internal organ damage. And what's that muggle saying? An eye for an eye. Am I right?"

Dolohov was struggling hard now, but Draco was far too strong. Draco was being driven by adrenaline and revenge, and he knew he could hold Dolohov like this for hours if he had to. That beautiful moment was so close he could taste it.

“Let’s see how you like it you fucker,” growled Draco, and he pushed the point of the blade into Dolohov’s chest, just below his sternum, and he pushed up to Dolohov’s left side.

Dolohov gasped and sputtered as Draco twisted the knife, piercing Dolohov’s heart and shredding the bottom of the right ventricle.

Draco held him in place and waited, as he watched the blood seep from the wound, and Dolohov’s face turn ashen. Slowly, Draco loosened the grip on Dolohov’s throat, but he was too far gone to speak.

“Say hello to the Dark Lord for me when you get to Hell,” he said, as Dolohov’s eyes finally fluttered, and he collapsed. Draco released him and stared at the body crumpled before him, blood staining his clothes and the floor.

As if in a dream, Draco conjured a glass vial and collected some of the blood. That could be useful to break Dolohov’s wards at his hideout and shouldn’t go to waste. It would need to be searched for evidence. He corked the vial and tucked it into his coat pocket. Then he stepped forward and wrenched the knife back out of Dolohov’s chest and used his wand to clean it before sheathing it back into its holster. Draco stepped back to straighten his clothes, adjusted his tie, and used his wand to vanish the blood from his shoes.

Draco glanced down at Dolohov’s body and saw it was perfectly still now. His eyes were glassy, his face was pale, and he was no longer breathing.

Draco cast a quick charm to confirm what was obvious: Dolohov was dead, and Draco had killed him.

Mission complete, Draco turned to exit the closet, a broad smile on his face.

## Chapter 37: Celebrate

### Hermione

“Hermione, you can come out now,” came Harry’s voice a few moments after she heard his shout of “*Stupefy!*” along with a satisfying thud as the man Hermione recognized as Sorin Cazacu collapsed.

Hermione peered out from under the table and stood to straighten her skirt. “Bloody hell,” she muttered looking around at the carnage. Luca Popa was bleeding profusely, and Harry walked over to mutter a quick healing spell. There were bullet holes riddling a door that Hermione was sure led to the kitchens. And there were still a handful of muggles crouched under tables who hadn’t been able to escape when Draco first arrived and pulled his gun.

“Draco?” she asked Harry, and he just gave her a grim look.

“He went after Dolohov. Malfoy seemed to think he was polyjuiced as the bartender.”

Hermione closed her eyes for a moment, and tried to breathe. Surely, *surely* he would be OK. She had just seen for herself how fantastic he was in a duel. Still, she worried her lip as she waited.

But it wasn’t Draco who returned first. No, nearly half of the Romanian auror department and several obliviators were rushing through the doors of the restaurant now.

They came to a sudden halt as they stared at Harry and Hermione in confusion. All of the aurors had just seen them at the deal signing, after all.

It suddenly occurred to Hermione that Draco Malfoy was rather good at causing international incidents. The last one she had been involved in was her own breakup with Viktor Krum, of course. She rather hoped this would be easier to smooth over than that one had been.

“What happened?” asked one of the aurors, whom Hermione recognized as Cristian Baciu. He was the head of the Romanian auror department. The other aurors moved toward the wizards and trained their wands on them, while the obliviators began pulling the terrified muggles out from under their tables and started to gently modify their memories.

Hermione had to admit it was rather convenient that Harry was here. All of the aurors – even Baciu – had looked at Harry with something akin to hero worship not even an hour ago. She was certain that was why the aurors were pointing their wands at the wizards who had been stunned instead of Hermione and Harry.

“We’re in the process of fulfilling the terms of our deal,” said Harry in a surprisingly smooth voice that made Hermione’s eyebrows go up. “As we suspected, the things that have been happening in Romania are a bit more widespread across other parts of Eastern Europe as

well. As you know, Hermione has many connections through her job, and she has been helping me uncover the circle of suspects. We were a bit surprised to learn that Florin Rosu was involved, but he showed his hand at dinner tonight. The others showed up when we tried to fight back.”

“*Rosu?*” asked Baciu in disbelief. “But he coordinated our deal!”

“It’s because he wants Hermione, who you should know is *my* fiancée,” came Draco’s voice from the door. Hermione spun around to see him walking toward her, energy radiating from him. He looked perfectly collected and put together, but Hermione sensed a sort of dark jubilation in his voice.

*Draco got him.*

Hermione felt an enormous surge of relief, mixed with a keen sense of anxiety that he was about to be caught and arrested for murder. She glanced at Harry and saw the ghost of a smirk cross his face.

“And who the hell are you?” asked Baciu.

“He’s an auror,” said Harry quickly.

*Oh bloody hell Harry, now YOU are going to cause an international incident by telling such an obvious lie.*

“Can I see your credentials?” asked Baciu skeptically.

“Erm, he’s a trainee auror I should say,” added Harry quickly. “He hasn’t taken the qualification exam yet, though after tonight I’d say he’s ready.”

Hermione glanced at Draco, who looked like he was struggling not to laugh.

“But you look too old for –” started Baciu, and Hermione decided she really had to jump in now. Neither Harry nor Draco were as good at smoothing things over as she was.

“Cristian, Harry is right. This is Draco Malfoy. He works opposite me in the French Ministry, but he has trained as an auror as well on a... erm... slower basis than usual. He came this week to provide some extra security for me and Harry given the little project we’ve been working on. It was sensible because he does have the training, and Draco is correct that we are engaged. I’m afraid Florin imperiused me and then tried to drug me, and Draco saw it...”

“He *imperiused* you?” asked Baciu in slight horror, and Hermione nodded solemnly.

“Yes, and the drug he was trying to give her would have removed her free will for a week,” said Draco darkly. “He’s obsessed with her. I’m afraid I couldn’t allow it.”

“No, no of course not...” muttered Baciu. Then he stared around at the others. “And them?”

“Working for Antonin Dolohov,” said Harry.

"Rosu drew out Potter for them in exchange for the potion to trap Hermione," added Draco. Hermione felt her stomach lurch at this, and she glanced at Draco. She was rather amazed he hadn't actually killed Florin. She suspected the only reason he didn't was because there would have been too many witnesses.

Baciu's eyes were huge now. "*Dolohov?* I admit I wondered, but..." he hesitated.

"You were right," said Hermione. "All of your suspicions about Dolohov were absolutely correct." She figured a little flattery wouldn't hurt now that they were on the topic of Dolohov. Any second now Baciu would ask about...

"Do you have any idea where he is?" asked Baciu, now looking at Harry. She saw Harry glance at Draco.

"As a matter of fact, I ran into his body not ten minutes ago while I was looking for others who may have helped him," said Draco easily. "I believe you'll find him gutted like a fish in a supply closet just off the staff corridor. He's clearly dead. It looks like one of the muggles got him with a knife. It's a bit barbaric, don't you agree? Although it did allow me to collect some blood for you in case you need it to break his wards and gather evidence. That's erm... part of auror training, you know."

Draco produced a vial of blood with a flourish, which Baciu took hesitantly.

Hermione held her breath as Baciu now stared at Draco with something that looked a little like fear, as he nodded slowly. "Yes. Yes, of course. Must be a muggle. After all, very few wizards would use muggle weapons..."

Hermione noticed that Baciu was pointedly ignoring the gun holster peeking out from under Draco's coat as he said this. He also did not allow his gaze to linger on Harry as he picked up his own gun from the table and dusted it off before reholstering it.

Hermione swallowed a bit uncomfortably.

"Excellent," said Draco brightly. "Well I'm sure Potter can catch you up about the others, though you should know that one of their accomplices is Lola Dascalu. She's currently stunned in the penthouse suite of the Dove. I would suggest sending a team to arrest her now and searching her memories for information. There were several others that we didn't have on our initial list. She knows quite a bit and is not a good enough occlumens to stop a proficient legilimens. That being said, if you need assistance with any legilimency, I would be more than happy to offer my services."

"Erm..." started Baciu.

"Malfoy is an exceptional legilimens," chimed in Harry helpfully. "He scored top marks in that part of his auror training. Though I'm rather good at it too if you prefer my help."

"Right," said Baciu, now steeling himself. "Very well then. Mr. Potter, if you would be good enough to assist us with this investigation, we would be most appreciative. I'm sure Mr. Malfoy will be wanting to get back to..." he trailed off and eyed Hermione.

"I'd be happy to help," said Harry smoothly. "Hermione, would you mind letting Ginny know I may be a few more days?"

"Of course," said Hermione quickly. She was more than ready to get out of here, and based on the looks Draco was giving her, she was sure he would agree. The expression on his face was nothing short of covetous, and she gulped.

Draco gave Baciu a cordial nod and then moved toward Hermione and lifted her left hand. He tapped his wand to her finger to reveal her ring. "Come along, *mon ange*. Potter can take it from here."

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

Draco felt himself thrumming with energy. Dolohov was dead. Draco had experienced the exquisite pleasure of watching the life drain from his face. He returned to find Hermione and Potter both unharmed, and the three of them had managed the Romanian aurors with much less trouble than he had been expecting.

He wanted his fiancée now. His *fiancée*. Merlin, but he was thrilled he could finally acknowledge her like this.

Draco half-led, half-dragged Hermione to the international floo at the Romanian Ministry of Magic after abandoning their muggle weapons in a bin.

"Draco, what about my things..." she started, but he just shushed her.

"Potter can get them," he said. "He'll be in Romania for a couple more days. You have your ring and wand. That's all that matters."

She gave him a slightly exasperated look, but he just tugged her hand. He was desperate to get home with her.

She looked at him askance as he slipped some gold to the security wizard to clear them through the Romanian security checkpoint quickly, and before long they were clearing British customs as well. Finally, at long last, they made their way to the domestic floo, and Draco was practically bouncing on the balls of his feet as Hermione went first.

"Malfoy Manor!" he called right behind her, and the moment he stepped through the threshold on the other side, he grabbed her and pressed her against the wall to cover her mouth with his.

"Oomph, Draco what...?" she gasped as he wrenched himself from her lips and attached to her neck and started to suck. Draco hadn't been this eager for her since that first night he had

her. But the thing he had just done to Dolohov barely an hour earlier and the fact that she was here was making the blood pound through his veins.

“I want you naked,” he gasped.

“We’re in the foyer...” she said, but she started to take her clothes off quickly, and Draco just grinned against her skin.

“And?”

“Topsy...”

“She won’t care. I need you *mon ange*. I’m aching. *Please*.”

Hermione said nothing more to this, but she shimmied out of her dress and knickers, and as soon as she was naked he pushed her against the wall and dropped to his knees as he began to suck.

She made a strangled sound, but Draco didn’t stop. She tasted like sunlight, like his future, like everything he had ever wanted all in one place. And as she started to break Draco smiled again. With Dolohov dead and his fiancée now well and truly his, Draco didn’t think he had ever smiled this much in his life.

“Come for me. Now,” he demanded, and as if on cue she broke as he rose and spun her around and then bent her over as he unfastened his trousers.

“Fucking come again for me gorgeous,” he said as he pushed into her and started to move.

“*Draco*,” she gasped. “What’s gotten into...”

“I told you I get off on danger. It was so hot watching you stun Gataki and Andrei Popa. And killing that fucker made me hard. Come on darling, give me another.”

She was bent in half, her hands against the wall for support, and Draco admired the sight of her arse on display for him. He ran his hands over it and gripped it. It was his. She was his. Everything was his. He had won and gotten the girl all at the same time. He couldn’t believe how lucky he was.

It didn’t take long before she was breaking again, and Draco felt her spasming all up and down his cock. He could tell she was getting tired, but he wasn’t finished with her yet. He pulled out and lifted her into his arms, not even bothering to fasten his pants as he took the stairs two at a time to get to his room.

When he arrived he tossed her on the bed and then stripped his own clothes as quickly as possible before settling on top of her and taking those glorious tits he loved so much into his mouth.

“Did I tell you how I did it *mon ange*? ” he asked between licks and open-mouthed kisses. He looked up to see her watching him a bit warily, but he could tell she was curious despite herself. Her eyes were darkening as he stared at her.

He released her tits to sit back, and he opened her legs so he could look at every part of her. “Do you want to know how I killed him? Does that make you wet? Do you like knowing that I did it for you? I told him it was for you right before he died. I made sure he knew, darling.”

He watched her core eagerly, and sure enough it started to glisten even harder for him. Draco nearly groaned. “I... I....” she was panting and barely able to speak, but she was looking at him with something like desperation on her face now.

“Look at you...” he murmured. “That perfect cunt. So wet because I murdered the fucker. And I don’t feel bad about it darling, not even a little bit. It was one of the greatest things I’ve ever done, sliding that knife into his heart and twisting it for you.”

As he said this he slid his fingers into her and twisted them too, and she moaned for him. “Tell me... does it turn you on as much as it turns me on?”

“I... I...”

He twisted his fingers again, and she groaned, “Yes... It shouldn’t but...”

“It’s alright,” he crooned. “It’s because you know you have me, body and soul. And I will do anything, *anything* for you. I already have. And I always will.”

“Yes,” she whispered. “It makes me feel safe.”

“You’re so safe with me,” he agreed. “Now open up *mon ange*.”

She dropped her jaw, and he slipped his fingers into her mouth as he slipped his cock into her cunt.

“I’m going to fuck you nice and good, darling. I want you to come for me one more time.”

She said nothing, but he watched as her eyes rolled back, and Draco slipped his hand out of her mouth and pinched her nipples as he started to move. He stared, his gaze settled on her, utterly focused on every expression of her face, every twitch of her body. Some distant part of his brain recognized what this was for him: a claiming, in every sense of the word. He needed her to give herself over to him because of the thing he had just done for her. And she was doing it. She was giving him everything he wanted.

He was transfixed as she broke for him one more time, her entire face alight with the pleasure that he had given her. And now, finally, he broke too, and he thought he had never come so hard in his life. On and on it went, coating the inside of her with him, and Draco positively gloried in it.

Finally, slowly, he pulled out and rolled off the bed to grab his wand to clean them both up. Hermione stretched languidly, and Draco was forcibly reminded of that fucking cat of hers as she opened her eyes slowly and looked at him with a satisfied smile. Draco couldn’t help but grin back. He and the cat had reached an agreement ever since Draco proposed, but the

message Draco received from the cat couldn't have been more clear: *I will tolerate you for now, but if you ever hurt her again, I will end you.*

Draco secretly thought that the cat could probably succeed where Dolohov and the others had failed. Draco didn't mind though. He knew what it was like to dream about murder where Hermione was concerned.

"Feeling good darling?" he asked as he slipped back into bed with her.

"Mmm," she said. "You're all dark and dangerous you know."

"It's part of my charm."

"I'll admit it's sexier than it ought to be," she said with a small smile.

Draco smiled too and then turned serious. "I'll always defend you, I hope you know that. I'll always get revenge for you."

She smiled softly. "I do know that. And you do have some limits, I suppose. What Florin did..." she hesitated for a moment, and Draco felt his heart turn dark at that bastard's name.

"If he hadn't released you from that curse, I would have killed him too," Draco said without hesitation. "I came very close to it."

Hermione sighed. "It's probably good you didn't. I doubt the Romanian Ministry would have been willing to turn a blind eye to that one."

Draco inclined his head in acknowledgment. "True. That thought did cross my mind while I was pointing my gun at his face."

He saw her lips quirk a bit. "Well I think he's going to prison for a very long time, and I will never meet with him again. Maybe the Romanians will give me a woman next time. That would be like a breath of fresh air."

Draco grinned at this. "I'll tell Potter to suggest it, darling."

She smiled a little and nestled into him.

"Hermione?" he asked.

"Hmmm?"

"You don't mind if we tell everybody we're engaged, do you? I know I kind of... announced it. A lot."

Draco realized he felt more nervous about this than he cared to admit. He had promised her they could keep their engagement hidden a little longer to get the world used to a public relationship first. But instead he told everybody he could at the earliest opportunity.

To his relief she just smiled a little. "No, that's fine. We can tell the world. But maybe we can set a wedding date for next summer? That way nobody thinks I'm knocked up."

"But I wouldn't mind it if you *were* knocked up."

"Draco..." she said, rolling her eyes now. "Next summer."

Draco weighed this for a moment. He wanted to get married as soon as possible.

"Maybe around Christmas?" he countered.

"Next summer."

"What about spring?"

"Next summer. I want hydrangeas in my bouquet."

Draco sighed, but he couldn't help but smile a little. "Fine. You know I'll give you anything you want, even a wedding that's ridiculously far into the future."

"Draco, summer is eight months from now."

"Like I said, ridiculously far into the future. I want to marry you today *mon ange*."

She scooted up and gave him a kiss. "I want to marry you too. But we have things to do first – like announce our deal and get some of it passed."

"Ah yes. That, and I need to take my auror exam. Maybe Potter will finally hire me as his partner once I do it. Trainees are supposed to be paid, you know. There are eight years of back wages he owes me."

Hermione chuckled at this. "Are you going to become an auror then? After some of our legislation has passed, I mean?"

He gave her an amused look, but he just shrugged. "Maybe. I'm probably better at being an auror than a diplomat."

"I'll say," she muttered.

"Hey now. Did I or did I not give you France?"

"You did. And I love you for it, *mon rêve*."

"I love you too, darling."

# **Chapter 38: Newsworthy**

## **Potter Busts Eastern European Death Eater Ring**

*by Ignatius Blott*

*In a surprising turn of events, famed auror Harry Potter has successfully captured more than a dozen witches and wizards whom Mr. Potter says were perpetuating crimes in Eastern Europe and specifically Romania.*

*“They were being led by Antonin Dolohov, who ironically was killed during a surprise raid by one of the nearby muggles.”*

*According to Potter, Dolohov was consolidating power, much in the same way as You-Know-Who did nearly a decade ago, and he was responsible for a number of muggle deaths in Romania over the last two years. With the help of certain members of the Department of International Magical Cooperation from both Britain and France, Mr. Potter was able to trace Dolohov and his followers and place all of them under arrest with help from Romanian authorities. One individual, Georgi Borisov, was employed by the British Ministry of Magic Archives and was responsible for record tampering and at least one instance of breaking and entering.*

*“Mr. Potter and his team were critical in helping us solve a number of difficult murders that were taking place against the muggle community,” said Cristian Baciu, the head auror in Romania’s auror department. “We cannot thank him enough, and we are eager to train our aurors in some of the unique methods Mr. Potter and his team used during the raid.”*

*As readers of The Daily Prophet may know, Antonin Dolohov was the last known member of You-Know-Who’s so-called “Inner Circle” and was in Britain and fled the night You-Know-Who fell. Mr. Potter has led missions that resulted in the capture or death of nine members of the Inner Circle, an astonishing feat that will surely secure his place among the greatest British aurors of all time.*

*“It’s all down to my team,” said Potter. “I couldn’t do it without them.”*

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco Malfoy: Death Eater or Auror?**

*by Marla Lancett*

*It's no secret that Draco Malfoy is a reformed bad boy. He was the junior-most Death Eater who served You-Know-Who during the height of his power. Mr. Malfoy's trial after the war was well-publicized, and he was sentenced to time already served in Azkaban plus hefty fines for his role. He finished his last year at Hogwarts once the war was over and moved to France, where he joined the French Department of International Magical Cooperation, and he has lived there ever since. In fact, this is the only job Draco Malfoy has held since graduating Hogwarts, at least officially.*

*But according to Harry Potter, Draco Malfoy also qualifies as an auror. And evidently Minister Shacklebolt agrees.*

*"Yes, I let Mr. Malfoy take the test," said Shacklebolt. "He's been training under Harry Potter for years on a... confidential basis."*

*Confidential basis indeed.*

*The standard training for aurors is three years with at least three completed missions before trainees are eligible to take the auror qualification exam.*

*According to the application that Mr. Malfoy submitted to the British auror department, he's been training for eight years and has completed twenty-four missions, all supervised by Harry Potter.*

*"I had no idea he was even in the program," said John Dawlish, who heads the auror training academy. "I've never seen him."*

*"I had Malfoy enroll under me," said Harry Potter. "The auror academy is how most aurors qualify, but it's not technically required if a qualified auror is willing to supervise a trainee on an independent basis. Malfoy's been critical to many of my missions, and I'd trust him with my life."*

*When asked why he waited eight years and went on twenty-four missions before taking the qualification exam, Mr. Malfoy said, "I wanted to make sure I was well-prepared and would pass on my first try."*

*Sure enough, the results of Mr. Malfoy's auror exam were nothing short of astonishing. He scored top marks in dueling, stealth and tracking, and warding, and his occlumency score was off the charts.*

*"Malfoy's the best occlumens I've ever met," confirmed Potter. "And that's saying something."*

*When I asked Mr. Malfoy if he intends to leave the French Department of International Magical Cooperation and become a British auror instead, he said, "That's the plan eventually. But first I need to make sure my fiancée gets France."*

*With this perplexing statement, Mr. Malfoy threatened to hex me if I didn't move along, but our readers can rest assured that our team of reporters will be investigating.*

\*\*\*\*\*

## ***Landmark Deal Announced Between Britain and France***

*by Abigail Pennington*

*The British and French Ministries of Magic have revealed a joint proposal that will fundamentally change the relationship between our two countries. The proposal, which is known as the Multistate Actions for Generational Initiatives and Change (or “MAGIC”) Accord was presented at a ceremony last night at the British Ministry of Magic by Minister Shacklebolt himself.*

*“The MAGIC Accord is one of the most ambitious and wide-sweeping proposals that has ever come out of the British Ministry of Magic. We will be working closely with our sister country, France, to lead the way for positive change on an international scale. The MAGIC Accord is a commitment, a promise of a greater future. We are optimistic that once Britain and France achieve the historic legislation required to fulfill the terms of it, other countries will join us to put magical Europe at the forefront of progress.”*

*The MAGIC Accord was devised by the International Department of Magical Cooperation in both the British and French Ministries, led by none other than Hermione Granger for Britain and Draco Malfoy for France.*

*“I am proud of Miss Granger for her exceptional work on this proposal,” said Harvey Cooper, the head of the British Department of International Magical Cooperation. “She and Mr. Malfoy have a shared dream of a better Europe, and this is the first step in making that dream come true.”*

*The MAGIC Accord contains any number of commitments which, according to Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy, have been backed up by extensive research and data from each country. These commitments include, but are not limited to:*

- *Free floo travel between countries for pre-cleared travelers.*
- *A single market economy*
- *Creating international educational standards for Hogwarts and Beauxbatons*
- *Instituting early childhood education programs for low or no cost that focus on core competencies*

- *Muggleborn immersion programs that introduce the concept of magic to muggleborns prior to the age of eleven*
- *Muggle immersion programs for witches and wizards raised in the magical world to assist them with integration and a better understanding of their muggle counterparts*
- *Joint protection of endangered magical plants and animal species*
- *Commitment to designate protected regions for magical creatures*
- *Providing representation for magical creatures in each country's Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, including a representative from each of the goblin, elvish, centaur, and merpeople nations.*
- *Elimination of house elf enslavement and a guarantee of a living wage and vacation time for all workers, including house elves*

*The MAGIC Accord, though very ambitious, has the support of several notable figures, including Harry Potter.*

*“The MAGIC Accord will be the most important proposal in our or our children’s lifetimes,” said Mr. Potter. “I am in full support of every part of the plan and will do anything I can to help it come to fruition.”*

*After the announcement of the MAGIC Accord by Minister Shacklebolt, Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger took the stage together. Once on stage, Mr. Malfoy said, “We are committed to the MAGIC Accord, and we will work tirelessly until it is finished. And while we wait for the laws to pass, Hermione and I would like to take the first step into this new future together.”*

*At this, Mr. Malfoy called the Malfoy house elves to the stage, while Miss Granger called an elf named Topsy to join them. Together, Mr. Malfoy presented his elves with clothes, while Miss Granger did the same thing for Topsy. Each elf then signed a magical contract with Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger, which contain generous pay and benefits that exceed the standards sought by the MAGIC Accord.*

*“We must set an example and be the change we want to see,” said Miss Granger. “We look forward to the coming months and the transformative legislation that will improve our world.”*

\*\*\*\*\*

### ***Malfoy and Granger Engaged!***

*by Rita Skeeter*

*The wizarding world is agog as rumors of the engagement between Draco Malfoy and Hermione Granger have been spreading. These rumors were fueled by many public appearances with both Mr. Malfoy and Miss Granger, including most recently, the announcement of the MAGIC Accord. It was noted by several attendees that Miss Granger had a large diamond ring on her left ring finger, and The Daily Prophet can exclusively report that the elf Miss Granger freed that night has always been a Malfoy elf.*

*"Draco bound her to me accidentally when he changed the wards at Malfoy Manor for me," admitted Miss Granger after many questions from this reporter. "I've never had a house elf before, and Topsy was bound to me for only a short time before I freed her at the ceremony."*

*After much urging, the couple has released details of their relationship and engagement.*

*"We knew each other as children of course," said Mr. Malfoy, "and we reconnected in Paris earlier in the summer through a random meeting. Then our jobs crossed when Hermione was assigned to France, and we've been working together closely ever since. We started dating quietly and got engaged very recently. I proposed in my family's library. Hermione has always loved libraries."*

*"Yes, it was very romantic," added Miss Granger.*

*We asked socialite Mrs. Narcissa Malfoy what she thought of this union, given the Malfoy family's history of pureblood matches. "I am thrilled to welcome Hermione into the family. She's a lovely young woman, and my son Draco is head over heels for her."*

*However, when we reached out to her husband, Lucius Malfoy, who is currently serving a long sentence in Azkaban, we discovered that Mr. Malfoy had evidently not been informed of the upcoming nuptials. "You're lying," he said. "No son of mine would debase himself in that way."*

*Lies or not, the timing of their relationship and engagement does, of course, call into question whether there was a conflict of interest on behalf of either party when drafting the MAGIC Accord.*

*"The relationship was disclosed to me in accordance with appropriate Ministry procedures," said Harvey Cooper, Miss Granger's supervisor. "My counterpart in the French Ministry is aware of it as well. We both feel that their relationship is the reason the MAGIC Accord is so forward-thinking and likely to succeed. They work extremely well together."*

*Nonetheless, tongues are wagging about this unexpected alliance. Is Miss Granger after Mr. Malfoy's ample resources? Is Mr. Malfoy trying to improve the Malfoy name with Miss Granger's reputation? Or were their hands mutually forced by certain circumstances? Rumor has it that Miss Granger is in a delicate condition, and with the date of the wedding not disclosed to this reporter it is believed that they will be eloping as soon as possible.*

## Chapter 39: Mon Petit

### Hermione

Hermione was staring at Harry, as he smiled softly at her. “You look amazing, sis. Malfoy’s going to pass out when he sees you.”

Hermione blushed, but gave Harry a broad smile as she took his proffered arm, and he led her down to the courtyard. It was July now, and Harry and Ginny had returned from their honeymoon a couple weeks ago, just in time to help with last minute details for Hermione and Draco’s wedding.

Hermione glanced down at the hydrangeas in her bouquet and smiled a little. Draco had been so impatient to get married and kept begging her to do it earlier than this, but now that they were here she knew it was the right decision to wait.

The previous legislative session had only ended a few weeks ago – France’s had ended a week later than Britain’s – and up until that point Hermione and Draco were both buried in work. To Hermione’s surprise, nearly half of the items they were seeking in the MAGIC Accord got passed on their first try, in both countries. There would be more work to do in the fall to rally votes for the things that were still unfulfilled, but they had some time before they had to start working on it again. It gave Hermione the opportunity to cash in quite a bit of vacation time that she had never used for their wedding, and Draco put in his notice at the French Ministry once the session was over. He would be starting with the British aurors officially in several weeks, though he would continue to work behind the scenes with Hermione to secure support for the other parts of the MAGIC Accord that they still wanted to get passed.

One of those things was house elf enslavement. It hadn’t passed on the first try, but Hermione never thought it would. It did, however, get much closer than Hermione expected, largely thanks to Narcissa Malfoy. Narcissa decided she would make it fashionable to free house elves and employ them – in fact, Hermione had overheard Narcissa explaining to more than one of her socialite friends that *paid* house elves provide superior service, and it was a testament to the Malfoy fortune that they could afford to give their elves the very best. To Hermione’s shock, the idea had taken on, and now it was in vogue to pay one’s house elves as a way of elevating the household name. Hermione rather thought that another year of it would probably be enough to sway the fence sitters she hadn’t convinced the first time around.

Yes, Hermione and Draco’s work on the MAGIC Accord had been an overwhelming success by any real measure. There was still more to do, but they could give themselves this time for something that was just theirs.

Hermione glanced sideways at Harry, and he shot her another grin and wink. Even with all of the resources of the Malfoy library at her disposal – not to mention Draco’s offer to give her

the best magical healers in the world – Hermione had not attempted to reverse her parents' memory charms. They were happy, they were safe, and it had been so long now that even the best care had a high risk of brain damage. Hermione was a bit sad that her father wouldn't be walking her down the aisle today, but Harry was more than happy to take his place. He was her brother after all, and the closest member of her own family here today.

Much to Rita Skeeter's consternation, they were in Paris, getting married at the Malfoy home where Hermione and Draco first danced together, just over a year ago. Rita called it a national disgrace that war hero Hermione Granger wouldn't get married in England, but Hermione didn't care. The Malfoy home in Paris was beautiful, large, and it had far fewer wards to deal with than the Manor. Draco loved their bubble at the Manor and had little interest in opening it to swaths of guests, other than their closest friends. Hermione found herself in agreement with this. The Manor had transformed from a place of torture to her safe haven while they were hunting Dolohov, and she wasn't keen to let the world in either.

So Paris was the solution. They would get married in the courtyard and then have the reception in the ballroom, with blue and white hydrangeas spilling out of vases everywhere.

This was the other reason for the choice of venue, of course: the color scheme. Whereas the Manor had a strong green theme running through it, no doubt as a nod to Slytherin House, the Malfoy home in France featured the classic blue and gold that was so prevalent in Parisian decor. Prepping the home for the wedding of Hermione's dreams was almost no work at all, because it was already so beautiful and in the precise color palette she wanted. All she needed were hydrangeas, so Draco gave her hydrangeas – *mountains* of hydrangeas, in fact. Hermione had never seen so many in her entire life.

In any event, Hermione rather thought that holding the wedding in France would give all of their guests the opportunity to try the new, streamlined floo network procedures between Britain and France for the first time. This, of course, had been the first piece of legislation from the MAGIC Accord to pass, and the new security protocols officially went into place the previous week. It was already getting rave reviews, and several other countries had expressed interest in doing the same thing.

"Ready then?" asked Harry, and Hermione took a deep breath and nodded as the glass doors to the courtyard opened. The music started, and the guests all stood, but Hermione couldn't see anybody but Draco.

There he was at the end of the aisle, looking more handsome than she had ever seen him, staring at her with that look of adoration she loved so much. His gray eyes roved over her, taking in her every detail: the fitted bodice, the full skirt with small train, the sheer sleeves that started off of the shoulder, along with the Potter earrings she loved so much and a small Malfoy tiara that was securing her veil. He looked utterly dumbstruck.

She smiled broadly as she approached and Harry took her hand and gave it to Draco.

"*Mon ange*," he whispered. "You look..."

He couldn't finish it. He started to choke up, and then Hermione almost did too. They both had to take a deep breath to compose themselves before turning to the officiant and

beginning.

The opening words washed over Hermione, but the look on Draco's face when he promised to love, honor, and cherish her would be something she would remember forever. They had mixed magical and muggle traditions for this. They would do a handfasting ritual of course, but Draco had been so taken by the muggle vows Hermione described that he wanted to do that too. And so he promised her everything in front of all the important people in their lives: he vowed to give her his life, his body, his love, his soul, his everything. All that was his was hers, now and forever. He swore that he would fulfill every dream for her: from a garden full of hydrangeas to global house elf freedom if that's what she wanted. He was hers entirely, and he was committed to loving her until his dying breath.

There wasn't a dry eye in the house by the time Draco was finished with his vows, and Hermione was so overcome by them that she could hardly get through her own promises in return. She knew he meant it. He meant every single word.

The handfasting ritual was its own kind of magic. Hermione had seen it a few times by now, but it never failed to enchant her. The glow of the magical ribbons that tied their hands, the burst of light, and then the look of love on the faces of the couple always made her emotional. And this time it was her turn, and she finally got to feel it: that touch of magic that was Draco's for just a split second as they were magically bound together for life.

When Draco pulled her in for their first kiss as a married couple, Hermione felt it all the way to her toes. Then he pulled away for a moment before leaning in again and whispering, "My wife." He sounded so amazed by it, that Hermione couldn't help the dazzling smile that crossed her face. After all, that look of adoration was permanently affixed to his.

He proudly led her back down the aisle, followed by Harry and Ginny, Theo and Luna, and finally Blaise who escorted Narcissa, and then Draco turned to her. "I love you more than anything. Thank you, *thank you* for marrying me *mon ange*. "

"I love you too, *mon rêve*. Now let's get this party started, shall we?"

\*\*\*\*\*

## **Draco**

This was the greatest day of his life. This was the greatest day of his entire fucking life, and he didn't know if anything would ever top it.

Hermione Granger-Malfoy was his wife. Yes, she chose to hyphenate. No, Draco didn't care. Malfoy was still part of it after all, and she was so famous in her own right it made sense to incorporate her maiden name too.

Besides, Hermione wanted it that way, and he would give her anything she wanted. Hell, he would have even done it himself if it wouldn't cause the biggest paperwork headache of his life to change the legal name on every single asset he owned. Even Hermione didn't think that was worth the bother.

But there she was, Hermione Granger-Malfoy, spinning around the dance floor with Harry and Ginny Potter in an odd three-way dance group, laughing her head off, while Blaise and Gabrielle danced nearby. Draco grinned broadly as he watched her – his *wife*. Gods, but she was gorgeous.

"This has been wonderful," said his mother, sidling up to him. "Hermione seems to be enjoying herself."

Draco turned to his mother. "She is, that's true. And Mother – thank you for all this. You've outdone yourself."

"It was my only child's wedding, Draco. Of course I outdid myself."

Draco grinned at this and took a sip. "And Father?" he asked carefully.

Narcissa rolled her eyes. "As you would expect. He's horrified of course, but that didn't stop him from asking when he would have a grandchild."

Draco smirked at this. Draco had never fully cut off Lucius, but they rarely communicated anymore. Most of the news Draco received about his father was through his mother. Lucius had not approved of Hermione for all the predictable reasons, but his arse was still in Azkaban for at least another ten years, so there wasn't anything he could do about it. Draco had to admit, he was pleased that Lucius wasn't here to cause a scene today. Draco used to wonder if he would miss Lucius on his wedding day, but he really didn't. His heart was too full of Hermione. He didn't want to see anybody who thought she was less than perfect.

"The answer to Father's question is that he will get a grandchild whenever Hermione is willing to give him a grandchild. That's her prerogative. So he might want to be nicer to her next time he writes to her."

Narcissa gave him an exasperated look, but Draco just raised an eyebrow and turned back to look at his wife – his *wife*. Fucking hell he wanted to call her that every day for the rest of his life. And he could. He *would*. Draco felt as bubbly as the champagne he was drinking as he thought about it.

He realized he was grinning like an idiot. He didn't care.

"One more song, dear, and then I think you and Hermione can depart if you wish."

Draco nodded and drained his drink as he approached his wife. "My turn," he said, pulling her in close and swaying with her. They had danced several times that night, including a rumba that brought cheers from their friends. But this was just Hermione in his arms, one last time, before he whisked her away and made her irrevocably his.

As the song came to an end, Draco nodded to the band leader, who announced that the bride and groom would be on their way shortly. Their friends surrounded them with one more toast as Draco pulled Hermione in close, gave her one last kiss, and then they touched a small portkey and disappeared.

Draco didn't stop kissing her as they spun away, and several long moment's later they landed in a villa in Seychelles. Hermione promised Draco they could fly private on the way back, but they both agreed that a portkey was the best way to arrive. The last few weeks leading up to the wedding had been utterly exhausting.

Draco hardly glanced around as he threw the portkey to the side and latched onto Hermione's neck. "Fuck I need you," he groaned as he tasted her. "All day, darling. All fucking day I've wanted to do this..."

She gave a contented little sigh, and he felt her melt into him. "My dress..." she murmured, as Draco spun her around and stared at what had to be a hundred tiny buttons that went all the way down her back.

"Goddammit..." he muttered, as he started working on them. He had half a mind to just rip them off, but he was sure Hermione would hex him for it. "Is there not a spell...?"

"Do it by hand, *mon rêve*," she said serenely. "It will be worth it, I promise you."

So Draco did. He worked as quickly as possible, unfastening button after button as he slowly peeled the dress off of her. As he worked, she was talking to him. "Muggles have a saying you know."

"Hmmm?" he asked, as he fiddled with the damned buttons.

"Yes, the bride is supposed to wear something old, something new, something borrowed, and something blue when she gets married. It brings good luck."

"And what was your something old, darling?" he asked.

"The Potter earrings. I've been wearing them for years, and they're heirlooms of course."

Draco nodded to himself. That was sensible.

"And your something new?"

"My veil," said Hermione simply. "We had it made for me, remember?"

Draco did remember. Hermione's veil was a work of art, crafted from the finest handworked lace money could buy. The design in the lace blended elements from the Malfoy and Potter crests, along with hydrangeas, of course. Draco learned that they were her favorite flower because they were her *mother's* favorite flower, and the Grangers had a whole hedge of them when Hermione was growing up. Every time she saw them she was reminded of her childhood home and the parents she had lost.

"That's an excellent choice, *mon ange*," he said. "What's your something borrowed then?"

“The Malfoy tiara,” she said simply.

He gave her a sharp look, though she was facing away from him so she didn’t see it. “That wasn’t borrowed. You’re a Malfoy now. Everything in my vault is yours, remember?”

“Yes, but I *wasn’t* a Malfoy yet when I was walking down the aisle. The tiara qualified.”

“Only on a technicality,” Draco muttered.

“So last thing is something blue...” she started, and Draco furrowed his brow.

“Your bouquet then?” he asked. The blue hydrangeas had been everywhere today, including in Hermione’s bouquet.

She shrugged. “As far as the public was aware, yes. But that’s not really what I had in mind.”

“Oh?” he said, as he finally finished the last button, and the dress fell away.

Draco’s mouth went dry when he saw what she was wearing underneath it. She turned to face him, the light blue, sheer corset pushing her breasts up perilously high, with just a scrap of blue lace below that barely counted as knickers. It was so delicate, lovely, and *bridal*.

“I thought this could be my something blue,” she said simply.

Draco stepped back so he could see her. “Stay just like that,” he muttered as he stared at her, memorizing her like this, while stripping down himself as quickly as possible. Thank Merlin his own dress robes were much easier to remove.

Naked now, Draco pulled her back to him and kissed her deeply, the excitement from earlier soon returning as he maneuvered her to the bed, never taking his mouth off of her. He pushed her back until she was splayed out for him, and he stood there, stroking his cock as he studied her.

Fuck he needed to buy her some more corsets. They did things for her tits that were nothing short of spectacular.

Then again, he also needed to see her naked. Now.

“Knickers off,” he said, and he watched as she shimmied out of them.

“Corset off too,” he said, and she slowly unfastened the row of hooks all the way down the front, before opening it as though it was a fucking present.

*His present.*

Goddammit, he needed to last. And he was so turned on by what his wife – *his wife* – was doing that he was afraid he would finish the minute he got inside of her. He closed his eyes for a moment to steady himself.

“Touch yourself,” he whispered, and she looked at him in surprise. He had never once asked her to do this before tonight. Ever since creating his rules about orgasms, Draco had *always* been the one to bring her off. But he wanted to savor this. He wanted to see it in real life, not just her head.

As he watched her eyes fluttered closed, and her hand crept toward her core while the other started to knead her breasts. She was using light touches and rolls and flicks, and Draco was absolutely transfixed.

“Harder,” he breathed, and she started to pick up the pace, and Draco watched as she started to shake, her breathing started to get shallow, and then finally... *finally*...

There. She broke with a moan, and now Draco needed every part of her.

Before her orgasm was complete, he was on top of her, slotting himself into her and beginning to move as he latched onto her neck and started to suck.

They had had sex dozens of times by now, and Draco always loved it. But this time was different. This time was special. This was the consummation of everything they had just done earlier that day.

Draco knew that Hermione had been a bit appalled by how old fashioned some aspects of magic were, but the binding spell cast on them at the ceremony through their handfasting wouldn’t become permanent until Draco spilled his seed inside of her. And fuck if he wasn’t eager to make that spell so permanent it could never be broken between them.

That was why he watched her give herself her own pleasure first. That was why he waited to touch her like this until it was time. Draco had been dreaming of this consummation for months – and he wanted it so much that he worried he would come before she did for the first time ever.

He was nearly there, and he leaned back to look at her face, desperately trying to hold back until she came one last time.

“Give me another, *mon ange*,” he whispered. “Just one more darling...”

He reached under them and found her clit, and that seemed to do it. Her brow furrowed, and her mouth parted, and she arched with a gasp, as Draco felt the telltale tremors of her release almost vibrating all around him.

Fuck. Fuck.

And then Draco was done. He was lost. He couldn’t hold it back anymore, and he had no interest in even trying. He wanted this so badly. He pumped, and started to come, and on and on it went – hotter, stickier, fuller than he had ever made her – and as they got to the end, Draco felt something warm settle inside of him. He stared at Hermione, whose eyes opened in wonder, and he could see that she felt it too.

“Are we...” she whispered.

“Bound together. Forever,” said Draco quietly. It was the most satisfying feeling he had ever experienced.

Hermione gave him a brilliant smile, and he couldn’t help it. He smiled back too before slowly removing himself and cleaning them up. He pulled her close, and to his surprise he felt that little burst of warmth again – that magic that assured him he was touching his *wife* – not that Draco would ever touch another woman like this as long as he lived. It was delicious though, the warmth. He could tell Hermione thought so too.

She sighed contentedly and moved into his arms. They lay still for a long while until she finally spoke.

“Draco... I have something for you. A wedding gift.”

Draco pulled back and looked at her with surprise and a little embarrassment. He hadn’t gotten her a specific gift for the wedding. Her new ring, obviously, was hers. He supposed the wedding itself was something he gave to her. And it was true she now commanded a fortune thanks to her marriage to him. But he hadn’t given her anything more than a heartfelt letter to commemorate the wedding itself.

“I didn’t...” he started, but she raised a finger to his lips and shushed him.

“You’ve worked so hard to give me everything I wanted. Everything I have *ever* wanted. And in a way, the gift I’m giving to you is also something you gave to me.”

Draco was utterly confused now, but he nodded slowly. “Alright... do you want to go get it then?”

“Oh I already have it,” she said, with a small smile.

Draco raised an eyebrow as he looked around them. “Where? You’re naked in bed *mon ange*.”

“Hmmm, that’s true,” she said. “But I was wondering... I know the last few months have been absolutely mad with the MAGIC Accord. And we’ve barely seen each other the last few weeks because of all the wedding planning.”

“True,” said Draco slowly. “I couldn’t wait to have you tonight. It’s been too long.”

It *had* been too long since they had done this. It really had. They saw each other every day, but they were both so exhausted – Hermione in particular – that they just collapsed into bed most nights. Draco was never more grateful for a vacation in his life. They would be here for three weeks, just relaxing and rediscovering each other.

“Yes,” she said. “It’s been awhile since we’ve had sex. And I was wondering... have you forgotten what my tits look like?”

Draco looked at her askance. “What kind of mad question is that?”

Draco truly had no idea what she was talking about now, but evidently she had moved on from the topic of wedding gifts.

“My tits,” she insisted. “They don’t look... a little different to you?”

Draco blinked and then sat back for a moment and stared at them. They were so lovely, so full, her nipples practically begging to be touched or kissed. He ran a finger over one, and it peaked perfectly. These were truly...

“The tits of a goddess...” he whispered, as his stomach suddenly swooped.

It couldn’t be. It just couldn’t be. Surely she wasn’t telling him...

His heart filled with hope, *desperate* hope, and he looked at her with huge eyes.

“*Mon ange*, are you...?”

“Expecting our little boy. In March,” she said.

The bottom dropped out of Draco’s stomach, and he inhaled as he stared down at her breasts and then down further at her stomach.

“You mean...”

“I’m six weeks. I... went off my potion a couple months ago. I hope that’s OK. You said I could have a baby whenever I wanted one, and I was afraid you’d hover if you knew. It can take awhile and...”

“It’s perfect,” he said quickly, cutting her off. “So perfect.”

She gave him a small, relieved smile. “Good. Well you know that night we celebrated the end of the legislative session and everything we had done for the MAGIC Accord so far?”

He did remember that night. It was just after his birthday, and they had taken one night off between the end of the session and the final push for wedding planning to go on a date at a fancy restaurant in muggle London. Then he had shagged Hermione within an inch of her life that night, first in the pool, and then again on the sofa in their bedroom.

Draco nodded, eyes still trained to her abdomen before flicking upwards again. He could hardly believe it. But her tits *were* bigger and more lush and...

Fuck. This was amazing.

“And everything is OK?” he asked suddenly. “You said it’s a boy, so you must have seen a healer and...”

She put another finger to his lips and nodded. “Yes, I was tracking things very closely this time, and I went to get checked out a week ago. Everything is normal. He’s *very* magically powerful. And they gave me some potions to keep the symptoms under control, though I declined the potion that reduces breast swelling for you.”

Draco just closed his eyes in relief that she and their son were OK, before opening them again to stare down at her.

“So this breast swelling...” he said.

“It’s just started. They’re probably going to get bigger on this trip.”

Draco bit his bottom lip as he imagined it.

*This will be a fantastic honeymoon.*

“Hermione, our son.... He’s the best thing.... Truly, darling, this is the very best thing you could ever give me. I just...”

She smiled softly at the look on his face. He was overwhelmed by how much he loved her, how much he loved *this*.

He leaned down and kissed her again before pulling back. “You said March, but tell me your actual due date. I want to track everything.”

To his surprise, she bit her lip as though trying to hold back a smile. “March 1,” she said, and then she snorted with suppressed laughter.

Draco furrowed his brow. “What’s so funny about March 1?”

“It’s Ron’s birthday,” she said simply.

Draco’s jaw dropped in horror, and she started to laugh at him. Draco narrowed his eyes and turned to give her stomach a very serious look.

“Listen *mon petit*,” he said softly, tracing the skin just below her navel. Hermione’s laughter died in her throat as he began to speak. “You can be born at the end of February or any day in March that you want, *except* for March 1.”

“Draco...” she started, but Draco ignored her.

“Don’t listen to your mum. You won’t enjoy sharing your birthday with Weasley when you get older. His entire family will bring it up every time they see you. So listen to your father on this one and make sure you time things properly, *mon petit*. ”

“*Mon petit*, ” she whispered.

“He is. He’s my little one,” said Draco simply, raising his eyes to look at her. She was smiling softly.

“I love you, *mon rêve*, ” she whispered.

“I love you more than the world, *mon ange*, ” replied Draco. “And I love you too, *mon petit*, ” he said to her stomach again, before giving it a reverent kiss.

He sat back and stared at his witch, his *wife*, the mother of his child.

This was truly the best day of Draco's life.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!