

# smoke signals

**By:** blue\_keyboard

Voldemort gives Draco Malfoy a task, but it isn't killing Dumbledore. In the summer before sixth year, a reluctant Draco shows up in Hermione Granger's muggle suburb to warn her that he has been sent to kill her parents. Everything changes.

The story of how two sworn enemies learn of something far more powerful than hatred: devotion.

Status: ongoing

Published: 2023-09-22

Updated: 2025-09-26

Words: 327994

Chapters: 52

Original source: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/45236773>

Exported with the assistance of [FicHub.net](https://FicHub.net)

# smoke signals

[Introduction](#)

[The Heat Wave](#)

[An Unwelcome Visitor](#)

[The Fire](#)

[In the Broom Shed](#)

[Diagon Alley](#)

[The Hogwarts Express](#)

[Liquid Luck](#)

[The Unbreakable Vow](#)

[Detention](#)

[Remedial Instruction](#)

[A Collective Madness](#)

[The Woes of Pansy Parkinson](#)

[Merry and Bright](#)

[The Ritual](#)

[Seating Arrangements](#)

[The Prefect's Bath](#)

[The Prince's Design](#)

[Vulnera Sanentur](#)

[Pain Relief](#)

[The Room of Requirement](#)

[Collateral Damage](#)

[The Many Misfortunes of Theodore Nott](#)

[The Puller of Strings](#)

[The Elegy of Aragog](#)

[At the Edge of the Forest](#)

[Breached Defenses](#)

[In Cold Blood](#)  
[Confrontations](#)  
[The Last Summer](#)  
[That Which Cannot Be Undone](#)  
[A Missed Migration](#)  
[Unforgivable](#)  
[The Flight of Narcissa Malfoy](#)  
[The Black Sheep](#)  
[Days of Disquiet](#)  
[The Mirror of Erised](#)  
[If We Make It Through December](#)  
[A Prison of the Soul](#)  
[The Tale of the Three Sisters](#)  
[The Girl in the Greenhouse](#)  
[The Heir and the Spare](#)  
[Shell Cottage](#)  
[Enter Stranger, But Take Heed](#)  
[Into the Breach](#)  
[The General and His Labyrinth](#)  
[The Potion Master's Secret](#)  
[No Battle Ever Won](#)  
[Unbowed](#)  
[Back Through the Veil](#)  
[A Thing With Feathers](#)  
[The Season of Wanting](#)  
[Of Wands and Wanderings](#)

# The Heat Wave

## Chapter 1: The Heat Wave

---

In the summer of 1997, Hermione is paid a visit.

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

---

It was dead summer in Hampstead Garden and Hermione had never wished more ardently for the ability to do magic outside of school.

August had brought a thick heat wave that swallowed Greater London, leaving its citizens laid out in front of fans in as little clothing as possible. She was getting to the point where breaking the Statute of Secrecy seemed reasonable, so long as it allowed her to perform a cooling charm. Honestly, she would turn seventeen in almost a month. Couldn't the Ministry forgive her for casting a little *glacius* ?

She rested prone at the window, turning her face to the box fan propped on the sill, marveling at how the heat seemed to magnify in the face of boredom.

More and more Hermione found she had few activities and fewer acquaintances to occupy herself with in the Muggle world. The longer she spent at Hogwarts, the stranger and more distant she'd felt towards the place and people with whom she had spent her first eleven years. It was like the months away at school were unraveling her stitches and leaving tangled threads behind. As isolated as she found that the Wizarding World could be, coming home could be just as lonely; her interactions hinged on mistruths and carefully skirted details. She could only reveal a shadow of herself and it gave her the same prickly feeling as her first weeks at Hogwarts, where every missed reference was met with derision. The same restless sense of

disbelonging that had driven her to work harder and smarter than everyone else. She wished that she could say she outgrew her childhood desire for acceptance, but in her most honest moments, she knew that desire had merely shifted forms.

She rested prone at the window of her childhood bedroom, turning her overheated neck towards the box fan propped on the sill, when an uncomfortable thought had woven itself into her mind. Perhaps being a muggleborn witch meant that she'd never belong in one place or the other. She'd always had one foot on either side of a divide that was growing every year, threatening a spectacular fall onto the rocks below. There was a sense of finality to this summer, to the crack that had become a chasm.

Such melancholy considerations had her scrambling for distraction, but she quickly exhausted interesting readings and potential research for the coming year within her first month home. On weekdays, her parents drove to their dental practice in the mornings, leaving their daughter to entertain herself for the day. Hermione had accompanied them a few times, assisting with paperwork and reorganizing the filing system in a manner that left their regular receptionist furious. But there was only so much to do at the practice, and she couldn't shake the feeling she was getting in their way.

Her mother recommended she see some old friends, but who? She'd lost touch with most of the non-magical world since turning eleven, and even prior to that, she had never exactly been a social butterfly. She would occasionally wave at the neighbor Melissa, a muggle girl her own age with whom she went to primary school. Occasionally they would exchange greetings over the garden gate. How school was going — Melissa was lamenting her recent A levels, Hermione lied through her teeth, lest she reveal what happened to her at the end of last school term in the Department of Mysteries— just pleasantries, really. She was a sweet girl, always inviting Hermione to picnics or friend's parties if they bumped into each other while

Melissa was on her way out. Hermione, sensing that they were invitations born from politeness, always declined.

But this time, Hermione had already re-alphabetized her school books, bathed a violently-opposed Crookshanks, and painted her nails an awful shade of mauve from a polish she found under her mother's sink. She went to check the mail for the second time when a rather tan Melissa called over and asked if she wanted to come for a dip at the local swimming pond, and she was so desperate for relief— from heat, from boredom, from her disgruntled cat— that she agreed.

"Go on then, Hermione," Melissa said, surprised by her response, as she nodded towards the Grangers' house. "I'll wait." She was wearing a sleeveless crocheted dress that was sheer enough to reveal the bright pink of her bikini. There was a dab of unblended sun cream on her nose and her fringe was damp with sweat.

"It'll only be a minute," Hermione promised, then hesitated. "My bathing costume is from when I was thirteen. I'll look like a split sausage."

"It'll scandalize the old codgers a bit," Melissa called through her grin. "Good for them to get their heart rates up."

Hermione took the stairs two at a time, not wanting to keep Melissa further. *This isn't a pity invitation*, she told herself sternly. *This is what normal girls do in the summer*. Right, normalcy, a mask Hermione had never worn with any authority.

She squeezed into her old Speedo, a faded blue one piece that was once rather practical, if not conservative for a young girl, but now bordering on inappropriate, but it wasn't like Rita Skeeter would be afoot at the Hampstead Garden community pond, ready for a closeup of Hermione's arse. She threw on one of her father's T-shirts, filled one a shopping bag with some sun cream and a bag of crisps, snagged *Encountering Counterjinxes* and— just in case, you

know, *constant vigilance*— her wand off her nightstand, and set off to accompany her neighbor.

Mercifully, Melissa talked the whole walk to the pond, punctuating her sentences with the smack of her flip-flops against the pavement.

“— so, after I caught him out for going with Krista, I resolved myself to be free of him once and for all.”

“That seems sensible,” Hermione said, uncertainly. She didn’t exactly have these conversations with Harry and Ron, and it was the kind of thing Lavender and Parvati would draw the four poster curtains to discuss.

“If only I was a sensible girl,” Melissa said, wry.

“You took him back?”

“Not yet.” Melissa said. “So if we see him having a swim, remind me it doesn’t matter how fit he looks with his shirt off.”

She held the pond gate for Hermione, and herded her towards a patch of empty grass. The pond was occupied with what felt like half of the London suburb; splashing children, boys tossing a ball, girls rolling up their already small bathing suits in order to improve their tan.

“He’s a *lad’s lad* , Hermione.” Melissa said darkly as she laid out her towel. “That’s what we’re dealing with here. Are they like this at your boarding school?”

Hermione contemplated this with a smirk, drawing up memories of Ron shouting that she was fraternizing with the enemy after a dance with Viktor Krum. “I imagine they’re the same everywhere.”

She spread out her towel on the already flattened grass next to Melissa, who began to page through a glossy magazine advertising hair techniques and horoscope readings. She contemplated opening

her book, but if Melissa saw the title, what would her explanation be? She was studying Wicca? Amateur magician? Christ.

“Shall we swim?” she suggested instead.

“Give us a minute,” Melissa responded, smoothing some sort of tanning oil on her stomach. “I like to wait until the heat is unbearable and I’m nice and roasted.”

Hermione tried not to look longingly at the water, and clearly failed, given her companion’s laughter.

“You’re dying aren’t you. Go on then,” Melissa waved her forward.

Hermione stripped bare of her clothing— too drenched from the perspiration of their walk over to feel self conscious about it— and waded into the pond.

Finally, *relief*.

It took a few dunks for her to feel the heat on her skin subside. She tipped her head back and allowed the water to soak her curls, sighing in pleasure at the cooler temperature against her scalp. Even though the pond was crowded— teenagers chatting, some elderly women flapping paper fans, children splashing and giggling— it felt like the first time that summer Hermione had been at peace. She hadn’t been sleeping well, since the night at the Department of Mysteries.

Dolohov’s curse had left a jagged purple scar down her chest and if she tilted her chin she could see where it peeked out from the edge of her Speedo. It wasn’t a question of vanity; she wasn’t as concerned about the aesthetic effect as she was with the possibility of residual magic. The stuttering unease that she hadn’t been able to shake, a sharpness that seemed to originate somewhere behind her ribs.



She'd read everything she could find on cursed scars, but since Doholov's spell had been wordless, the point of origin was based on light and wand movement alone, making it exceedingly difficult to pinpoint. If she had a remnant of dark magic stuck in her like a piece of shrapnel, what would it do? She only knew of one other person with a cursed scar, and if last year was any indication, Harry seemed to have a terrible time with it.

A soft splash behind her interrupted her thoughts. She tugged up the neckline of her swimsuit.

"That's lovely," Melissa groaned, swimming circles around Hermione. "I'm going to spend the rest of this bloody heatwave underwater. They can drag me out when courses start."

Hermione meant to inquire which classes Melissa would be taking, what she was interested in studying and what her plans for university were. But her voice caught in her throat, because she could have sworn she saw a flash of platinum blonde in her periphery vision.

There was only one person she'd ever met with hair that light, a complete absence of color, but there was no reality in which her suspicions could be true. That hair didn't belong here, in this world, *her* world. Its place was firmly enmeshed with castle hallways and cauldron steam.

She blinked and shook her head, wondering if she'd finally cracked.

"Oi," Melissa asked. "What's got your knickers in a twist."

Hermione opened her mouth and closed it again.

"Hermione?"

"Do you see that boy," Hermione asked, softly. "No, don't turn. Just look over towards the gate where all those shrubs are. *Subtly.* "

“Well, he’s not my type,” Melissa smirked. “I’m not one for blondes. Dressed rather oddly, isn’t he? It’s a bit hot for all that.”

“You see him?”

“Hermione, are you alright? Do you know him?”

Hermione was not alright, not at all. Her heart tightened like a fist, lungs stuttering from a cold that had nothing to do with the temperature. She was not alright, because Draco Malfoy was standing in the muggle suburb of Hampstead Garden, wearing a cloak and staring at her with an awful expression she had never seen on his face. A terror so stark it made him almost unrecognizable, but no, it was assuredly him; same narrow face and prominent cheekbones.

The scar on her chest began to throb, a dull, violent pain that echoed into her extremities.

“Yes,” she told Melissa grimly, already pulling herself from the water. Whatever separation of selves she’d managed crumbled; she was just Hermione, childlike and whole in her dread. “I know him.”

---

---

This story was born after reading a passage of Manacled by SenLinYu: "Did you know I was even assigned to find your parents? You must have hidden them yourself because there wasn't even a trace to be found."

It was a quick line (if you haven't read Manacled, you should), but one that stuck with me for months. Imagine if it had been tasked to Draco, to kill Hermione's parents? Would he have been able to? The answer came quickly and resolutely: no, probably not. This fic is my attempt at unravelling the complexities between the two sides of the war, those who were forgotten in the canon (what ever happened to the other Muggleborns' families?), and how two very different people fall in love in the most drastic and dangerous of conditions.

(Note: this fic is an original work that does not take place in the Manacled universe or use its material)

---

# An Unwelcome Visitor

## Chapter 2: A Visitor, Unwelcome

---

Draco's visit is explained.

---

---

“What are *you* doing here?”

Hermione was still dripping wet. She had made excuses so ridiculous and hasty that her neighbor would probably never invite her anywhere again. She'd dragged a silent, seemingly paralyzed Malfoy around the corner of the car park and shoved him behind a station wagon, wand brandished at his throat. Malfoy had made no move towards his, but the expression he wore made her acutely aware of potential dangers.

He looked different up close. His once perfectly combed blond hair hung, lank, into his eyes, which were shadowed and sunken, as if he'd lost weight and quickly. Malfoy had always been slight, but the boy in front of her was painfully thin, accentuating the razor sharp quality of his features. She could cut herself on his clenched jaw.

“How do you even know where I live?” Hermione shouted, and then, aware of the scene they were causing, lowered her voice. “Why are you here? How did you find me? And for god's sake, what are you wearing?”

“I didn't have any muggle clothes,” Malfoy finally breathed. “I didn't plan to come here.” Even his voice sounded different than she remembered. It wasn't the jeering inflection she remembered from her childhood. It was deeper, tinged with a rasp, and a great deal more solemn.

“You couldn’t have left off the traveling cloak?” Hermione snorted. Trust a pureblood to be insulated enough to believe the Victorian era was still the height of Muggle fashion.

“Granger.”

“Really, everyone must think you’ve escaped from some sort of theater troupe—”

“ *Granger* .” The way he said her name gave her pause. Like a plea. She stepped back from him, attempting to meet his gaze. He couldn’t look at her directly.

“Why are you here, Malfoy?” she asked, this time sounding much more afraid. This was no social call. There were only a few reasons Draco Malfoy would show up in muggle London, would seek her out at her home. She cycled through them in her head, each one more distressing than the previous possibility.

“We haven’t much time,” he whispered feverishly, still avoiding her gaze. “He wanted me to do it, but I can’t.”

“Who are you talking about?” Hermione asked, although she already knew. He finally looked up, eyes filled with anguish.

“I’ve tried. They made me try. I can’t do it.”

“Can’t do what?”

“He sent me to kill your parents, Granger,” Malfoy said and Hermione’s world fell apart.

On instinct, she shoved Malfoy hard and began to run in the direction of her childhood home. *Don’t curse him* , she reminded herself. She would have one opportunity to do magic before the Ministry was alerted, and she would have to use it strategically. She’d be of no use to her family if she was being held at the Ministry questioned for illegal spellwork. Her parents wouldn’t be home until late afternoon,

although the exact time could vary. She'd have an hour to prepare: but what?

*Dumbledore* , she thought. *She had to contact Dumbledore* . He would send the Order, surely. They could guard the Grangers; they'd be a match for any Death Eaters that would be sent.

*But what about Harry's parents?* A new voice in her head offered as she ran. *What protection did Dumbledore offer them, again?*

She rounded the corner, only to see Malfoy at the end of her driveway, wand peeking out from his sleeve. He must have apparated, despite the Trace. He knew where she lived, her exact address. He couldn't have that information, not if he was in contact with...with...

She panted, drenched in sweat from her sprint home. One of her sandals had torn, and the side of her heel was bleeding. She took out her wand. *She'd stun Malfoy quickly and then send a patronus*, she thought. *To Moody? Maybe Tonks? She has a muggleborn father, she'd help...*

"Granger," Malfoy called. "I don't have much time. I shouldn't have...I wasn't supposed to warn you. If he finds out, he'll kill me." He ran his fingers through his hair roughly, pulling the skin at the base of his skull. "They're sending more— Rodolphus and Rabastan, they were supposed to be here, but I shook them off—"

"You said you can't," Hermione remembered. "Not that you won't, but that you can't."

"The Killing Curse," Malfoy muttered, almost ashamed, although Hermione would wager for the wrong reasons. "I can't manage it."

"There are plenty of ways to kill a person," Hermione said. "You could torture them to death, cast a *diffindo* to the throat, you could—"

“I get it,” Malfoy cut her off, irritated. “ It’s not that...of course I could, if I wanted to, but...” he trailed off miserably.

Hermione couldn’t help but numbly register the ridiculous sight they must make. Her in her too small bathing suit, hair drenched in sweat and pond water; him, wrapped in a thick black cloak, smack in the middle of the hottest stretch of summer. She must look rather scandalous to him, she thought mirthlessly. Surely Malfoy had never seen a half-nude muggle.

“...I know you,” Malfoy finally said. “I’ve never liked you. In fact, I’ve usually found you repugnant—”

“Lovely, thanks.”

“—but for some inane reason all I could think of was that we’ve had potions together for five years. Since we were children.”

“Twice on Fridays.”

“Yeah,” he continued as if he hadn’t really heard her. And I’m not supposed to be thinking of that detention in first year or the bloody Potions benches. I’m supposed to be able to put that all aside, tell myself you’re not real, you know, like killing spiders—” He grew frustrated, screwing his eyes shut. “But I can’t just...”

“Murder my family? Like killing *spiders* ?”

Malfoy glared.

“It’s not a great metaphor, okay? You’re supposed to be clever,” he spat. “Aren’t you? You can...you can hide, can’t you? I’ll say I’ve killed you, I’ll say—”

“You want me to fake my death?” Hermione almost laughed. “How exactly should I manage that? Why should I trust you at all? You’ve done nothing but torment me for nearly six years—”

"I don't know!" Malfoy roared, sending Hermione's pulse rocketing. He looked spooked, as if he'd shocked himself with the volume of his voice. "Figure it out!"

He began twisting at his knuckles absently, releasing them back into their sockets with a violent pop.

"He'll kill me," he muttered feverishly. "Kill my family, if I fail. And it won't be fast, there won't be one fell swoop. I've seen him do it. He likes to take his time. It'll take hours, by the time he's bored of it."

Malfoy looked up at her, eyes reddened and beginning to fill.

"He'll kill me last," he said. "So he can make me watch. He gives the leftovers to the snake."

Hermione looked horrified. If she wasn't in such dire circumstances, she'd dwell more on Malfoy's admission. He'd seen Voldemort? He'd seen him murder someone? He was sixteen, he surely couldn't be accepted into Voldemort's inner circle as a wet-behind-the-ears school boy. And to be given a task like this? Surely Voldemort would have sent someone more capable, a trusted lieutenant like Bellatrix Lestrange, not sniveling, spoiled Draco Malfoy. He couldn't expect him to succeed.

"Figured it out, have you Granger?"

"Voldemort doesn't think you can do it," she said, and he clicked his tongue in response. "He's expecting you not to."

"He can't kill me outright because I'm the heir of Houses Black and Malfoy; he'd be wiping out two Wizarding dynasties. He needs me to give him a reason, to use me as punishment for the failures of my father," Malfoy said mockingly. "Failures I believe you're familiar with." He laughed, a strangled sound, void of any mirth. "Thanks for that."

Hermione narrowed her eyes.



“What exactly would you like me to say? I feel terribly that your father ended up in Azkaban while trying to slaughter me and my friends? Sorry it turned out that way?”

“I don’t need your pity,” Malfoy spat.

“I’m not offering it.”

“Hide, Granger.” Malfoy straightened his robes, glancing around for bystanders in preparation to apparate. “Your whole lot needs to disappear.”

In that moment, under the lingering touches of late summer sun, she finally realized what he looked like. Those World War II videos of shell shocked soldiers with blown off limbs, plainly recounting scenes of inhumanity for a news camera. He looked like one of them; devoid of hope, resigned to violence. He warned her knowing he would be walking to his death. He didn’t even try.

“Malfoy,” she called. “Wait.” He stilled, obedient despite himself and looked at her. His mouth was twisted like a bit of twine.

“Want to send me off to war with a kiss?” He asked mockingly, as if he’d read her thoughts.

“What exactly,” Hermione began. “Did Voldemort instruct you to do?”

“Need me to lay it out for you? Want me to walk you through how I was supposed to take the Lestrage brothers to murder your mother and father, you too if I could manage it? Call the Death Eaters and set the mark over your home, just so everyone would know who killed Potter’s famous Mudblood?”

“Two bodies,” she stated, mind spinning off-kilter. *Think, Hermione* . “And you’re marked? You can call them, show them proof?”

He began to raise his sleeve, and Hermione prepared herself to see the horribly familiar skull and snake. It was freshly burned into his

forearm like a cattle brand, edges raised and angry.

“You can’t outrun him, Granger,” Malfoy said, staring at the mark on his arm. “He’s stronger than you could ever believe. He’ll break your mind into pieces like it’s fine china, take out the worst of you and make you relieve it. And if he doesn’t find anything sufficient, he’ll make some new memories to trap you in.”

“I’m not going to outrun him,” Hermione said grimly. “I’m going to give him exactly what he wants...”

She looked up at her childhood bully, whose eyes were still bright with fear, who couldn’t cast the killing curse, who had resigned himself to die. They’d just been children a moment ago, trading jabs and rude gestures, competing for top marks. Now who were they? Machinations of war; a soldier and a dead girl. She made a decision.

“...And you’re going to help me.”

---

# The Fire

## Chapter 3: The Fire

---

Hermione and Draco cover their tracks.

---

---

Thank you all for your support so far! It's been so lovely reading your comments and I'd love to hear your thoughts on this chapter!

---

In the moments that followed, Hermione felt suspended above her body, disassociated from its movements. She hovered somewhere above herself, as a girl with half-dried curls who looked an awful lot like her and a pale boy with aristocratic features shot harried words at each other like steel tipped arrows.

Malfoy first offered to perform an *imperius* charm on her parents, to will them away while under his control. Hermione had given him a look so poisonous, he'd wilted under it.

"I don't trust you to hold the door for a muggle, much less cast an Unforgivable. Been practicing those, have you?"

"What would you like to do then, politely inform them there's a dark wizard set on spilling their dirty blood?"

"If there's going to be magic used on my parents, I'll be the one to hold the wand."

Malfoy snorted inelegantly.

"Yes and send a signal flare to the ministry with your underage magic. Remind me: why do they call you the brains of the operation, Granger?"

“They don’t call me the—” Hermione stopped, narrowing her eyes. “Hang on, how have you been able to use magic? You’re still sixteen.”

After some more violent pressing on her end, Malfoy reluctantly explained by pulling a thin gold chain from around his neck. An amulet cast in oxidized bronze, inscribed with runes. Some that Hermione recognized: *auja* for containment, *lapu* for privacy, *laukar* for obscurity. Others that she didn’t: runes that looked ancient and jagged, like they’d come from a time before language. It was a Malfoy family heirloom, he said, that hid the magical signature left by the caster, allowing him to use his wand without a Ministry official banging down her door.

“Any caster?”

“Supposedly, yes.”

“Regardless of blood status?”

Malfoy had narrowed his eyes.

“It’s not cursed, if that’s what you’re asking. My ancestors from that far back would never even dream of it around the neck of a....of someone like you.”

In order to test her theory, she reached out to where it hung around his neck, breath suspended, and brought her hand to the juncture of Malfoy’s throat. He made a little noise of disgust.

“Hang on then, Granger,” he said, cheeks blooming poppy-red, “Don’t maul me.” She ignored him, gingerly pressing a fingertip to the amulet. Nothing happened: no boils, or blood, or resistance to her touch. The bronze hummed under her fingertip, a little pulse.

Hermione knew what she had to do.

As Malfoy stood uncomfortably in the foyer, Hermione went through preparations as if suspended by invisible strings pulled by a puppet master: packing her parents' essential belongings, their birth certificates and passports. Her parents would never leave her behind, and so, she had to remove their impetus to protect her. Her plan bloomed within her mind seemingly effortlessly, as if her subconscious had been suspecting the terrible possibility of such danger. She would obliviate her mother and father, removing herself from their memories. Send them as far from London as she possibly could. Somewhere warm, her mother would appreciate the sunshine. Australia, maybe. As a young man, her father had loved to surf.

She learned the theory surrounding memory charms when she was thirteen, after Gilderoy Lockhart's attempt to wipe her friends' recollections in the Chamber of Secrets. She was intrigued by how someone, especially an inept fraud like Lockhart, could specialize in a subsection of cognitive charms. She read extensively on how memory charms could vary in strength, depending on the cleanliness of the cuts in the subject's conscious and subconscious recollection. She figured it was similar to how muggle surgeons sought to leave clean margins with their scalpels. The trick lay in the caster's ability to compartmentalize; Lockhart must have had innate sense to separate conflicting emotions and experiences in his subjects, likely born from his aptitude for avoiding the discomfort of his own contradictions.

She'd never performed the charm before, but she'd always approached magic with logic. She could separate the parts of herself that ached and heaved at the thought of an impossible loss with the part of herself that knew this pain was necessarily for preservation. She could envision herself holding the scalpel. She willed her hands not to shake.

When she heard her parents' car pull into the driveway, she stood in the entryway, side by side with Malfoy. She could hear their voices, her mother's tinkling laughter, and she dug her nails into Malfoy's wrist. She didn't even realize she'd done it until he yelped.

“Don’t touch—” he started to snarl, but trailed off at the sight of her face. She could feel wetness on her cheeks, but couldn’t pinpoint when she had started crying.

“Why them?”

Malfoy swallowed, looking deeply uncomfortable.

“I don’t know. Probably because you’re known as Potter’s friend. Because you were there last June. Your parents are the first, but they won’t be the last. It’s just starting, Granger. You have to know that.”

“I can’t do this,” she whispered. She wished, not for the first time that day, she was with anyone besides Draco Malfoy.

He looked down at her, gray eyes darkened with desperation. There was no pity in his expression, only a terrible resignation. She wondered about the things he’d been forced to do since taking the mark.

“You have to.”

He took the chain from under his collar and draped it around her neck. It was still warm from where it had rested on his skin, buzzing with the sort of energy old wizarding artifacts seemed to emit. It felt unsettlingly like Malfoy, like the sensation that accompanied his flourish-forward charm work or the way his potions were always slightly more opaque than hers. Like his personal brand of magic.

“If you plan to apparate off with this,” he warned, hand hovering over the clasp. “I’d reconsider. It’s quite easy for a Malfoy to locate an heirloom that’s been...misplaced. The consequences are often quite bloody.”

“I don’t want your stupid—”

Hermione's father stepped through the front door, footsteps stuttering upon sighting the tall blonde standing next to his daughter.

"Hermione?"

"I'm so sorry, Dad."

Her father frowned at her apology, forehead creasing in confusion.

"Hermione, who is this?"

"Do it, Granger." Malfoy's voice was thick with an emotion she couldn't place. "Make it quick."

She wanted to tell her father how much she loved him. Even as she removed herself from his mind, she'd be careful to preserve every moment they shared, every push on the swings, every lump of homemade pizza dough, every refrigerator magnet. She wanted to curl up under his arm, breathe in his cinnamon toothpaste and the scent of cedar that clung to his sweaters. She wanted him to comb the conditioner through her tangled curls, the ones she inherited from him. She wanted to listen to him tell a terrible joke and laugh until he choked.

Instead, she raised her wand.

---

To the chagrin of her roommates at Hogwarts, Hermione had never been tidy. It was a common occurrence, to see her space adorned with piles of clothing in various states of use (clean, dirty, somewhere in between), stacks of dog-eared books, partially filled notebooks and rolls of parchment, records and cassettes in mismatched cases, half-used hair products and lotions. She wasn't dirty; there was never any strange smelling trash or candy wrappers askew, like in the boys' dormitory. She just wasn't...particularly organized. Often, her mind moved so quickly she'd become distracted by a new train of thought, put down one of her possessions and promptly forget its existence until she tripped over it in the dark. This was not a fatal

flaw by any means. It was; however, something no one seemed to expect from her.

“Merlin, Granger,” Malfoy said from her doorway as she haphazardly flung a drawer full of woolen sweaters into her bag. She’d mastered an extension charm in preparation for her O.W.L.s, and it hadn’t been that big of a leap to learn how to make the spell undetectable. “Is this how all Muggles live?”

Malfoy had been badly shaken when she encountered him, but seemed to be regaining a bit of his signature sense of superiority ever since Hermione had obliviated her parents. Her skin crawled as he examined the parlor with a cold disinterest, taking in the television, the mahogany furniture, the Japanese art that her father collected. She abhorred the thought of allowing him into her home, to judge her parents’ decor choices and condemn their muggle technologies. He looked at her room as if it was a particularly exotic installation at the zoo.

“Oh yes,” she spit, while stacking the majority of the contents of her library within the bag’s depths. “Without magic everyone lives in complete squalor. How superior you must feel, what with your *slaves* and all.”

She paused her packing to glare in his direction.

“You know, this would go a lot faster if you lent me your bloody necklace again. Or, god forbid, helped me.”

He looked at her as if she’d grown an erumpant horn. He was so out of place in her childhood bedroom, with her Beatrix Potter wallpaper and sunflower pillowcases. The tension between the two sights would have been funny, in any other context.

“Help you...pack your things?” He said *things* in the manner one used to refer to excrement.

“With your wand, Malfoy.”



He gave her a look of pure loathing before shakily levitating the remainder of her belongings into her bag. As much as she despised needing his assistance, she knew they had to move quickly. She'd spent too much time on the spell, meticulous as she strained her parents' memories through a sieve. She'd sent them off with no memory of a daughter, amenable to leaving their house in the hands of a notably young blonde realtor with a pinched countenance. By Malfoy's assertion, someone would come looking if he wasn't back before sunset, and the sky had already taken on a pink tinge, giving the clouds a pastel effect that Hermione normally would have stopped to take in.

Bag over her shoulder, she led Malfoy outside her house. She did not look back.

"Voldemort will go through your memories," she told him. He winced at the name.

"He won't find anything. My aunt taught me how to keep him out." He said this with the sort of ghostly recollection with which one would explain a particularly haunting nightmare. "Granted, I don't think this is exactly what she wanted me to use Occlumency for."

"You're just going to shut him out of your head? You don't think he'll find that odd?"

"What would you like me to do about that Granger? Give you a *crucio* or two so the Dark Lord can corroborate my murder spree?"

Hermione raised an eyebrow, contemplating. The look on Malfoy's face quickly grew horrified.

"What if you give him what he's looking for? What's that saying? The best lies are grown from the seeds of truth?"

"Are you completely barmy? Come on now Granger, you can't actually want me to..." He swiped his robe's sleeve across his face, eager to put a boundary between their gaze. "I can't actually..."

“Malfoy” Hermione said, in the most even voice she could manage. “I know you are no Gryffindor. But it’s your turn to be brave now.”

His breathing stuttered and he pinched the bridge of his nose.

“You’re mad,” he said. “Absolutely mad if you want me to...to hurt you.”

“I’m not scared of being hurt.”

“Spoken like someone who has never felt the Cruciatus before. ”

“You need to offer him up some memories. You, raising your wand at me. A scream. My parents’ eyes rolled into their heads,” Hermione replied, filing away his grim admission of the sensation of the Cruciatus Curse to examine at a later moment.

If you’d told her a month ago that she’d be asking Malfoy to use an unforgivable curse on her, she’d have laughed until she wept. “You need a memory of at least trying. One of me, getting away. I know how occlumency works; Snape gave Harry lessons all last year. You can offer him those, when he looks in your mind. Because he will look, you know he will.”

He raised his wand, unsteadily. In the last rays of daylight, his blonde hair glinted, closer to gold than its usual platinum. He cast his eyes upwards, as if waiting for the sky to open up and swallow him.

“Go on,” Hermione said gently. She almost reached out to lay a hand on his wand arm, but thought better of it. “I’m not afraid.”

“Then you’re a fool,” Malfoy said quietly and he raised his wand and whispered the curse in a voice like cracked glass. “ *Crucio.* ”

Hermione expected to scream, expected pain. But all that came from Malfoy’s wand was a meager zap, akin to sticking her finger in an electrical socket. The sensation ricocheted in her chest, stinging her

scar. She raised her hand to collarbone and pressed hard, until it dissipated. Malfoy looked like he was about to be sick.

“Are you...did it...?”

“You weren’t kidding,” she breathed. “You really can’t do it.”

“Oh, piss off, Granger,” he spat, mouth twisted in an expression of derision. But he blinked rapidly, eyes full of relief.

“You’re going to want proof you killed them,” she told him. He blinked, her demand wiping the sneer from his mouth.

“You want me to try and cast a killing curse too, you lunatic?”

“No,” Hermione said. She gave a long look at the house where she was raised, but felt oddly numb. She’d killed off any ideas of home when she stole her parents’ memory. It was just a house, she reminded herself. It was just walls and wood. “I want you to burn my house down.”

---

The flames had just begun to roar when Hermione’s next door neighbors started to scream. She figured the sounds would add a believable effect to Malfoy’s memory of the arson. They crouched across the street in some of the neighbors bushes, ensuring the structure burned down.

“What about when no one finds the bodies?” Malfoy asked. He’d been twisting his amulet absently, fingers quivering. She absently realized that he had been shaking since she’d seen him across the pond. It felt like a lifetime ago. She wondered what Melissa would think when she saw the wreckage.

“I doubt they’ll search through the rubble,” Hermione said, tongue laced with something bitter. “They’re only Muggles.”

She looked at him and he stared back. The afternoon had been a nightmare; distorted and surreal. She hoped that Monica and Wendell Wilkins were getting out of a cab at Heathrow, full of excitement for white sand beaches and frothy espresso. She hoped that they'd never feel it, the emptiness that now filled her, hoped they'd never puzzle over where the sensation came from. She hoped they'd never realize that something had been lost.

"Rabastan and Rodolphus will be here any minute," Malfoy said, startling her out of her reverie. "It's time." He raised his sleeve, the ugly ink of the Dark Mark cutting against the pale of his delicate wrist. If she hadn't already known, Hermione would have never guessed that he was a quidditch player. He could play piano, with hands like that.

"Wait," she said, and wrapped her hand around his forearm, palm flush against the wound. He hissed in pain, attempting to jerk his arm away, but she held fast.

"What are you playing at?"

"I didn't mean to hurt you." She loosened her grip. "I just had to say —"

"Don't you dare thank me, Granger." Malfoy's face burned with something akin to loathing, although for once, it didn't seem directed her way. "Don't you dare thank me for not murdering your family."

"You didn't have to come here," she insisted. "You could have let someone else do it. The Lestranges, hell, could have asked Dolohov or your mad aunt for help."

"V-Voldemort would have killed me. This" — he gestured between them— "Is purely out of self preservation."

"Maybe," Hermione said, thoughtfully. "But your first instinct was to warn me. To help me hide my parents, who I'm sure you see as barely above livestock—"

“I don’t...I mean, I do, but it’s not that...”

“Simple? Isn’t it? ”

She released his arm. He pulled away weakly, cradling it against his chest.

“The next time he tells you to hurt someone,” Hermione said with a steadiness she pulled from the most logical part of her mind, the part she kept fenced off from panic. “To kill innocent people—who don’t even understand what they’ve done wrong, who don’t even believe in your existence, much less threaten it— I want you to remember that it is. Simple, I mean.”

Hermione drew her wand, but did not drop his gaze. He looked at her as if she was reciting a prayer he’d long forgotten the words to.

“You should know by now that I’m no martyr. Don’t put that on me.”

“I’m sure you are many things, Malfoy. But today, you weren’t a coward.”

“Granger, I —”

Hermione thought of handknit sweaters and the scent of mutton stew and the silvery marks left in the sky by lingering fireworks. She pictured the only other place she’d ever considered a home. *The Burrow* , she thought, and turned on the spot. The last thing she saw was Draco Malfoy, pressing his fingers to the brand on his arm.

---

# In the Broom Shed

## Chapter 4: The Broom Shed

---

Hermione is intercepted.

---

---

Apologies for the delay: I'm getting my Ph.D. currently and was swept up in finals. But we're back!

A refresher: last chapter, Hermione obliviated her parents with the help of Draco Malfoy, who was tasked by Voldemort to kill them. They shared a tense interaction where Hermione called Malfoy brave, and then burned her house down to sell the idea that her family was indeed killed. Hermione apparated to the Burrow, which is where we pick up now.

While this has all taken place throughout one day so far, I assure you the rest of the story will not be as linear (nor will it remain entirely in Hermione's perspective...I'm suspect we'll be hearing from tortured, pining Draco so do with that information what you will). Please let me know what you think/what you anticipate you'll see next in the comments!

---

The fields surrounding the Weasley family home were exactly as Hermione remembered: loamy English soil dappled with lavender and barley, the faint hint of livestock, and in the distance, a towering, albeit haphazard, country home. She ran her hands over her body checking for any splinching; she'd overshot her apparition point by a dozen yards or so and was missing the fingernail on her pinky, but she considered it a reasonably good result given that it was her first attempt outside of theoretical practice calculations and that it took place under a good deal of duress. She closed her eyes for a

moment, trying to block out the image of the flames consuming her childhood home, of Draco Malfoy's fear, so palpable she could almost taste its acidity. She couldn't help but wonder whether he'd made it back to his manor, whether he was in front of Voldemort that very instant, lying to the face of the most dangerous wizard in history. Lying on her behalf, on the behalf of two Muggles he'd never known. It was surreal and terrifying to imagine. Would he be able to pull it off? Even if he was as well versed in occlumency as he'd hinted, what match would he be for the Dark Lord?

"Ah, Miss Granger," a familiar voice called to her and she spun around, heart catching in her throat, to encounter a familiar willowy figure clad in silvery robes and half-moon spectacles. She drew her wand. "I was under the assumption you'd be arriving soon."

"Professor Dumbledore?"

"Are you unharmed? I commend you for such an apparition while underage. Although if the Ministry inquires, let it be stated for the record that I gave you a hearty scolding."

"How did you know I was here?" Hermione tightened her grip on her wand. She remembered the lesson the false Moody had instilled in them on the importance of vigilantly checking for polyjuice, one that hit even harder given that he'd been an imposter himself. Even so, she felt a bit silly with her wand pointed at the serene headmaster; she knew better to assume she could duel with one of the most prominent wizards of the last century, but given the chance that he was an imposter, she might have more favorable odds.

"I received a rather strongly worded owl from the Ministry moments ago, relating that one of my students had broken the ban on underage magic and violated the law against unlicensed apparition. Another followed it, raising alarm bells about a potential violent scene in the London suburbs. I made an educated guess on your whereabouts, Miss Granger. No need for that," he said, gesturing for her to lower her wand.

Hermione grimaced, the part of her that longed to obey authority screaming at her resistance.

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Professor. Not until—”

“Of course, you’ll need verification of my identity. Precautions are important, now more than ever. What did I give to you at the beginning of your third year of Hogwarts, with the express instruction to keep it a secret?”

“A time-turner, Professor.”

“You’ll remember what I said when I bestowed it upon you?”

Hermione nodded cautiously.

“I find it still applies: time is like smoke, Miss Granger. We’ll never be able to control or even grasp it, only watch as it provides us evidence of continued combustion.” It was what he’d told her, although then, she’d dismissed it as one of his eccentric musings. Now, it carried a heaviness that could only have been imbedded with experience, with her growing understanding of the ever shifting darkness the world held.

“I take it you’ve had a difficult evening. Shall we find a place to discuss the events that led you here?”

Dumbledore strode a few paces towards the house, robes dragging on the bracken. Hermione lowered her wand but stayed glued to her apparition point.

“If I recall correctly, there’s a broomshed just over— ah, there it is— good to know my memory isn’t failing me just yet. After you, Miss Granger?”

Hermione followed mutely, head spinning. Surely if Dumbledore was here, it meant she wasn’t going to Azkaban for performing underage magic. It had, after all, been a life threatening circumstance. And



Dumbledore had stepped in for Harry last year, when he'd been attacked by dementors. Legally, there was precedent not to arrest her.

Dumbledore shut the door to the broomshed behind him, and Hermione watched as he gently brushed a large spider from his hat, his hand warped and blackened, although Hermione told herself it could have been the moonlight.

"Forgive me, you must be cold. I find discomfort does an awful job at alleviating fear."

The headmaster conjured a cloak from thin air, something soft and reminiscent of the expensive garments made of never-tangle-wool found in Madam Malkins. She wrapped herself in it gratefully, conscious of her dried swimming costume for the first time in hours.

"I imagine this evening has been quite a shock. Can you tell me what happened, Miss Granger?"

Hermione hesitated, worrying her lower lip between her teeth, unsure of how much to reveal. While Dumbledore was the head of the Order, she never held the same blind trust in him that Ron or Harry seemed to exhibit. There was a part of her, a part that often got her into trouble or earned her eyerolls and derision, that couldn't help but question things: the laws of the wizarding world, their backwards and often cruel customs, the decisions of the headmaster. She felt sure that he always acted in the best interests of the wizarding world; however, his exact motivations often eluded her. Her own were exactly clear: she would protect her parents at any cost.

But where did she fall on revealing the involvement of Draco Malfoy? How much of that very sensitive information would she entrust to the headmaster? Although Malfoy was cowardly and loathsome and probably thought she wasn't fit to wipe dirt from his shoes, she felt an uncomfortable debt to Malfoy, one that she feared would rear its head in the ugliest of ways. He'd all but ensured the safety of her

parents at great personal risk, an unexpected kindness she felt motivated to repay.

“The ministry has gotten several eyewitness accounts from Muggles in the area,” Dumbledore prodded carefully. “They say that the fire started early this evening and that the fumes created a strange cloud over your family’s home. I think we both know this is a rather simplistic version of events.”

“Eyewitnesses?”

“The casting of the Dark Mark is not only a symbol, Hermione. It’s a breach of the Statue of Secrecy. Naturally their memories have been wiped. There was one account that troubled me, from your young neighbor.”

“Melissa,” Hermione breathed. The events of the afternoon felt foreign, as if they’d been a story told to her long ago. “Is she all right?”

“Most fortunately, Hestia Jones was the mediwitch on the scene. She took your friend Melissa’s memories and sent them directly to me before obliterating her and I destroyed them promptly. I’m afraid your re-engaging in contact with her would put her in tremendous danger.”

Hermione closed her eyes momentarily, strangely crushed. Melissa had waited, sun cream on her nose, as she got ready that afternoon. She had invited her even when she didn’t have to, and this was that thanks she would get for her kindness. The world felt impossible and unfair and Hermione’s eyes filled for the first time since she cast the memory charm.

“Is she safe?” Hermione blinked rapidly, reminding herself to be logical. It didn’t matter, if Melissa didn’t remember the pond, didn’t remember her. She’d probably be better off, get to attend university and flirt with *lad’s lads* and never question what happened to the girl from next door. “Does she...remember?”

“She’s been obliviated, but will be quite alright, if not a bit foggy. But my viewing of her memory revealed something very peculiar about the events of today. Or rather, someone.”

Hermione tried not to fidget.

“Would you like to tell me what Draco Malfoy was doing in Hampstead Garden?”

Hermione ran through her options. There were memories and Dumbledore had seen them; he was careful to protect them from the authorities. To lie to a gifted Legimens felt like a foolish recourse. Above all, Hermione wanted to explain to someone the fevered dash to save her parents, the choice that left her effectively orphaned. As she became more removed from the scene, doubt had started to creep in. She needed someone to tell her that her choice to curse her mother and father, although terrible, was the correct one.

“Whatever you say in this shed will be kept in the utmost secrecy, Miss Granger.”

“He saved them,” Hermione whispered. It sounded even stranger when she conjured it aloud, even less believable. “Voldemort sent him to kill them, but he couldn’t do it.”

Hermione carefully relayed the rest of the story as Dumbledore listened attentively, from the moments in the bathing pond to Malfoy’s anguished expression when he pressed his fingers to the mark. Her tearful obliviation of her father and mother using Malfoy’s amulet. His sneers at her home, his comments on the squalor of Muggles. She explained how, to his credit, Malfoy had balked at the thought of performing an unforgivable on her and had produced the weakest *crucio* she’d seen. She was careful to leave out the fact she relocated her parents to Australia, only admitting to sending them off somewhere she wouldn’t be able to follow. She didn’t trust even Dumbledore with that information. *But you trusted Malfoy*, a little voice reminded her snidely.

“So, Mr. Malfoy was marked. Younger than Tom usually goes,” Dumbledore said, although she wasn’t sure if it was to her. “How did the mark look?”

“Bad,” Hermione supplied, curious to his line of questioning. “Like it was infected. Why does that matter, Professor?”

“Simply an interesting phenomenon, one I’ve long considered worthy of research.” Dumbledore waved her question off, and Hermione made a mental note to look for answers on the topic on her own.

“Tell me, Miss Granger. What do you think of Draco Malfoy?”

“I’m sorry? What do I...think of him?”

Dumbledore nodded patiently. Hermione cast her eyes around the shed, as if searching for an answer.

“I’m not quite sure, Professor. Before today, I would have told you that I think Draco Malfoy is a spoiled bigot, more prone to bullying than any possible acts of compassion. And maybe that’s all still true. But I also think he’s sixteen and was sent to become a murderer against his will.” She remembered his feverish stare, his unwilling receipt of her thanks. She felt the weight of her debt to him curled around her shoulders like a particularly stifling stole. “I think his instincts told her to act selfishly, to turn to self preservation as he always has previously. And I think even so, he went against them in order to do the right thing.”

Dumbledore smiled without it reaching his expression. His gaze seemed troubled, cloudy even. Hermione couldn’t shake the feeling that he was listening to her, but remembering something else, conjuring some memory from a long sealed vault that she would never be privy to.

“Do you trust him, Miss Granger?”

Hermione raised her chin and looked into piercing blue eyes. She considered her answer carefully before opening her mouth.

“No,” she said softly. “I don’t trust anyone.”

“Trust is a dangerous thing,” Dumbledore mused, expression more serious than she’d ever seen it. “Once given, it’s exceedingly easy to destroy and almost impossible to restore. And yet, we give it anyway.”

“What about my parents, Professor? Will they be—” Hermione trailed off, unsure if she was going to finish her sentence with *safe*, or *found*, or *killed*.

“You’ve done a very difficult thing today, Hermione. You made a sacrifice, in the name of love. There is no greater protection.” He smiled gently, a twist of the lips that didn’t quite echo the sadness in his gaze. “If what you told me comes to pass, the Death Eaters will undoubtedly consider your parents dead and Draco Malfoy’s task complete, a presumption we’d do very well not to challenge. I suggest you don’t reveal the accounts of today to anyone— no, not even your friends. Consider the version of events you want to share very carefully. More than a few lives hang in the balance.”

“I understand, Professor.” She did. Harry and Ron couldn’t know about what really transpired, nor could they learn about the involvement of Draco Malfoy. She loved them both dearly, but they were hot headed and prone to hasty vengeance and rash reactions. Harry’s subconscious seemed connected to Voldemort’s in a way no one could truly fathom. It was better to remain quiet, to cry on their shoulders and mourn her family. A sorrow that would be rooted in truth, despite the falsity of her story.

“You’ll stay the remainder of the summer at the Burrow, of course. I’ll send Molly a Patronus momentarily with the essential details of the situation. Mr. Potter will be joining you shortly. For all effective purposes, your parents perished in the fire. I’m sure your friends will offer their condolences for your loss. While they may not have lost their lives, it is still a terrible thing to lose a parent.” He laid a hand on her shoulder. “Trust that you have my utmost sympathies.”

“What about Malfoy?”

Dumbledore seemed surprised by the question, or at least, that she had offered it.

“I will certainly have a conversation with Mr. Malfoy at the start of the term. Any contact before then would only put him in immense danger. *Any* contact, Miss Granger.”

Despite herself, Hermione felt a pang of worry on Malfoy’s behalf. She knew that one good deed did not erase a lifetime of bigotry, of hurling slurs and curses across hallways. But no matter what nastiness had transpired between them, Hermione didn’t want him to face the viciousness of the Dark Lord, didn’t want him to be hurt or killed. She thought for the first time of his parents, Lucius and Narcissa, imagining them facing down a wand because of his decision. She could hardly fathom that he had resisted Voldemort, but she was impossibly grateful that he did.

“Voldemort does not take kindly to those who have slipped from his grasp, does he Professor?” She asked, sadly. Not for the first time that night, she thought of James and Lily Potter.

“No,” Dumbledore sighed. For the first time she could remember, he looked old. He’d always appeared ancient, even wizened, to her, but never quite tired or frail in the way the elderly did. It was as if he’d spent many years transcending the passing of time, only to fall victim to it in one fell swoop. His hand caught the moonlight to reveal charred flesh, and she bit her tongue to stop from inquiring about its cause. “He does not. Nor does he offer sympathy to those who have defied him.”

Dumbledore looked at her and in that moment she felt whatever wisps that had been left of her childhood dissipate. He looked at her like she was an adult, like she held the same burden on her shoulders that he did.

“You have found yourself in a perilous predicament, Miss Granger. You’ll be wise to remember you are not alone in this danger.

Hermione blinked, unsure what Dumbledore meant by this statement. But before she could ask, he was sweeping the shed door open and raising his wand. A silvery phoenix sprang to life, circling her once, before soaring towards the Burrow.

“Professor, I have to— there’s so much more to do, I can always— what about the others, the families of other Muggleborns? Surely, I can—”

“You’ve been through a terrible shock tonight, one that few could have survived, much less handled so deftly. The best thing you can do— for yourself and for those who will soon undoubtable require your skills— is rest. Mourn what you have lost.”

“But—”

“In my many years I’ve learned that grief, albeit extraordinarily painful, is often a harbinger of resistance. You must feel it in its entirety, in order to receive its strange, terrible gifts.”

Dumbledore gestured to the Burrow, where the lights all flickered on at once. The outline of a short woman in a dressing robe filled the lamp-filled doorway. Hermione looked back at Dumbledore, but only his phoenix remained. It opened its beak as if to sing, only to release Dumbledore’s parting words, warped into an echo.

“Goodbye, Miss Granger. I imagine I’ll be seeing you quite soon.”

---

# Diagon Alley

## Chapter 5: Diagon Alley

---

Hermione has an unexpected encounter.

---

---

Weekly updates? Who is she!

I just wanted to note that as this story opens, Draco and Hermione are at odds. For now, their behavior is that of two people who really, really don't like each other, but have somehow shared a traumatic encounter.

Also I really enjoyed writing the Weasley scenes. There is nothing better than a dysfunctional, well intentioned family dynamic. And I love the character of Fleur-- there is so much richness to her heritage that I think was never fully explored in the books.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Hermione's final days of summer passed in the way that honey drips from a spoon: slow, sticky, and with a cloying, almost unbearable, sweetness.

No one at the Burrow knew how to talk to her about what had happened. She'd slept for over twenty hours after Dumbledore's departure, thanks to a double vial of Dreamless Sleep potion. A practice that was typically frowned upon, but she thought the situation warranted a reason to dismiss Healer directions.

When she had finally awoken, she'd been greeted by something she'd never heard in the Burrow: silence.



At first, Hermione wondered if everyone was out, but upon descending the stairs from Ginny's room, she discovered the whole family—including a newly reinstated Percy and the inexplicable addition of Fleur Delacour—around the kitchen table, grimly staring at their breakfasts. Ron had leapt to attention upon sighting her, causing the entire family to spring into action, bustling with silverware and plates as if they hadn't all been sitting silently, waiting for her arrival.

Ron wrapped her in a hug so nervous and gentle that it caused tears to roll down Hermione's cheeks, kickstarting Molly, who buried her face in Arthur's shoulder and began to weep..

"Mum," Ginny scolded. "Stop *crying* ."

"It's all right," Hermione croaked, extricating herself from Ron's limp arms. "It'll be nice to give someone else a turn."

"Sorry, dear," Molly sniffed. She busied herself by buttering a large stack of toast that Hermione feared was intended for her. "I'm being silly. You've been through a terrible trauma, you don't need an old woman blubbering about it."

"I'm fine," Hermione mumbled to her audience of redheads, expressions all brimming with pity. She didn't know how she'd talk about the loss of her parents without giving away the complexities of their disappearance, and simultaneously felt tremendously guilty for all the compassion she was receiving under the guise of their deaths. *I did this to them*, she wanted to scream. *I cast the spell* . Instead she sat and reached for a piece from the tottering stack of toast.

"Allow me," Percy said, wielding the jam jar and a butter knife. "And may I offer my sincerest condolences for your loss, Hermione."

"I can manage—" she started, but Percy was already spreading marmalade.

“Merlin,” one of the twins— Fred, she suspected— muttered.

“What!?” Percy protested, scraping the toast into oblivion.

“What that awkward bastard is trying to say,” George continued. “Is that we’re here for you, Hermione.”

“Thank you,” Hermione said into her lap, suddenly unable to make eye contact with any of the Weasleys. She busied herself with picking at her cuticles, an awful habit her mother was always trying to get her to quit. *Don’t tear at yourself like that* , she used to scold. “If it’s alright with you, I’d rather...I’d rather not talk about it.”

“Of course,” Ginny declared, eyeing each of her family members fiercely, as if daring them to insist otherwise. “We’ll be here whenever you’re ready. Percy, *put the sodding toast down!* ”

Despite Hermione’s request, the Weasleys seemed set on attempting to provide her comfort, even if they didn’t quite seem to know how. Ron attempted to start several excruciating conversations about allowing oneself to mourn a loss, scrambling for words, before finally giving up and simply spending his time standing silently next to her like a gangly bodyguard. She suspected it was him who slid a copy of *Grappling with Grief: A Wizard’s Guide to Bereavement* under Ginny’s door. Ginny had taken to reading chapters of it aloud in a horrendous impression of Fleur’s accent, the only thing that had made Hermione crack a smile since the day at the pond.

Fred and George gave her a generous amount of space, something so unlike them that she almost felt insulted, until she noticed they’d begun surreptitiously confunding Percy every time he looked like he was going to attempt an apology speech. Percy, eager to make up for a year of tense familial separation, had to be confunded so often that he’d begun running directly into closed doors.

Molly mothered her even more intensely than before, taking every opportunity to push towering amounts of roast potatoes and sausages onto her, drenching Hermione’s plates in buckets of gravy.

She'd also begun insisting that Hermione go on walks to get some sun and fresh air with Fleur, something Hermione suspected came partially from good intentions, but primarily from her desire to get the blonde out of the house.

While Hermione had been hesitant of Fleur's presence at first, she found she didn't mind her as much as she once had. Jealousy, once so bright and insistent that it had lit Hermione from within, was nowhere to be found, and in its absence, she found Fleur to be a decent companion.

They would descend the grassy steps cut into the bottle green hills, walk along the glittering creek where Molly usually did the washing. The stones of the riverbed were warm from the sun, and Hermione perched on them, the heat blooming against her skin, as she watched Fleur's wand work. After sufficient laundering, Fleur levitated the linens onto a glittering line, suspended by magic so that the wind would catch the damp bedding like a sail, and Hermione rolled up her jeans and dipped her feet in the creek water.

During the first few Molly mandated strolls, their conversations shifted from terse to tentative; Hermione started out with stagnant questions on the Beaubaton's curriculum, cursing herself for how pedantic she sounded. Fleur, seemingly the only one astute enough to realize Hermione had no desire to discuss her parents, filled the silence by explaining how Bill's courtship had left her in the Weasley family care. After a few shared afternoons, Fleur began to regale her with wistful, airy stories of enchanted seashells and fields of lavender that surrounded her home in the Côte d ' Azur. There was something baroque to the delicate lilt of her voice, alongside her dropped *h*'s and throaty vowels. Something that smoothed the lines between familiar and ancient. If Hermione closed her eyes, she could almost breathe the French seaside air, the perfume her mother wore on their trip to the south of France, the rustle of the dried purple flowers hanging from doorways and vendor stalls. When she voiced this phenomenon, Fleur grinned, an expression that tinged her lovely face with something far more devious.

“Part of Veela magic,” Fleur told her conspiratorially. “It is not only driven by desire. Memory, sensation. A touch or taste or scent. That is the sort of magic that drives men mad.”

“Could you...” Hermione fidgeted, filled with longing. To hear her mother’s voice...a hint of her father’s cologne... “Use it to conjure... anything sensory?”

“It is not a conjuring,” Fleur said, knowingly. “I can not wield it as a wizard would a wand. I just remember. The part of me that is Veela responds. In many ways, my magic is like yours, Hermione. It’s tied to my heart.”

Hermione’s hope crested and fell. There must have been something tragic about her expression, because Fleur looked at her with an utter softness, uncharacteristic of her devastating features.

“Even if I were full Veela, I couldn’t. Natural magic doesn’t work that way. It won’t respond to human insistence.”

“I know,” Hermione whispered, and she willed herself to inhale again, only to smell laundry soap and quaking grass.

Hermione didn’t begrudge any of the Weasley’s for the uncomfortable and futile nature of their efforts; they were simply trying their hardest to alleviate a fraction of her grief. It was an impossibility, although they didn’t know why. It created a growing shame inside of her; she’d never enjoyed keeping secrets from the people she loved, even if she was adept at it.

When Harry arrived, he took her hand, earnestly explaining how he understood. She felt so guilty that she almost evaporated on the spot.

“You’ll probably be angry soon,” he said gravely, sitting on Ginny’s bed with Ron. Hermione was beginning to suspect they’d drawn up some sort of schedule, ensuring that she was never without company. “That’s what happened to me when Pad—” he stopped,

half-choked and corrected himself. “When Sirius died. I was so goddamn angry, it consumed me. I couldn’t think. I couldn’t feel anything else. It was like a parasite or something, I felt like I needed to make them have to feel this way. But Hermione— no matter what, promise me you won’t go after them.”

She closed her eyes, picturing Harry’s face when Sirius went through the veil, the way he’d sprang at Bellatrix Lestrange like a mad dog.

“I won’t,” she said, the lump that felt permanently stuck in her throat making a reappearance.

“Who was it?” Ron asked, “How did they find you? Did you recognize —”

“You don’t have to talk about it yet, Hermione,” Harry said, giving Ron a look that would have frozen the equator.

“No, it’s all right. I didn’t see. They were masked and there was so much smoke, I was barely—”

“It’s alright.” Harry reseated himself on her mattress, slinging an arm around her shoulders. “Well, it’s not, but it will be.”

He grasped her shoulder firmly, an intensity to his touch that she hadn’t expected.

“Hermione, listen to me. Your parents' deaths won’t be in vain.”

“What does that mean?” She shifted from under his arm, turning to look at his face. There was an intensity to his expression that constricted her throat, as if he were about to attempt a particularly dangerous dive on his broom. A look that had caused Hermione to turn from the Quidditch pitch and hide her face in her hands. “What do you mean, you swear it?”

“Dumbledore asked for my help,” Harry’s eyes shone with the weight of his promise. “I think he’s planning to destroy Voldemort, once and

for all.”

“Mate,” Ron shook his head in disbelief. “Why didn’t you tell us earlier? Like, as soon as you got here?”

“There were some other things going on that felt a bit more urgent,” Harry said dryly, and Hermione cracked a smile that probably looked more like a grimace.

“Does this have something to do with his hand?” she asked. “It looked like it had been cursed.”

“His hand? Merlin, can you two give me a bit of context?”

Hermione explained how Dumbledore’s ring hand had appeared charred in the broomshed, a detail Harry grimly confirmed, adding the details of their impromptu trip to a retired Professor’s home, and Dumbledore’s promise of private lessons. Ron looked a bit green at the description of cursed flesh and moved to open a window.

“I’m not sure,” Harry finally answered her. “He didn’t tell me much. It’s got something to do with memories though, Voldemort’s memories.”

*Memories.* Hermione willed herself not to fidget. She remembered the gossamer web of her parents’ minds, the way she had picked through strands, searching for her presence...

“Classic Dumbledore,” Ron snorted. “ *Something to do with memories* . Very descriptive, he is.”

---

The following morning over porridge, owls arrived for everyone of school age. Ron and Hermione’s contained their Prefect badges, something Ron seemed disgruntled with — *I’m just not built for chasing blokes out of closets with their pants half down, Hermione* — and Harry grinned widely as he pulled a Captain’s badge from his envelope.

“I’ll be able to use that poncy bath!” He exclaimed, as Percy looked on, scandalized by the dishonoring of Prefect privileges. Hermione laughed, something that caused everyone’s head to swivel towards her.

“What?” She asked, self-consciously.

“It’s just good to hear you laugh, dear,” Molly responded in a rather watery voice.

“Stop looking at her like that, you lot,” Ginny piped up. “She’s been laughing plenty.”

“What has she been laughing at?” Fleur asked and Ginny busied herself with her booklist, suddenly deeply concerned about the edition of *Advanced Transfiguration* that Ron had used the previous year.

“We’ll send in some mail orders,” Molly insisted, scanning Ron’s list.

“Oi, why we’re not going to Diagon?”

“Ronald, you will not address me with *oi*. Hermione has had far too much disruption to her life lately, she should be resting not traipsing about the Leaky Cauldron. Maybe another walk—”

“I’m fine,” Hermione said hastily, making panicked eye contact with a disgruntled Fleur. “I think it would be good to regain a sense of normalcy.”

“I quite agree,” Ginny piped in, a mischievous twist to her lips. “We could pop in to see Fred and George’s shop. Mum, maybe you can finally show Fleur that gardening spell you’ve been talking about.”

“Well, I don’t—”

“Zat won’t be necessary—”

“That sounds lovely,” Ron agreed loudly, exchanging a meaningful glance with his sister. “Wasn’t I just moaning about the state of the garden, Harry?”

“What?” Harry asked, eyes wide. Ron gave him an surreptitious elbow to the ribs.

“If you think you’ll be going to Diagon Alley unsupervised you have another thing coming, Ronald Weasley! And after what’s just happened! Are you all mad?”

The room fell into a hushed silence, everyone making a concerted effort to not look Hermione's way. This only seemed to spur Molly forward, voice blazingly steady.

“Danger won’t simply disappear because of back to school shopping! I remember what it was like before, with his attacks on Wizing London. God forbid it should happen again. I’d like to think my children aren’t so hairbrained as to think that visiting a ludicrous joke shop should supersede their *lives* .”

“Of course it doesn’t, Mum,” Ginny said, sufficiently chastised. “We weren’t thinking.”

Molly looked beseechingly at Hermione, who stared back. She’d never heard Molly talk about the first war, but knew vaguely that she’d lost her twin brothers in the fight. There was a terror in her face that looked startlingly familiar. Hermione realized where she’d seen it before: in the mirror after a shower, while she tried to think of anything but her family.

“I’m sorry, Molly,” Hermione said, quietly. “We can mail in our orders.”

“I didn’t mean to frighten you, dear.” Molly shook out her red hair, silver strands catching in the window light. “You’ll be safe, everyone will be fine. The Order has been standing guard, Aurors too. They’re prepared. It won’t be like that again.” It sounded as if she was trying to convince herself.



“If you truly feel up to it, I’ll floo Nymphadora—” Ron attempted to swallow the grin that was creeping into his expression “— and Alastor, of course.”

Ron’s face fell instantly.

---

Diagon Alley was the same and somehow also completely unrecognizable, filled with a sense of distrust that permeated the air surrounding shoppers. There was an uncharacteristic briskness to the crowd, with families being especially quick to conduct their business and promptly return to their homes. To the chagrin of shop owners, the usual socializing was moved from the streets into shops, causing a bottleneck effect in entrances and exits. She saw a few of their schoolmates, but was mercifully prodded along by a gruff Moody— irritated with having been put on Diagon Alley duty, or *babysitting* , as he grumbled— before she could greet them. Hermione wasn’t sure how much people outside of her immediate circle knew about what happened to her parents. The attack had been reported in the Prophet, but buried on the eleventh page in a set of blurbs featuring other Muggle-related incidents. Hermione had bitterly noted that there was no mention of their names, as was typical with Wizarding reporting of muggles. More uncharacteristically, their muggleborn daughter and her escape were also omitted. Hermione suspected the erasure could have come from either the Order, in an effort to protect Hermione’s privacy, or the Death Eaters, attempting to conceal a botched job. Both organizations had contacts in the press, although if last year was any indication, her money was on the Death Eaters.

After taking in the colorful spectacle that was Weasley’s Wizard Wheezes (and, despite her protests, having several love and beauty potions slipped slyly into her bag by Fred and George), Ron and Harry, who had both shot up about five inches this summer, went to Madam Malkin’s with Hermione in tow. Moody had followed them in and stood guard as Harry and Ron squirmed through their fittings, until a silvery wolf appeared with a message. It was a Patronus that

Hermione couldn't place, but based on Moody's whizzing eye, its message was clearly urgent.

"I've got to take care of this," he growled, glass eye swirling in distrust. It lingered on Hermione's beaded bag. "I'll be right outside, no funny business. If I find out you managed a way to put yourselves in danger in a bleeding *robes shop*, I'll gut you myself."

Privately, Hermione considered other unconventional places they'd managed to put themselves in danger, but thought it best to pipe down.

Mad-Eye shouldn't have worried about external factors, because there was no torment like that of shopping with Ron and Harry for robes. As the boys finished their transactions, Hermione absently flipped through dress robes. When she heard a rush from the shop's fireplace, she looked up from the garments, only to see the face that had appeared several times in her recent, fiery nightmares.

Draco Malfoy stared at her like he had been struck. And by the looks of it, he had.

He was sporting a series of tender looking bruises and an angry scar that reached from his ear down to his jaw, as if—Hermione suddenly felt faint with the realization— as if someone had tried to sever it.

"What are you doing here?" He hissed, giving her a disdainful once over. "You shouldn't be here."

She wasn't sure what she should have expected. In an effort to bridge the cognitive dissonance, it was like she'd separated him into two Malfoys: the boy from school, all sneers and sleek brooms and *Potter Stinks!* badges and punches to the face. Then, the other, a slim characterization because of the singular interaction they'd had: a pale, drawn Malfoy, radiating desperation, flashes of gold amulet and tattoo ink, eyes full of scorn and terror. She struggled to unite them; separately, they were crude character sketches. Together, they were entirely too human.

There were a number of questions she wanted to ask him: *What happened to your face? What happened with the Lestranges? Did you manage to keep your head straight while Voldemort tore through it? Anything I should know about, like, is anyone else being sent to kill me?*

"I have every right to be here," Hermione responded. She tossed her hair in a way she knew gave her an awful air of superiority. "Or does it bother you to share oxygen with a filthy little mudblood?"

There was an almost imperceptible tightening of his eyes, and then he sighed, raggedly.

"That's not— don't be difficult. I meant after...Are you—" He fell silent, eyes fixed on someone behind her.

"Christ," Harry muttered, sidling up to her protectively while Ron finished, oblivious, at the till. "Who let him around another Hippogriff?"

"Harry," she hissed, reproachful.

Malfoy swept past them imperiously, ignoring the remark in an uncharacteristic show of self control. Before he could get far, the Floo ignited once more, and another blonde figure emerged. Narcissa Malfoy, looking paler and thinner than ever before, looked for her son with poorly veiled desperation, as if he'd be ripped from her grasp at any minute. She was seemingly unaware of any other presence in the shop, eyes fixed intently on the boy in front of her.

"Draco," she whispered, so quietly Hermione had to strain to hear it. "We're expected to return soon."

"Go home, Mother," Malfoy muttered back, trying to speak quickly enough to ensure he wouldn't be overheard.

"You can send a mail order, darling. Please come back with me—"

"I have business to attend to in Diagon, as you very well know. You should be resting. Father would be displeased."

Narcissa recoiled in a manner that almost broke Hermione's heart, but Draco was faster, steering his mother gently by the shoulders until she stood in the fireplace once more. He ignored her whispered protests, opening her fist for her and spilling a fistful of Floo powder into her cupped palm. Hermione felt the need to look away, to pretend she wasn't present for such desperate tenderness between mother and son. By the time she turned back, Narcissa was gone.

Although, she considered, it seemed the Narcissa of Hermione's memory had been gone for a while. Where was the snobbish woman with an ever lifted chin, who'd eyed her as if she were vermin? The coiffed blonde with glass skin and meticulously fitted robes? Something terrible had happened to the Malfoys in Lucius's absence, something that had dulled even Lady Malfoy's seemingly impenetrable shine.

"What's he doing here?" Ron said, rejoining them before Hermione could shush him. "Blimey, are you alright, Hermione?"

"I'm fine," she hissed, tugging his and Harry's elbows towards the door.

"Corralling your livestock, Granger?" For all that had changed in his appearance, Draco Malfoy's low drawl remained intact. He flipped his wand casually between his long fingers like one would with a percussion mallet, making dexterous figure eights. *Show off*, Hermione thought.

"Leave her alone, Malfoy," Harry said, wand already drawn.

"Stop it." Hermione pulled at his arm furiously. "Put it away. "

"Listen to your girlfriend, Potter. It's not advisable to be drawing a wand on me these days."

“What do you mean, these days?” Harry asked, and Hermione saw the calculating look on his face, the look that had cost her every house point she’d ever lost.

“What are you going to do Malfoy, tell your father on us?” Ron piped up. “Oh, wait. He’s a bit preoccupied right now, isn’t he?”

She expected Malfoy to be baited into action, but his anger thrummed quietly across his face, before his expression settled into an unsettling blankness. You wouldn’t be able to note it unless you were looking, which Hermione realized she was.

“My father is disappointed to have missed the...excitement of this summer,” he lingered on the consonants of *excitement* in a way that left no confusion to what he was referring to. “Having a good one, Granger? You look positively dreadful.” He cocked his head, as if pretending to consider. “Although I suppose that’s nothing new.”

“I’ll kill you, you bastard,” Ron insisted, temper igniting like a signal flare, and raised his arm. Before Hermione could stop him, Malfoy had wordlessly sent Ron’s wand sailing into the window display.

“Look in a mirror, Malfoy,” Hermione spat, summoning the wand and pocketing it despite Ron’s noise of disapproval. “Fix your face before you start giving out beauty tips.”

She strode out of the shop before he could retort, heart racing, and Harry and Ron followed. They muttered as they followed Moody back to the Leaky, voices hushed as to not alert the auror of their altercation.

“Hermione, I swear—”

“That arrogant little—”

“Harry was right,” Hermione said sharply, cutting them both off.

“He’s an arsehole, Hermione, he— wait, I was?”

“We can’t go looking for revenge. And certainly not with Draco Malfoy. What, you think a sixteen year old school boy has infiltrated Voldemort’s inner circle?” Ron winced at her use of the name and Hermione scoffed, they continued to make noises of protest. “Did you want Moody to find us wands drawn? Funnily enough, I’d like to keep my organs in place, thanks.”

“But—”

“His mother still takes him shopping, for Christ sakes. Whoever did... what they did will pay, just like you said. But it wasn’t Malfoy,” she lied.

“We have to be strategic.” She turned to Harry, beseechingly. “If you fly off the handle every time the ponce of Slytherin decides to run his mouth, how will you be of any use to Dumbledore?”

“How do you do that?” Ron muttered, looking at her with something darker than awe. Disbelief, maybe. “Even after everything he said, you’re so...logical. Should have been a bloody Ravenclaw.”

“Everyone says that,” Hermione responded, pressing his wand back into his hand. “But I think the hat got it right.”

“He looked awful, didn’t he?” Harry wondered thoughtfully, once his temper had abated. “Narcissa too. And what did he mean when he said I shouldn’t draw a wand on him *these days*?”

“It probably didn’t mean anything, Harry. It’s just Malfoy being a complete git, per usual.”

It was only once they had returned to the Burrow, once she had packed her trunk and inhaled a heaping plate of Sunday roast, once she’d crawled into the spare bed in Ginny’s room and lay staring at the ceiling, that Hermione suspected that before everything had gone to hell in the robes shop, Draco Malfoy had been trying to ask her if she was all right.

---

---

Next up, Hogwarts.

---

# The Hogwarts Express

## Chapter 6: The Hogwarts Express

---

If you're in the mood for intelligent-but-ignorant Draco and vengeful-yet-compassionate Hermione, this is the chapter for you. Comments give me wings.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

---

Hermione had always loved the train ride to Hogwarts. She wasn't sure if it was the anticipation of the coming school year, the gilded compartments with sliding glass doors, the dumpy older witch who sold marked up sweets. Mostly, it was a symbol of transition: of seasons, of school years, of who she was and who she would be.

Her love for the journey made this year's trip all the more bittersweet. Instead of waving to her parents and Molly Weasley, she left Tonks and Moody standing on the platform in their official capacity as Auror escorts. The corridors of the train were dismally quiet; the once frantic gathering and exclamatory greetings had been replaced by neatly closed compartments, hushed voices and heads bent together. Hermione would bet that a communal piece of advice had been passed from parent to child on the platform before disembarking: don't draw any unnecessary attention. She wondered absently if it had been like this before the First Wizarding War; if twenty years ago, you could feel the same tension, the same growing wariness.

But as Hermione and Ron entered the prefect's carriage for the customary start of term meeting, she realized that despite the change in the public mood, there were some things that remained, irritatingly, the same.



“Does anyone *smell* that?” Pansy Parkinson looked up from examining her fingernails to comment on their entrance. She sniffed exaggeratedly in Hermione’s direction. “A bit like a barnyard, isn’t it? Have you been staying on a farm, Granger?”

“Yes, I’ve been mucking out the trough for your boyfriends. You like a real pig, don’t you Parkinson?”

“You’re such a bi—” Pansy began to retort, until she saw Hermione’s hand twitch towards her pocketed wand. Wisely, she shut her mouth. Word of Marietta Edgecombe’s still prevalent acne was legend, even in Slytherin. And there was no question who would best the other, wand to wand.

In a concession to the bitterness in her gut demanding acknowledgement, Hermione waited for Pansy to turn away before sliding her hand into her pocket and jerking her wand ever so slightly up. An almost imperceptible tuft of hair from the back of Pansy’s head fell into her collar, leaving her with a cowlick at the back of her previously perfect bob. She swallowed hard so she wouldn’t smile.

The meeting commenced with the new Head Girl and Boy— Florence Vaisley, a severe looking Slytherin, and Roger Davies, a handsome Ravenclaw whose presence used to cause Hermione to blush embarrassingly— drawing the compartment to attention by taking attendance on a hovering clipboard that marked itself. There were a few familiar others already seated; she noticed the wide, eager face of Ernie MacMillan and saw Padma Patil’s silky plait catch the light as she turned to speak with Terry Boot. It’s not that she was actively looking for him, but she couldn’t help but notice—

“Oi, where’s the blonde wanker?” Ron asked loudly, causing a few heads to swivel his way.

Roger frowned at being interrupted and then cocked his head in consideration.

“Parkinson,” he asked, and immediately regretted it once he caught Pansy’s simpering smile in response. “Where’s Malfoy?”

“Draco had to attend to a family matter,” she responded, blinking coquettishly at the Head Boy. “But I’m sure I’ll be able to help you with...anything you may require, Davies.”

God, Pansy could be so *gross*.

“Er, that won’t be necessary,” Roger took a step away, the backs of his knees colliding with the compartment seating. “Please remind your partner that promptness is one of the characteristics required of prefects. I don’t want any missed meetings unless you have a bloody good reason. Being a prefect is a privilege.”

“Being a prefect is a privilege,” Ron mocked as they made their way out of the corridor after discussing patrol schedules. “If they inflated Davies’ head any more, it’d float clean off his body.”

“You’re just sore because he flies so well,” Padma, who had never quite forgiven Ron for their disastrous date at the Yule Ball, butted in. “I heard he’s being scouted for the Kestrels.”

“Come off it,” Ron gaped. This, apparently, was significant gossip. “The Kenmore Kestrels want Davies? Old Goody-two-bollocks?”

As Hermione tuned out Padma’s noises of displeasure, she noticed something in her pocket that had most certainly not been there before. She reached in it, only to close her hand around a neatly folded note. When she peeked at it, she could barely make out her surname, written in a cramped penmanship she recognized from years in the same potions classroom.

“You coming?” Ron gestured at her from ten paces ahead. She hadn’t noticed she’d stopped walking.

“In a bit,” Hermione called, voice higher than normal. “Just need— er — the loo.” Ron wrinkled his nose, as if they hadn’t all shared a

bathroom in the Burrow for weeks. She'd gotten remarkably good at wandless reinforced locking charms.

She waited until Ron was halfway down the corridor and then unfolded the paper surreptitiously. On it were three familiar runes etched in ink. She'd know them anywhere; after all, the last time she'd seen these inscriptions, they'd been hanging on an amulet around her neck.

Hermione hurried towards the emptier compartments at the end of the train where the Slytherins sat, thinking perhaps, she could pry Malfoy out for an audience under the guise of a scolding. What was it Pansy had said? A family matter? Was it his mo—

An invisible force shot out from one of the seemingly empty compartments, dragging her inside. On instinct, Hermione kicked backwards.

"Ow, Granger, you twit! You almost kneecapped me!"

Malfoy's disillusionment charm flickered, before he canceled it all together. He bent down to rub his shin, scowling at her. With him partially doubled over, they were the same height, forcing her to look him squarely in the face.

The scarring she'd seen on his face at Madam Malkins had all but disappeared, certainly the work of a competent— and expensive— healer. Unlike Hermione, he'd already mostly changed into his school robes; in contrast to her jumper and denims, he was wearing a starched white shirt and his Slytherin tie, slung half-undone around his neck.

"What are you doing?" Hermione hissed, checking the glass entrance to the compartment for nosy students. "I don't want to be seen with you!"

"Worried your boyfriends, Dim and Dimmer will see? Or will it ruin your precious reputation as holder of the largest stick ever to enter

anyone's—"

"What do you want, Malfoy?" she cut him off, unwilling to entertain the end of his sentence. Their eyes met, a storm hitting the sun, and Hermione came to the uncomfortable realization it was the first time they'd been alone since that day. There was a strange intimacy one couldn't help but share with a person after an afternoon of adrenaline and terror and —dare she say it?— altruism. They weren't on a first name basis by any means, but it would be impossible to ignore the understanding they'd reached. It seemed to affect Malfoy as well, his gaze quickly darting away from her own.

"I put a repelling spell on the compartment," he finally said, after a pause. He brought a hand to his temple as if to smooth an invisible wrinkle. "Obscurement charm on the glass for good measure. Did you get my note?"

"How'd you—"

"Charmed it to float out of Pansy's bag once you were close enough."

She had so many questions the sheer quantity tied her tongue, and somehow the least pressing was the only one to slip out.

"Why weren't you at the prefect meeting?" she asked.

Malfoy pursed his lips in poorly managed irritation.

"What, are you going to scold me as well? I already got a written reprimand from that poncy Ravenclaw tosser. Keen, that one. Term's not even started yet and he's already throwing his weight around."

"Roger?"

"Roger?" Malfoy mimicked in a high, girlish tone. "Merlin, not you too, Granger. Half the girls in our year are always on about how his hair

falls into his eyes. Did your kickers get all damp when he told you to patrol the third floor corridor?"

"Ugh," Hermione exclaimed, moving to leave. "I'm not staying if you're just going to be crass."

"Hold on," Malfoy barked, hand holding the compartment door shut. Hermione turned, fully intending to rip him to shreds before he added, rather desperately, "you owe me."

She did, and so, she sat. Despite stopping her, he said nothing. The pale ribbon of his throat bobbed several times as she waited. He clenched and unclenched his jaw.

"Pansy mentioned you were dealing with family issues," she said, taking in the way his expression fell, a house of cards.

"That's one way of putting it," he muttered. He examined the windowsill, dragging a finger across the frame as if checking for dust. *Posh wanker* .

"I barely made the train. The Dark Lord didn't want me to come back this year."

Hermione dug her nails into her knee to keep herself from interjecting. She was beginning to realize that you needed a strategy, when speaking with Malfoy. Every word had a parry and every verbal misstep had a consequence. He spooked easily, like a deer. He had a tendency to kick off when he wasn't in control of the conversation. In an effort to get him to explain why he pulled her into the compartment, Hermione allowed him to steer.

"He said my family owed him my servitude," Malfoy shook his head, as if trying to dislodge a particularly ugly thought. "That I should take my place among the others. My *place* ."

"It goes against everything I've ever been taught, you know? That the last of the two most Noble and Ancient Houses could owe him

something as precious as their scion. Put me in a soldier's robes and send me off to do his bidding. Like I was disposable."

His mouth became a tight line. His disgust was so scalding, it could power a steam engine.

---

Hermione fought a smirk at his use of precious in regards to himself, willing herself to focus on Malfoy's bitterness, the questions that seemed to rise from him. She wanted to push: if he, the heir, could be considered replaceable, was everything he'd been taught equally flimsy?

*Strategy*, she reminded herself. *Don't startle the wildlife.*

"Mother came up with a whole rationale. She had Aunt Bella tell him that I'd be more helpful at school. There's no better place for me to serve; I'd be the only Death Eater who could roam Hogwarts at will. Keep an eye on Potter, especially when Snape couldn't. Mother's always been more clever than father," he said, with a surprising viciousness. "She was desperate to get me out of that bloody house."

It was the most he'd ever explained to her about his situation without her prodding. He seemed surprised as each detail tumbled from his lips, like he'd never planned to reveal this to her, but couldn't bring himself to stop. Like it had been an eternity since he'd spoken to another person.

He drew his bottom lip raggedly between his teeth, biting down in an attempt to focus himself. Hermione knew without a doubt that this summer had forced Malfoy to bear witness to terrible things; she was beginning to also suspect him to be the victim of unspeakable acts. She felt a strange ache in her throat, like she'd gone hoarse without speaking.

She realized she felt sorry for him, a sensation so foreign and unanticipated that she quickly shoved it back into a closet at the

back of her mind.

“She knew I couldn’t be there, with a great big target on my back. Or should I say,” — he smiled without any humor — “On my arm.”

Malfoy rolled up his sleeve gingerly, as if he was avoiding a place of tenderness, and revealed a bandaged forearm. Gauze covered the space he’d pressed his fingers to on the night they’d saved her parents.

“At first, I thought maybe you’d cursed me,” he admitted, unwrapping the gauze. He took in her affronted expression and sneered in return. “Come off it Saint Granger, I know it wasn’t you. Even a swot like you couldn’t manage this.”

He unfurled the rest of his bandages and Hermione gasped.

The skin surrounding the tattoo looked deeply infected, with its lines raised like they’d been branded by a hot iron only that morning. But that wasn’t what caused her to gasp; Malfoy’s Dark Mark, once faint and cleanly delineated, had turned the color of tar. The lines of the skull and snake blurred, ink sliding into raised veins up Malfoy’s arm. Inching towards his heart.

“It’s *black* .”

“Very good, you know your colors.”

“I thought...it's only supposed to burn black when you’re called. Or when you touch it to communicate with the, er, *others* .”

Malfoy shot her a look of pure derision.

“Obviously. Why would I have come to you— to *you* — if it was doing what it's supposed to?”

“It looks like blood poisoning.” She interrupted herself to clarify, remembering how woefully inept most wizards were at basic medical

terminology. "That's a Muggle disease, brought on by infection; left untreated it will kill—"

"I know what blood poisoning is."

"Well most wizards don't so—"

"It's not that."

"Well, obviously! I was just comparing, there are a lot of wizarding illnesses that mirror Muggle ones. Don't get shirty with me."

He looked out the compartment window as they blew through Scotland, the green of the Highlands shimmering from the velocity of the train. Hills rippling, more sea than meadow.

"It's almost funny, isn't it? Blood poisoning or whatever the fuck is happening to me. I'd been talking shite about the filth in your veins for years now. What's that saying, about turning tables?"

Hermione reached out carefully, but drew her hand back once she caught the icy warning in Malfoy's eyes. He did not want her to touch him, but whether it was because of her own blood designation or the pain he was experiencing was anyone's guess.

"It wasn't like this, that night."

"No, this is recent. I think that's what sped it up though. I think," Malfoy's voice lowered with misplaced shame. "I think it knows I helped you."

"The tattoo? Like it has a sentient mind?" Her eyebrows raised of her own accord, a look of disbelief that Ron always said made her look like McGonagall. "Even dark magic has limits, Malfoy."

"Always so condescending," he spat in her direction. "You know everything there is to know about dark magic, do you? Sorry, was it *you* who grew up in a family where ancient, dangerous knowledge was passed around at dinner like table bread?"



“Enlighten me, then.” She tucked her hair behind her ear only for it to spring free. Malfoy’s eyes followed the movement and Hermione fought the urge to smooth her hair flat.

“Your kind would never be privy to this sort of information,” he started, fully ignoring the mocking way she mouthed *your kind* . “The basis lies in an obscure branch of the Dark Arts that remained restricted to families with a lineage pure enough to merit its preservation. Everyone knows Demonology went out of fashion thousands of years ago, but it has remnants in the Dark Arts of this era. They still teach it at Durmstrang, their old headmaster Karkaroff was considered a specialist until... well. Certainly even you’ve heard of the Mark of the Beast?”

“Certainly,” she responded, unwilling to reveal that most of her knowledge on that term in particular came from a muggle religious text and three years of Sunday school.

“I believe that to be the Dark Lord’s inspiration— many see the Dark Mark as a sort of Protean Charm, so his followers will come when called— but that’s a single-minded way to look at things. It’s not a way to send a message; it’s a mark of conjuring. Evidence of a promise, a trade. In the oldest texts, it’s written that magic was traded with demons during summonings. Dark magic in exchange for human energy, parts of our magical cores. The evidence of such trades was permanent; they always left a mark.”

“How do you know all this,” Hermione asked, impressed at the depth of his analysis. She had a begrudging understanding that he’d always been bright when he’d made an effort, even surpassing her marks in Potions on occasion. But it always seemed he considered his studies below him, as if making effort was too plebeian. If anything, his disinterest was evidence of his status: he didn’t have to try hard, did he? *Malfoy* was a title in itself.

“Spent a lot of time in the manor library this summer,” Malfoy admitted. “A convenient hiding place.”

Hermione pulse skipped over the words manor library. Christ, how rich was he?

“If what you’re saying is true— don’t look at me like that, Malfoy, I’m not basing my understanding of an entire branch of magic on whatever your ancestor, Pompous Git the Third, wrote in his bloody journal— if it’s true, it means dark magic is rooted in the act of trade? Why didn’t humans try to trade with goblins, or elves?”

“Ask Pompous Git the Third,” he sniffed, unhelpful as ever.

“You said it’s still a part of the Dark Arts,” she considered. “Where are the remnants of the practice in contemporary magic?”

“Granger, where do you think Ancient Runes come from?”

“Voldemort’s mark was inspired by runes?”

“In theory, yes. Connecting it to the Dark Lord is only an educated guess on my part.”

His assertion was more than that—although she’d never tell him, she found it quite brilliant— and it struck Hermione as incredibly un-Malfoy-like to downplay it. She narrowed her eyes in suspicion.

“Malfoy, what you’re saying has extraordinary implications. The Mark was always regarded as a form of communication, or of ownership. But as a physical manifestation of an oath, it would have to be approached completely differently. It’s more like an Unbreakable Vow, isn’t it? Is that why it’s infected, because you broke your oath to Voldemort when you helped me?”

“I’ve made a rather bad deal with a demon.”

“Why are you telling me this,” she breathed, although clever as she was, she’d already realized the answer. In fact, she’d had a suspicion since their forced reunion in Hampstead Garden. Since Dumbledore asked her about Malfoy’s Dark Mark and his emotional

state in the broom shed. Maybe she hadn't known about the tattoo (although she had a sneaking suspicion Dumbledore had), but in her heart of hearts, Hermione knew that whatever business she had with Draco Malfoy was far from being over.

"Why Granger," Malfoy drawled. "I'm appealing to your Gryffindor sensibilities. Isn't it you lot, who's always going on about the sense of duty?" He began rewrapping his bandages, casting a glamour to mask his arm before rolling down his sleeve.

"Why me? I'm not a healer, or even particularly versed in cursed wounds. You should go to Dumbledore, or Madam Pomfrey—"

"I don't trust bloody Dumbledore, much less the school matron. If anyone else finds out, if *he* finds out, I'm a dead man. I've got the literal evidence of a betrayal written on me. Do you know what happens to Death Eaters who betray the Dark Lord, Granger?"

"I'm not—"

"I saved your life." He cut her off, voice like a dull blade, requiring excessive force. "Now it's your turn to save mine."

"You didn't save me," She responded. "You warned me. Gave me a sporting chance, if anything."

"I saved you and your poor, helpless Muggle parents, and we both know it. Probably the stupidest thing I've done, which is saying something."

"You know, you're terrible at asking for help," Hermione bristled, looking up.

In the late afternoon sun that was filtering through the train's windows, Malfoy appeared marginally less pinched and pale. She could see the lingering evidence of his scarred face, a silvery line running from his temple to his jaw. Yes, it had been expertly healed, but even the most accomplished of healers wouldn't be able to draw

out every sign of a cursed wound. She would know; the mark Dolohov had left on her chest hadn't shown any sign of improvement despite potions and poultices. The light also brought a blush towards the high points of his severe cheekbones, although that could have been anger or— should the infection have progressed to such a point— fever.

“Are you running a temperature?”

“A what?” He seemed bemused.

“Bloody wizards,” she dug around in her shoulder bag, where she'd taken to carrying a first aid kit with her, consisting of both wizarding and muggle supplies. “You lot don't even know enough to take a few paracetamol—”

“What's parasomethingtol?”

“Muggle fever reliever.”

“Muggle medicine is medieval,” Malfoy said, wrinkling his nose. “Don't they chop off their limbs? I've got a fever relieving potion in my trunk, I'll— Granger?”

She stopped her search, going suddenly still. She had a suspicion about the Dark Mark— about wounds inflicted with Dark Magic in general— that was tied to what she considered the Wizarding World's largest and most blatant blind spot. Of course Voldemort wouldn't think twice about the failsafes involved in poisoning any disloyal followers, not if they were Muggle in nature.

“Oh, we're so dirty,” Hermione muttered, mind spinning. “So inferior, that no one would even dream—”

“What are you blithering on about, you lunatic?”

“I'm not sure...I'd have to experiment a bit. But I have a rather, er, unusual potential solution.”

“Well?” Malfoy asked, expectant. Even his questions had a tendency to sound like demands, an aftereffect of his posh way of speaking.

“Give me some time,” she cautioned. “I have to do a bit of research. Speaking of this library refuge of yours— would you be able to have some of those volumes sent to school? I doubt Hogwarts stocks *Demonologies: Origins of the Dark in the Restricted Section* .”

---

“Hermione, where were you?” Ron asked, through bites of roast chicken. “Got another Time-Turner this year?”

By the time Hermione finally shaken off Draco Malfoy with a promise to help and returned to their compartment, she’d only had a few minutes before the train pulled in to throw on her robes. She gazed forlornly at her appearance; hair escaping her elastic, circles under her eyes nearly the color of plums. She pinched her cheeks for a bit of color and charmed her hair as smooth as it would go, before abandoning her efforts and hurrying into the carriages. She’d been the last to sit at the Gryffindor table, pointedly looking anywhere but the Slytherin table across the hall.

“Not bloody likely,” Harry interrupted. He’d started a habit of scooping large quantities onto Hermione’s plate before he served his own. It caused her heart to pang violently; she knew, after a childhood of near starvation, it was how Harry expressed concern. She made an effort to choke down some of the potatoes; she didn’t think she’d be able to manage any meat after spending an afternoon looking at Malfoy’s horrible arm. “We smashed the lot in the Department of Mysteries, didn’t we?”

“A shame for Hippogriff refugees everywhere,” Hermione said, eager to jump on an excuse to pivot the conversation. “What did you two get up to?”

“I just put on my robes and chatted with Dean and Seamus after the meeting, but Harry was busy at an audience with his fan club.”

“They’re not my fan club! It’s Slughorn, the new Potions Master, he forced me to go to this demented luncheon. He’s a nightmare already—”

Hermione allowed herself to be lost in their laughter, poking at Harry alongside Ron, and falling over in a fit of giggles when he started up a solemn chant of “Chosen One” that Ginny joined in on from a few seats down the table. With her bright hair and wicked grin, she looked like a sprite; Hermione couldn’t help but notice the way Harry’s eyes lingered her way, catching like a broken zipper on the image of Dean’s hand reaching for hers.

“It’s nice to see you laughing, Hermione.” Ron’s painful earnestness caught her off guard. She’d forgotten, for a lovely second, about her parents, her lies, and her involvement with the Death Eater sitting across the way. The weight of keeping secrets, which seemed to only magnify, left a heaviness on her chest, or maybe that was her scar. She wondered, looking up at the head table where Dumbledore sat with his hands clasped, how he bore it all, because surely no one held more secrets than the Headmaster himself.

“It’s nice to laugh,” she admitted, spearing some roasted parsnips with her fork. “I’ve a feeling it’s going to be sparse this year.”

---

I have a couple head canons that made their way into this chapter:

1. I never saw Hermione as someone who would take Pansy Parkinson's bullying sitting down, especially with her vengeful streak (Rita Skeeter in a jar, anyone?). Nor do I see Pansy as a flat, mean girl character, but instead, a complicated mean girl (or, a product of her deeply prejudiced and misogynistic society). In my mind, they are fairly well matched verbal adversaries (although in wildly different ways).
2. I always thought of Hermione as rather witty, something that is a big part of her character in this fic.

3. I wondered about the role of Muggle medicine in the Wizarding World, and have a head canon that Hermione thought "fever-reducing potion" a bit ridiculous when there was acetaminophen (paracetamol) tablets at hand. Especially being raised by dentists, I like to think of Hermione as a bit innovative in the consideration of muggle medical practices, something that will undoubtedly have a role in this story.

4. The Dark Mark really interests me as a concept/motif of loyalty in the series. I'm thinking about Peter Pettigrew and how his hand suffocated him the moment he considered sparing Harry; wouldn't Voldemort have other failsafes in place to guarantee total loyalty? Stick around to find out more...

---

# Liquid Luck

## Chapter 7: Liquid Luck

---

Hermione's first day goes to shit. Or does it?

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

On her first day of classes, Hermione woke from a groggy, partial dream state by a muggle alarm clock blaring the Spice Girls. Already the victim of a crippling bout of insomnia, whatever patience she once had towards the owner of the device was instantly depleted by the first chorus.

“Lavender!”

“Huh?” Lavender’s voice, muddled with sleep, emerged from the burgundy curtains around her bed, the four-poster in the coveted space closest to the tower window. So I can watch quidditch practice, Lavender had explained coyly, with an inflection that assured Hermione that she wasn’t exactly in it for the love of the game.

“Turn it off!”

“Keep your pants on, I can’t find the button!”

“Use your wand,” Hermione cried. *You daft bint*, she thought, ungraciously.

The alarm clock was a new addition to their shared room on the second highest level of the Gryffindor tower: a small white monstrosity with a face containing the figures of five titular women and the word “SPICE!” in bold print. Hermione had shared a room with Lavender Brown for five years and had put up with a great deal



of histrionics, but this was the first year that she was genuinely contemplating sleeping in the greenhouses.

“Why did you bring that thing,” Hermione muttered. “And why does it have to play the bloody Spice Girls ?”

“Leave it,” Parvati responded, peeking around the doorway from the bathroom the three of them shared. Her hair was wrapped in a towel and her voice, edged with warning. “We’ve not even had twenty-four hours of peace. I’m not having you two squabbling the first week.”

“It’s my mum’s,” Lavender said thickly, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. “She gave it to me before I left for school. We were listening to *Spice* , like, all summer. Mum’s obsessed with Posh.”

Hermione felt something low and swooping in her gut at the thought of Lavender’s muggle mother folding the clock in with her daughter’s socks. It created an ugly clench in her abdomen; what would her own mother have packed for her as a token of remembrance, had Hermione not robbed her of the opportunity?

You did what you had to do , she reminded herself. It had become somewhat of a mantra for her, but did little to dull the aching guilt, the loneliness that had lingered in her heart since she cast the memory charm. What you had to do. Her last connections to the muggle world— the world that had been hers for eleven years— severed. She hadn’t belonged there in a long time. But she’d never really belonged here, either.

“Just keep it away from me,” she said to Lavender, trying to soften her tone. Failing, if Lavender’s expression was any indication.

“Yes, your highness,” Lavender stuck her nose into the air. “Apologies for not submitting my clock for approval.”

Parvati let out a giggle, quickly schooling her face into apathy. Hermione sighed, internally. It would always be the two of them. Whatever impartiality Parvati attempted to provide, drafted as

peacekeeper in the ongoing fight of Granger v. Brown, it was overshadowed by her kinship with the blonde. Hermione didn't blame her, but sometimes it stung the tender part of her that just wanted to be chosen .

She wished she could say that it was all uphill from there, but the SPICE! alarm must have been a harbinger of bad fortune, because the rest of her day progressed in a similar fashion.

She had a shower that seemed to mitigate between too hot and too cold. Forgot to brush some Sleekeazy's through her hair before her drying charm, leaving her with the volume of a small nimbus cloud atop her head. She wished desperately that the Hogwarts uniform included a hat, specifically for days like today. Or at the very least, that it would be socially acceptable to wear a bag over her head.

At breakfast, she had a sip of tea that scalded her, only to forget about her cup until it was lukewarm. Distracted by the bloody paper, which thankfully had no news of attacks, she dragged her sleeve though Ron's syrupy plate. Oh yes, today had all the markings of a downward spiral and if Hermione was wiser, she'd give up and go back to bed. But she was stubborn and obstinate, and so she continued to suffer.

Defense, normally one of the lessons she looked forward to (well, when the subject's teachers were competent and not bloodthirsty lunatics), was spoiled by the presence of Snape in his newly found post. And even worse, it was one of two lessons she shared with the Slytherins in back to back blocks. Defense and Double Potions, one after the other.

About half the Slytherins had elected to continue with Defense after O.W.L.S; she suspected the other half, more interested in the Dark Arts portion of the course, were seeking private instruction. But because the gods had frowned upon her, Malfoy was among those practicing nonverbal spells in the classroom, lazily disarming Zabini and tossing him his wand back, all with his mouth sealed into a grim line. Wanker.

Hermione had a good grasp on nonverbal spells and had practiced the theory of turning her magic inward instead of out. After all, she'd repressed her magic for eleven years. She'd had a solid, if not traumatizing, understanding of what it was like to channel emotion and intention without having the words to express herself. Ron's face had grown nearly purple as they practiced together, as if screwing up his eyes and looking a bit constipated would suffice in place of a summoning charm.

Somehow, this was still better than Harry's attempt, in which he, bless him, managed a very verbal shield charm, strong enough to fling Snape backwards, landing him his first detention of the term. A record; he hadn't even made it to lunch.

The Gryffidor table was bursting with life, friends catching up after summers apart, classmates going over schedules and swapping stories of their first lessons. In an effort to avoid the inevitable— *how was your summer, Hermione?* —and the answering — *complete shit, I cursed my parents and now everyone thinks they're dead; also Draco Malfoy is cashing in on a favor* — she kept her eye level firmly at her bowl of tomato soup.

Ron leaned over, breaking her concentration to dunk a piece of sourdough in her bowl.

"Ugh, Ron! Can't you just get your own?"

"Yours always tastes better," he said, immediately going as red as the offending soup in question.

"Oooh," Seamus crowed, "Did you hear that, Hermione? Yours just tastes better ."

"Oh come off it—"

"I'm going to Potions," Hermione announced, pulling herself upright. She was certain her cheeks were blazing. She pointedly looked only

at Harry, ignoring Ron's flush and Seamus' shit eating grin. "I'm not getting stuck with the wonky cauldron this year."

"Oi, wait for us," Harry said, attempting to cram half a baguette into his mouth in one fell swoop.

"What?"

"Didn't I tell you?" Harry grinned around a bite of sandwich. "Since it's Slughorn, not Snape, I can sneak through with my Acceptable."

"Yeah," Ron added, less excited. "Lucky us. Two more years of Potions."

Two more years of Potions, indeed. And at the N.E.W.T. level, which meant double blocks, ensuring that she got the gift of seeing Malfoy, not only for an hour and a half that morning, but also, for her entire afternoon.

The Potions classroom was just as dark and damp as she remembered, but it had been the victim of a clear attempt at sprucing up: a Persian style rug lay by the desk, accompanied by an overstuffed velvet armchair wide enough to comfortably situate a walrus, and Snape's classic pewter cauldron had been replaced. In its place stood a series of much finer, silver and gold cauldrons, filled with different brews. They were all engraved around the rim, personalized with some sort of Runic marking—

"Careful there! We wouldn't want you falling in!" Slughorn's gregarious voice cut through her train of thought and she stepped back from the cauldrons immediately.

"Sorry, sir. I was just curious about the engravings on your cauldrons, are they—"

"Already groveling for extra credit, are you?" A familiar drawl cut in and she turned towards the offending voice's owner. Malfoy brushed by her without excusing himself, shooting a nasty look over his

shoulder. He was one of four Slytherins in their year that had elected to continue with the subject: Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott were already hunched together muttering in the back of the classroom, as Daphne Greengrass took out a hairbrush and ran it through her glossy, wheat colored hair.

“Hermione doesn’t need extra credit,” Harry piped up, loyal as ever. “Snape never gave her a single extra point and she still managed to surpass your scores, what was it? Every single term?”

Don’t blush, Hermione willed herself. Don’t you dare blush.

“Oh-ho!” Slughorn exclaimed, eyes glinting in a way that let Hermione know he’d misjudged the entire situation. “Do we have a bit of a rivalry here? We’ll have plenty of time for that, in fact...” he pulled a bottle of something golden from the drawer of his desk. “Today, we’ll be having a little contest.”

She settled into a station closest to the solid gold cauldron emitting a delicious scent, pulling out her scales as she tried to place it. The four Ravenclaws took another table, and so Ernie Macmillan, along with Harry and Ron, evened out her workstation, the latter seeming suddenly disgruntled.

“What’s wrong?”

“Everyone knows you don’t need extra credit,” Ron frowned at the floor. “I mean, I know that. You’re brilliant.”

She exchanged a what on earth is going on look with Harry, who shrugged.

“Er,” she responded. “Alright then. Thanks, I guess.”

Ron, uncheered by her response, dragged his trainers following Harry to ask Slughorn for extra textbooks. She flipped open her copy of Libatius Borage’s Advanced Potion Making, enjoying the sound of a fresh textbook’s crisp pages, the cracking of the spine, the—

“What are you two fighting about? Stop, you’ll break something!”

Harry and Ron looked up from where they were squabbling over the workbench, sufficiently chastised. Ron darted to the other side of the station with a slightly less banged up edition of the textbook Harry was holding.

“Hermione,” Harry said, in a tone he only used when he needed her to check over one of his assignments. “Switch textbooks with me.”

“What? No! I actually prepared to take Potions this year, unlike some people.”

“But I’m shit at Potions,” he continued urgently. “I need to do well if I want to be an Auror, McGonagall just gave me the world’s longest lecture about it. Come on look, there’s writing all over it, I can’t even see the instructions. I bet you already know how to make these blindfolded.”

He flipped open the textbook to demonstrate. The textbooks had indeed been vandalized, by lines and lines of tight script.

“Please, Hermione. I’ll do your butchering for a week!”

Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose in exasperation. On one hand, Hermione hated that aspect of potions, growing squeamish when beheading newts and mincing crickets. On the other, the book looked like it had a manifesto in the margins.

“Fine,” she acquiesced and Harry cheered, handing her the offending copy. “But I want two weeks of newt duty. And only for this class. You’re ordering yourself a copy as soon as we’re back in the Gryffindor tower.”

“Cheers,” Harry responded, shooting her a grin.

“I’ve been hearing a lot of good things about this year,” Slughorn bellowed, smoothing his mustache. He sent a wink to their table,

undoubtedly meant for Harry. “Let’s see those talents in action! I’ve prepared a few rare brews for you to identify; you’ll have to make these sorts of potions on your N.E.W.T.s, so best to get well acquainted early. Can anyone tell me what this one is?”

He pointed at a colorless substance in the cauldron farthest from her table. She felt her hand hit the air before she’d given it permission. Bugger. She wouldn’t be losing the designation of swot anytime soon. He called on her, eyes twinkling.

“Veritaserum, sir,” Hermione answered. “The truth potion.” It was the potion Snape had administered to the impostor Moody two years ago.

“Very good! Now this one, a bit more obscure, you’ll see the viscosity is a bit muddy—”

“Polyjuice Potion, sir.” She did not add how closely she’d been acquainted with that particular brew. Harry grinned at her madly, as if he knew exactly what disastrous encounter she was picturing. It had taken Pomfrey two days to get rid of her tail...

“Excellent, excellent. And this—”

Hermione did not bother to raise her hand.

“Amortentia,” she said, gesturing to the gold cauldron closest to her. “The most powerful love potion in the world.” It was rather irresponsible for Slughorn to have sitting out, in Hermione’s opinion, not to mention intrusive.

“Probably the most dangerous of the lot,” Slughorn declared to Malfoy’s smirk. “Yes, if you’d lived the life I’ve lived you’d agree, there is nothing more dangerous than the power of obsessive love.”

“It’s supposed to smell like whatever is most attractive to you,” Hermione continued. “For example, I smell freshly mown grass and new parchment and—”

She cut herself off before she could finish her sentence, cheeks heating in a way that ensured she was blushing all the way to her shoulders. She smelled pine and cashmere and something numbing — peppercorn, maybe. Somehow simultaneously crisp and warmly spiced, like mulled wine at the Christmas markets.

“May I ask your name, Miss—”

“Hermione Granger,” she answered, snugly fascinated by the buckles on her shoes. She willed herself to ignore the sniggering coming from the Slytherin table.

“Of the Dagworth-Grangers? Why, I believe it was Hector, who started the society of remarkable potioneers—”

“I don’t think so, sir.” She swallowed, throat suddenly coated with sand. “I’m, er, a Muggleborn.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Malfoy lean over and mutter something to Zabini. She didn’t have to be a seer to anticipate what kind of comment it was. Slughorn; however, beamed.

“Ah! *My best friend is a muggleborn!* Harry’s mentioned you, haven’t you m’boy?” Harry looked nauseous as Slughorn fixed his attention upon her. “He said you were the top of the class.”

Hermione’s stomach simmered with pride, and she was sure any modicum of faux-aloofness had evaporated from her expression.

“Did you really tell him that?” she whispered to Harry, grinning.

“Er, might have.”

“Well what’s so impressive about that?” Ron whispered. “You are the best in our year, I would have told him so if he’d asked me.”

Honestly, why had he gotten so surly? She shushed him, turning back to the lecture.



The room seemed to collectively lean in as Slughorn explained the final potion, Felix Felicis, which if taken properly, gave the drinker extraordinary luck. She wasn't sure of the legality of offering up a vial as a prize for the best Draught of Living Death, but Slughorn gave off a *don't ask don't tell*, old boys club air about him, which seemingly provided him the abilities to skirt the rules.

The potential of the prize sharpened the focus in the room, whispers suddenly abated in favor of rifling feverishly through textbooks. Although she'd done everything in her power to ignore him since their altercation on the train, she couldn't help but notice how he sat up straighter, suddenly pinning Slughorn with his full attention. She figured if anyone needed a bit of luck, it was probably Draco Malfoy.

To her annoyance, the page with the instructions she needed had been almost entirely obstructed by annotations. She could barely make out the script, and had to squint as she struggled with cutting soporiferous beans, tricky. Half of the line was crossed out in ink, handwritten directions in its place.

*Crush using the flat side of a silver dagger.*

She worried her lip between her teeth. At the other end of her table, Ron was cursing the tar-like substance that had thickened in his cauldron. The soporiferous beans that Ernie had been attempting to chop rolled under their seats. She looked around to find other students in a similar state of desperation, with the notable exception of Malfoy. He was clearly favoring his left arm and winced when Zabini brushed his right side, where she knew his infected Dark Mark must be plaguing him. Besides that he appeared as cool as ever, only given away by the tightness of the skin around his eyes and the speed at which he was crushing his beans and draining the liquid into a vial. Crushing them, just as her scribbled directions had ordered, with the side of a knife.

As if he had a sixth sense for being watched, he looked up, meeting her gaze. His eyes narrowed into the universal expression for, *what are you looking at?*

She dropped her stare quickly down to her cauldron, and retrieved her silver knife from her potions kit. The effect was immediate and the beans started releasing juice.

“Crush them, don’t dice them,” she told Harry, who was a step behind, still cutting up his valerian root. He barely seemed to register her instruction.

Her potion had turned a deep eggplant, and she consulted the second hand textbook once more.

*Counterclockwise for maximum clarity.*

The technique had worked for the sopophorous beans, hadn’t it? Dare she break with what the newer edition was dictating? The knife technique was advanced enough for Malfoy to know about it. She squared her shoulders and began to stir.

“Counterclockwise,” she informed Harry and Ron. “Ignore the book.”

“Ignore the book?” Ron squawked incredulously. “Have you been imperioused?”

Despite her assistance, each member of her table had somehow bungled the recipe. Harry’s had stayed a shade of purple bordering on puce, a telltale sign he’d not been counting his stirs. Ron seemed to have given up halfway and Ernie was vigorously mixing something with the consistency of pancake batter. Twenty minutes later, her potion had turned a pale lilac, just as it should. She wiped a bead of sweat from her neck, flushed from the heat of the classroom but pleased at the outcome of her potion. Slughorn passed over each cauldron, exclaiming in delight at Malfoy’s.

“Must have learned something from your godfather, isn’t that right? I’ll be happy to report your progress back to Severus!”

Malfoy glared, as if the very idea of Slughorn praising him to Snape was poisonous.

“But I think Miss Granger might have you beat!” Slughorn beamed at her, buttons of his waistcoat straining as he rocked his stance back and forth. “The brightest witch of your year, indeed.”

Perhaps this day hadn’t been the worst, after all.

He pressed a vial of golden liquid into her awaiting palm. Her peers let out a few half-hearted claps. Ron’s potion emitted an awful bubbling sound that could only be described as flatulence.

Ron and Harry packed up at warp speed, assisted by the fact they didn’t have potions kits with them.

“Gotta avoid Slughorn,” Harry muttered. The portly professor was indeed making his way over towards Harry, a hopeful glint in his eyes. “Meet you outside?”

“Go,” Hermione advised. “He’s making a beeline your way.”

“That should have been mine,” Malfoy called as she packed her scales, nodding towards the vial in her hand with a gaze so intense she was surprised her robes didn’t catch fire. He was just as flushed as she was, with sweat-dampened roots darkening his platinum hair.

“Maybe I’m just better at potions than you,” she responded. “Slughorn will have to tell Snape that, too.”

“You got lucky.”

“No, but I’m certainly going to get lucky,” she replied, gesturing with her golden vial of potion.

Malfoy raised his eyebrows.

“Not like that!” she exclaimed. “I didn’t mean it in that way.”

“Sure you didn’t,” he replied pushing past her into the corridor.

*Arse.*

She met Ron and Harry from where they were loitering outside the classroom and followed them up to the Gryffindor tower. She reached into the pocket of her robes, thumbing the vial absently. Alongside the potion, a folded note had appeared. She took it out surreptitiously and unfolded it.

*Headmaster's Office* , it read, written in Malfoy's perfect penmanship. *Sunday at eight.*

Dumbledore's office? Why on earth would she be summoned to Dumbledore's office? Why should the note have come from Malfoy of all people? A bolt of simmering dread consumed her momentarily. Because nothing good ever came from a directive to the Headmaster's office and nothing good ever came from an altercation with Malfoy, setting Hermione's Sunday up for the world's shittiest double feature.

"Oh, and here's your book back, Hermione." Harry passed her the new copy, disrupting her thoughts. She slid it into her bag alongside the second hand edition. "Thanks a load."

It was only when she was back in her room, a silencing charm cast around her curtains, that she cracked the old book open once more. She ran her fingers over the pages, annotated with a number of spells and suggestions, edits for recipes and apparent inventions. Countercurses for various states of disembowelment, spells marked *for enemies*. Whoever had owned it previously had a marked interest in violent spells, but excellent advice when it came to potions. She examined the inner cover carefully, where there was an inscription written in the same slanted handwriting as the annotations.

*This Book is the Property of the Half-Blood Prince.*

---

---

We're picking up speed! (She says, as she writes another chapter surrounding the events of a single day). This is a slow, languid burn between Draco and Hermione, so prepare yourselves.

Also, no one loves innuendo like a teenage boy, so a castle full of them? Buckle up.

Kudos and comments and Red Bulls give me wings. No seriously, I read every comment and the questions/theories are SO good.

Next chapter: Hermione and Draco have a meeting with Dumbledore.

---

# The Unbreakable Vow

## Chapter 8: The Unbreakable Vow

---

Hermione makes a promise.

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Hermione was used to receiving mail at Hogwarts: letters from her parents, orders for new course materials, and lately, the occasional missive exchange with Order members. Even as she resigned herself to owl post— why didn't wizards just use a magical postal service? — she'd never truly get used to the fanfare of a parcel careening into her morning tea.

Her post was attached to a great-horned owl, larger than the other birds delivering mail at the Gryffindor table and twice as fierce looking. The owl, while intimidating, was rather handsome, with tawny plumage and twin protruding tufts over its brows, giving it a devilish air. It nipped her finger while she attempted to extricate a package from its talons.

“Ouch— give me a second, you vulture!”

“Careful or it's going to take your fingers off.” Ginny sat diagonal from Hermione, deftly weaving her fiery hair into a braid. She had her broom propped against the table and wore athletic clothing: a Holyhead Harpies jersey that looked like it was once Bill or Charlie's based on its sheer size, track pants, and trainers. Even dressed down, she was noticeably pretty. “Whose owl even is that?”

“I'm not sure,” she replied. Finally, she freed the package. The owl swooped off without an acknowledgement, leaving her bleeding.

*This, Hermione thought, is why she had a cat.*

The package was secured by twine and neatly wrapped in nondescript brown parchment paper. She muttered a *diffindo*, slicing through the wrappings, to reveal an ancient looking book. Bound in red leather that was once crimson but now appeared the color of rust, it was embossed with peeling gold lettering.

*The Lost Art of Demonology.*

No doubt a volume from the Malfoy library, delivered after their conversation on the train. She hadn't forgotten her promise to help Malfoy; it had, in fact, remained a buzzing pestilence at the back of her head, an albatross she wished desperately from which to free herself. She cast her gaze to the Slytherin table, where Pansy Parkinson was holding court, a dispassionate Malfoy by her side, staring into his tea as if it contained the answers to the universe.

*Look up*, Hermione urged. *Look up*. But Malfoy didn't even twitch her way. She gave up on her unsubtle attempts at catching his eye and fixed herself a new cup of tea: splash of milk, two spoonfuls of sugar.

"That's a bit...obscure," Ginny leaned over, noting the title with curiosity. "Demonology?"

"Research project," Hermione invented. "Doing a bit of extra credit for Runes, on, er, unbinding rituals." This, albeit based partially in truth, was apparently dry enough to erase the last of Ginny's interest.

"Are you flying today?" Hermione pivoted the conversation away from her incriminating delivery, tucking it into her school bag.

"Quidditch trials," Ginny confirmed, answering around a slice of toast. "The only thing that would get me up this early on a bloody Saturday. Are you coming?"

"Ron's trying out, isn't he? I promised him I'd go watch."

Ginny put her hand to her temple, as if warding off an oncoming headache.

“The only thing I need more than my brother on the team is a swift kick in the—”

“Morning,” the brother in question grunted as he flopped into the seat next to Hermione. Harry was close on his heels, flinging his Quidditch bag next to Ginny, who offered him a cheeky salute.

“Morning, Captain,” she grinned. “Ready for trials?”

“Christ,” Harry muttered, pouring himself a cup of tea. He ruffled his hair in a telltale sign of nervousness. “By the looks of the sign up list, we’ll be there all day. Dunno why the team’s so popular this year.”

Hermione and Ginny swapped knowing looks, the latter slightly irate.

“Oh come off it, Harry,” Hermione said lightly. “It’s not Quidditch that’s popular, it’s you. You’ve never been more interesting, what with everyone calling you the ‘Chosen One.’” She paused, considering, before adding, “It doesn’t hurt that you grew about a foot this summer.”

A loud choking sound interrupted her. Ron, purple-faced, had gagged on a kipper.

“I’m tall,” Ron announced, after he’d cleared his airway.

An incoming owl interrupted the conversation, making a bee-line for Harry’s breakfast. He caught its package deftly, avoiding the mishap that Hermione had encountered with her first cuppa.

“See, Hermione?” Harry called, unwrapping the parcel. He looked relieved to have received a new topic of conversation, the pink tinge still high on his cheeks. “Brand new, nine galleons. Now you can give Slughorn back the dodgy one.”



“Hmm,” Hermione responded, noncommittally. She would not be returning the textbook in question. At least, not until she figured out who it had once belonged to. If only to know who’d give themselves a moniker as irritatingly lofty as the Half-Blood Prince. “You’re still on the hook for extracting my newt spleens.”

Across the hall, Malfoy stood up suddenly, leaving Pansy calling his name. His departure turned heads throughout the hall, conjuring whispers at every table.

“What’s that about?” Hermione wondered.

Ginny let out a low whistle, shaking her head.

“Didn’t you hear what happened? Malfoy got six weeks of detention from Snape.”

“From *Snape*? ” she exclaimed. This was rare enough to grab Harry and Ron’s attention as well. Snape was known for giving preferential — nearly deferential— treatment to the members of his house, particularly his godson. “What on earth for?”

“He cursed Nott in the seventh floor corridor between classes.” Ginny leaned in, voice low. “Nott’s been in the hospital wing ever since. People are saying it was something really violent, because he’s stuck scrubbing cauldrons for six weeks, no magic. I guess he thought Snape wouldn’t do anything, the fool.”

“I’d bet he learned the curse from his father’s friends over the summer,” Harry said, darkly. “You know, like the ones we had the pleasure of meeting last June? He was probably itching to try it out on some muggleborn first year.”

“But it wasn’t a first year,” Ginny insisted. “That’s the really strange thing. I thought he and Nott were friends, since, you know, they come from the same pureblood mania crowd. Sacred Twenty-Eight and all that tosh.”

“Maybe they’re fighting over Parkinson,” Ron said, pulling a face. Hermione laughed and Ron looked pleased with himself.

“Maybe it's a lover’s quarrel,” Ginny added, the corner of her mouth curling.

Harry grinned at her, and seeming to remember himself, clapped Ron on the back. They both rose from their seats and shouldered brooms.

“C’mon then you two,” Harry said, with a put-on sort of gruffness that suited him terribly. “Less speculating about Malfoy’s love life, more blocking Quaffles, eh?”

---

Hermione planned to begin studying Malfoy’s book while in the Quidditch stands, and so she was doubling back from picking up a runic dictionary in the library, when she felt a cool hand on her wrist. The barest of pressure, a reluctant touch.

Reaching for her wand, she turned to find Draco Malfoy.

She jerked from his grasp as if recoiling from a hot stove.

“Oh calm yourself, Granger.”

Hermione didn’t know how he managed that aristocratic tone, so disaffected and bored. A leisurely cadence pricked by sharpened consonants. “What do you want?” she asked, glancing down the hallway. Thankfully, the majority of the student body had slept in, and it was only populated by a few stragglers on their way to breakfast.

Malfoy gave a little inclination of his head. She frowned in response, but followed him into a partially obscured alcove behind the tapestry of Morgan le Fay. He held the heavy fabric for her, his pureblood manners impeccably ingrained.

“What do you think I want, Granger?” He rounded on her, voice significantly more emotive than it had been in the hall. Whatever mask he used to obscure his tone had dropped. He shook his sleeve up to his elbow and gestured at his forearm. The wound was preserved with a stasis charm instead of bandages, a clever healer’s trick. She wondered where Malfoy had learned it.

“Take the stasis charm off,” she answered and reached out before thinking better of it. She hesitated, and then asked, “May I?” in her most prim, buttoned-up voice.

Malfoy’s lips twitched twice, almost succeeding in concealing a smirk.

“You may,” he offered and she lifted his forearm with her fingertips, lighting her wand so she could examine the skin. The red lines of the Dark Mark looked just as inflamed, with large patches of skin that seemed to have sloughed off. Like his body was rejecting the tattoo, exiling the cells it touched. The sight made her breakfast threaten a reappearance.

“You know if you need my help,” she said, in an attempt to refocus. Nothing cleared her head like an argument. “It’s common sense that you shouldn’t mock me.”

“I wasn’t *mocking* you.”

“You smirked.”

“You did a very realistic Pomfrey. Forgive me, for finding humor in the minutia.”

“Oh, speaking of Pomfrey,” Hermione interrupted sharply. “What on earth did you do to Nott?”

Malfoy’s expression shuttered, the modicum of lightness between them snuffed out like a candle’s flame. He snatched his arm away, leaving her fingertips tingling at the sudden change in sensation.

“That’s none of your business.”

“I heard you really hurt him,” she said, examining his face. It was still terrifyingly blank. *Sociopath*, she thought ungenerously.

“Is that what you heard?” Malfoy’s cold mask split when he barked a laugh, bitter as dandelion greens. “Ungrateful sod.”

“*Ungrateful?* Malfoy, you cursed—”

“I’m not actually here to speak with you about the many sins of Theo Nott. As discussed, I sent away for a volume from the Malfoy library. Did you receive it?”

She raised an eyebrow at his uncoordinated attempt to swerve her train of thought onto new tracks. Whatever happened with Nott, she was certain Malfoy didn’t want to dwell on it.

“You’ve got an absolutely vicious owl,” Hermione confirmed.  
“Murderous beast.”

“Noctua,” he sniffed, “Is of the highest breeding.”

“ *Noctua?* ”

“It’s Latin.”

“I know what it means. You named your owl, *owl?* ” The glee must have bled into her expression, because Malfoy scowled. “Very creative.”

He ignored her jab, making an insistent motion with his outstretched hand.

“Alright, here’s the bloody book.” She handed him the red leather tome gingerly, in an attempt to keep their fingers from brushing. Malfoy seemed to have no such hesitation, hand swallowing hers as he pulled the book from her grasp.

“Didn’t try to open it yet, then?” He asked smugly, clearly knowing the answer.

“Well, I only got it this morning!”

“You wouldn’t be able to,” he continued. He held the book in the crook of his elbow as he unsheathed his wand. “ *Diffindo* .”

“A little warning, Malfoy?” she exclaimed, horrified at his unwarned blood letting. He allowed blood to drip from the cut in his left hand onto the spine. The book seemed to shudder in acceptance, falling open in his waiting hands. Hermione shivered, suddenly overcome with a chill.

“Is this all of your books?”

Malfoy shrugged, healing himself. She watched as the skin knit itself back together. He had calluses on his hands, something that surprised her.

“Purebloods,” she said, with plainly bared disgust. “You never just use a locking charm, do you? A cipher? God forbid.”

“This book is older than all that,” Malfoy said. “It’s pretty much ancient.”

It *felt* ancient. Hermione didn’t quite know how to describe it, the sensation that filled her when holding the volume. Like remembering something from when she was very young. Something so dreamlike and hazy, she wasn’t even sure it could be real.

“Now be a good little swot,” Malfoy said, “and help me heal this blasted thing.”

“Did you ever hear the saying about catching more flies with honey?” she responded, crossly. She returned the book to her bag, struggling momentarily with the buckle. “Must you always use vinegar?”

She turned, only to find Malfoy gone. He'd slipped away without making a sound.

"Bloody ghost," she muttered to herself, and then made her way to the Quidditch pitch.

---

The weekend went by in a blur, with Hermione balancing her piles of homework and the growing research she'd undertaken on Malfoy's behalf. The book that he had sent to her was as disturbing as it was fascinating; between reading that and her ratty copy of *Advanced Potion Making*, she started to have increasingly violent nightmares. She woke from them clutching at the scar on her chest, pain rippling through her until she could hardly catch a breath.

She knew this was unsustainable; eventually she'd have to see Madam Pomfrey about it, but she dreaded the consultation. An irrational part of her—a part she usually kept buried six feet deep—never wanted to find out what spell Dolohov used, as if her ignorance would somehow stem the physical consequences of the spell.

The scar seemed to heighten in sensation whenever she felt strong fear-based emotions; from nightmares, adrenaline, anxiety. The hours before her meeting with Dumbledore, it panged so insistently she could hardly manage a bite of dinner. She hoped that no one would notice her change in behavior. A futile wish.

"Why aren't you eating," Harry asked, frowning. Noticing her change in appetite, he'd taken to spooning portions of his dinner on her plate from his own, a gesture no doubt born from the scarcity mentality of sustenance in his childhood. At the Weasley's, he was always careful, measured about how much he consumed, as if one bite too many would expel him from the table. The thought made her heart ache, and so she made an effort to eat a forkful of shepherd's pie directly off his plate. He pushed it towards her, insistently.

"I'm just nervous," she admitted. "I'm meeting with Dumbledore tonight."

"What!" Ron exclaimed, silverware clattering. The noise drew curious glances from the rest of the table, and he lowered his voice pointedly. "You never told us that."

"Er," Hermione answered, eating more of Harry's pie to buy herself time. "Must have slipped my mind."

"Right, because it's so casual to be called to meet with Dumbledore," Ron said, sounding slightly put out. She noted that he'd been testy since tryouts; while he had gotten the position of Keeper, it had been only by a hair. She had arrived just in time to send a *confundus* McLaggen's way, something she rationalized as a just intervention. McLaggen really was a self important brute. She also realized, somewhat uncomfortably, that Ron was the only one of the three that hadn't been asked for a private meeting with the headmaster. "Suppose he's taking you on for private lessons as well?"

"Is he?" Harry asked, curious.

"I don't think it's lessons," Hermione evaded, unwilling to tell her friends she would be accompanied by Draco Malfoy. She was getting startlingly good at lying to her loved ones. She left them with a fragment of truth: "I expect he's going to want to talk about August."

The words lingered on her tongue like too-sweet berries, conjuring a hazy recollection of smoke and flames and Malfoy's shaking wand hand. She hoped the Gold Coast, or wherever her parents had settled, was warm and lovely.

"Shite," Ron said, rubbing his hand over his face in contrition. "I'm sorry, Hermione. I'm a complete arse. I mean, I should have known it would be about that. I should have been more, er, delicate."

Ron, for all his flaws, had a good heart. Hermione couldn't help but manage a little smile.

“Delicate? Like flower petals?”

“Or fairy wings,” Harry added.

“Or candy floss.” She was grinning properly now, and Harry had begun to snicker. “Or—”

“Come off it!” Ron whined, but he was smiling too, all thoughts of comparison seemingly washed away. “I was trying to be sensitive!”

“Don’t worry Ron,” Ginny chimed in, “We all know you’re *sensitive* .”

A spoonful of mashed potatoes sailed through the air in response. Ginny artfully dodged it, swinging her braid.

“But Ron,” Harry said with false incredulity, a hand on his heart. “You’re a *prefect* .”

She slipped away as the Gryffindor table descended into its usual chaos— “ *I’ll show you prefect, you specky git* ” — following the staircases to the headmaster’s office. She’d only been there twice before, but both times had been so eventful, the path was seared into her memory.

The entrance was guarded by the same ugly stone gargoyle, which stood immobile as Hermione attempted to enter.

“Um, sherbert drops? Fudge flies? Cockroach clusters?” The statute remained unflinchingly in place. “Oh budge up, you brute—”

“Temper, Granger.” A posh voice she was beginning to know all too well interrupted her frustrations. “Acid pops.”

At Malfoy’s words, the gargoyle began to shift, revealing the winding stone staircase that led to the headmaster’s quarters. He gave her a cold smirk before ascending.

“How’d you know?” she demanded, following him up the spiral stairs.



“Dumbledore told me.” He cocked his head, in mock uncertainty. “Did I forget to pass it on?”

“Hmph,” she answered. “Given that you’re part-gargoyle yourself, it probably just sensed a fellow brethren.”

“Given that you’re full—”

She interrupted his would-be illustrious insult by rapping smartly with the brass door knocker.

“Enter,” a calm voice called.

Both Malfoy and Hermione attempted to pass through the doorway at the same time, jockeying shoulders. She grit her teeth and pushed past; she could swear she saw a hint of a smile on Dumbledore’s perpetually serene face.

Dumbledore’s office had always fascinated Hermione, with its collection of unusual artifacts. Delicate silver instruments sat on most surfaces, whirring as they measured different celestial phenomena. The majority of the portraits of former headmasters dozed behind Dumbledore’s desk, with the exception of a pair of wizened witches in gilded frames carrying on a hushed argument. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Malfoy staring at Dumbledore’s phoenix with poorly-veiled interest. The bird in question cocked his head, meeting his gaze in an apparent evaluation of character.

“His name is Fawkes,” Hermione whispered. Malfoy twitched, clearly caught staring. He schooled his expression into its typical disinterest, and the phoenix ruffled its magnificent plumage in dismissal.

“Miss Granger,” Dumbledore greeted, inclining his head. His eyes twinkled in a manner she found slightly nerve-inducing. “Mister Malfoy. Thank you for joining me. Please, sit. May I offer you tea? A biscuit?”

“No thank you, sir,” Malfoy said with polite air that bordered on frostiness. He even *sat* formally, with his spine ramrod straight. Hermione declined with a shake of her head, taking her seat.

“I am certain you’re wondering why I’ve asked you here today,” Dumbledore said. “As you may have guessed, this visit concerns the events that occurred in Hampstead Garden on the afternoon of August the tenth.” He inclined his bearded chin towards Malfoy, whose face had gone as blank as a freshly wiped slate. “I’ve received accounts from you both and have found myself troubled by certain...outstanding factors.”

Dumbeldore folded his hands, interlacing his fingers. Some, blackened and shriveled in a way that made Hermione’s stomach turn.

“When discussing with Mister Malfoy, he insisted— prudently, I may add—that his role in these events be kept with the utmost secrecy. Any breach of this information could result in egregious harm not only to Draco, but to his family.”

“That means, no writing it down in your dream diary,” Malfoy inserted. “No consultations with your merry gang of Gryffindors.”

“I haven’t told anyone,” Hermione answered. Malfoy seemed unimpressed by this assurance.

“Forgive me,” he drawled. “If I take your word at face value, Granger. Which is to say, it’s worth very little to me.

Hermione bit the side of her cheek until she tasted blood. *She would not curse him in front of the headmaster. She would not curse him in front of the headmaster. She would not curse him in front of the headmaster.*

“I, however,” Dumbledore continued, with an added sharpness. “Have the utmost trust in Miss Granger’s judgment and capabilities.

If that were the whole of the matter, I'd have no reservations, but unfortunately, there are other factors at play."

Dumbledore turned towards Hermione, directing his question at her.

"I take it you are familiar with the art of Legilimancy?"

She nodded, once. Yes, she'd heard accounts of Harry's lessons with Professor Snape. She saw the outcome of Voldemort's intrusions into Harry's psyche. Her scar burned painfully, as she struggled to shut out her memories of the Department of Mysteries.

"Lord Voldemort, while accomplished in the art himself, has a knack for collecting gifted legilimens. To encounter one would have disastrous consequences, both for Mister Malfoy and for the Order of the Phoenix."

Hermione whipped her head sideways, curls flying, but Malfoy had no evidence of a startled reaction. Whatever he discussed privately with Dumbledore must have included at least a partial revelation of the Order.

"Forgive me, sir," Hermione interrupted. "How would I find myself encountering such legilimens?"

Malfoy shifted, seemingly uncomfortable, in his armchair. Dumbledore smiled at her in a way that didn't reach his bright eyes, a terrible sadness to the turn of his mouth.

"Miss Granger," he answered. "I will not insult you by obscuring information that you very well know to be true. I'm sure you have noticed that the Prophet is catching on, however slowly, to the increase in acts of violence and terror. It would be no revelation to you that Wizarding Britain is balancing precariously on the cusp of a war."

He sighed and Fawkes cried once, a mournful, vibrating sound, in response.

"I can offer my protection as long as you are students in this castle. But there will come a time where the walls of Hogwarts will no longer serve as a barricade between witches and wizards like you, Miss Granger, and those who would wish to harm you."

He paused, as if searching for a delicate manner in which to continue. When there apparently was none, he looked Hermione directly in the eye.

"Mister Malfoy has informed me that your escape from the events of August tenth has incurred a...reaction, in certain members of Voldemort's inner circle who are irate over your escape. In particular, Bellatrix Lestrange."

Hermione's insides seized and she tried very hard not to look in Malfoy's direction. Fear rattled, cold and queasy, in her stomach.

"Mister Malfoy," Dumbledore continued, soliciting a twitch from beside her, "was very brave to impart such essential information. The Order will not forget his actions."

He turned to Malfoy, who was staring impertinently back, an eyebrow raised.

"Going to ask something else of me, then?" Malfoy intoned with a boredom that barely concealed the anger creeping into his tone.

"It pains me to ask anything of my students," Dumbledore confirmed. "Especially ones who have already sacrificed so much at the threat of personal harm. However, Miss Granger finds herself in a perilous position, without the tools to protect both herself and those who have offered her aid."

"You want me to learn Occlumency," she surmised, and Dumbledore inclined his head approvingly, like she'd solved a puzzle. "And you're asking *Malfoy* to teach me? He can't stand me!"

“And yet,” Dumbledore replied in a tone that disallowed all potential pettiness. “He tried to save your life.”

“I thought I made this clear to you, Headmaster.” Malfoy piped up, clearly furious at being thought of as moral in any regard. “I didn’t save a life, I just didn’t actively kill anyone. There’s a difference.”

“I am well aware of the line between altruism and inaction, but thank you for your clarification, Mr. Malfoy.” Dumbledore’s eyes fluttered shut, as if the conversation was taking an enormous toll. “Your motivations do not alter the fact that, should we ask a seer, we’d find that what you did or didn’t do changed a great number of outcomes.”

“I want an addition,” Malfoy insisted. “To our agreement. If I show her...If I teach her Occlumency.” He stood, towering over the desk in an apparent attempt at intimidation. Although— like Harry and Ron—he’d also shot up at least a foot in the past year, Dumbledore remained placid. “I want a guarantee.”

“What agreement?” Hermione asked, to no answer.

“What would you ask of me?” Dumbledore replied softly. “That I have not already assured you of?”

“I’m not asking you,” Malfoy spat. He rounded on Hermione, looming over her chair. “I want it from *her* .”

“I’ll ask Professor Snape,” Hermione told Dumbledore, ignoring Malfoy entirely.

“Severus,” he answered. “Is unfortunately otherwise occupied this year. His duties to the Order are of the utmost importance and cannot be compromised.”

“Why can’t you teach me?” The words flew out before she could school her voice into something resembling politeness. Dumbledore ignored her accusatory tone.

“Unlike Professor Snape and Mister Malfoy,” he answered gently. “I am not a natural Occlumens. Despite my best efforts, my mental predilections are firmly within the realm of Legilimency. Always doomed to attack, instead of standing guard.”

“I want a vow of secrecy,” Malfoy demanded. “I want her to swear she won’t disclose what happened this summer. Or anything that’s happened since in regards to my role in this,” he gestured wildly between them. “This disaster.”

“I’ve already said, I won’t tell anyone!”

“Well, forgive me if I don’t trust you!”

“Miss Granger, Mister Malfoy,” Dumbledore interrupted with an authority that Hermione couldn’t ignore. “I’ll ask that you lower your voices when speaking in my office. ”

“I want an Unbreakable Vow,” Malfoy said. His chest rose and fell quickly, like he was trying to catch a breath. “If I’m going to teach her, if I’m going to...I need security. This is my mother’s *life* you’re gambling with.”

Hermione’s brows flew to her hairline, and then when it became apparent Malfoy was serious, she sprung to her feet. Even with her posture at its utmost capabilities, she was still at a disadvantage in terms of height.

“I’m not making any promises— under penalty of death, I might add, a *barbaric* practice— to you.” She turned to Dumbledore.

“I will not,” Dumbledore stated severely enough to cause Malfoy to blanch. “In good conscience, act as binder for a vow that Miss Granger has not consented to.”

She examined the headmaster: electric gaze, velvet robes, rotted fingers. He had successfully put the impetus of Draco Malfoy’s assistance on her. *Clever old man* , she thought ungenerously. She

wouldn't be forced into anything, but of course, by de facto affect, she would. Refuse, and she could be vulnerable to one of the most dangerous witches in modern history. Refuse, and Malfoy would withdraw whatever support he had promised the Order. Although she wasn't sure how it had been maneuvered as such, Malfoy's conscription in the fight seemed hinged, however delicately, on her consent to the vow.

*My mother's life.* What had Malfoy done when it was Hermione's mother?

"I'll do it," she said. Malfoy looked at her like she was mad. "I'll make the vow."

"Are you aware—"

"I know the consequences of an Unbreakable Vow," she interrupted Dumbledore rudely. "Sir." She added, in some flimsy semblance of propriety.

Dumbledore delicately lifted his wand from where it lay on the mahogany desk. Malfoy looked torn, as if he'd never truly thought she'd agree. Hermione outstretched her wrist, calling his bluff. After some hesitation, he took her hand in his. It was surprisingly warm, and she felt the callouses she'd noted when he sliced into his palm brush roughly against her fingers, sending an involuntary shiver into her spine.

"Will you," Malfoy began quietly. "Hermione Granger, swear to conceal the full nature of my involvement on the night of August tenth, in Hampstead Garden, as well as any involvement with the organization known as the Order of the Phoenix?"

"I will," she whispered. A slip of hot-white light shot from Dumbledore's wand, snaking its way around their joined hands as if binding them. She expected it to burn, but it simply fluttered delicately against her magic. "I don't even know your involvement—" she started, but swallowed her argument.

“If faced with the situation of grievous harm, will you swear your assistance in ensuring the refuge and safety of Narcissa Malfoy?”

She thought of her own mother, lovely and pink faced. She thought of Lady Malfoy, skeletal and drawn in the robes shop.

“I will.”

A second thread of light wove its way around their union. Malfoy gave a nod of grim satisfaction, ready to withdraw his hand, but she dug her fingers in until he yelped.

“Will you, Draco Malfoy,” she called in a surprisingly clear voice. “Fulfill your promise to impart the art of Occlumency to the best of your abilities, providing means of self-protection from the forces of the Dark Lord?”

He hesitated, longer than she had, mouth moving imperceptibly as if he was running his tongue carefully over her phrasing.

“I will,” he finally said through his teeth. The final thread shot from Dumbledore’s wand jubilantly, surrounding their joined hands, before suddenly blazing out.

Malfoy dropped her hand as if it were a hot poker. Dumbledore’s eyes lingered over the place they had been joined, before regaining his seat behind his desk.

“Thank you,” he said, directing his words at them both. “What you have done today is a step towards the unity required for—”

“Save it,” Malfoy spat. He folded his arms.

Dumbledore turned towards Fawkes, who cried solemnly in response. The bird fluttered from his perch onto the post of the headmaster’s chair. Dumbledore raised his good hand, and Fawkes nipped at his finger affectionately.



“Thank you, Mister Malfoy, Miss Granger. I’ll allow you to return to your respective common rooms. Unless,” he added, with the false placidity of a frozen lake, “you have anything else you wish to tell me?”

Malfoy’s hand spasmed from where it rested on his forearm. She looked pointedly at the place she knew the Dark Mark to be and gave him a tiny, imperceptible shake of her head.

“No, sir,” she answered for them both, head inclined demurely.

“Then you may go,” Dumbledore said. She knew he was too clever to miss the twitch of Malfoy’s arm, but he did not press further. “I’ll bid you goodnight”

Malfoy pushed forward, although he held the door for her with apparent bitterness. He didn’t speak on the stairs, and she resolved herself not to be the first to break the silence. The vow between them hummed not entirely unpleasantly, like some invisible thread had wound them together.

When they passed the stone gargoyle and made their way through the corridor that would lead them in their respective directions, he finally broke.

“You don’t trust him, do you?”

Hermione examined Malfoy’s expression. Distress was radiating from the tightness of his mouth, the way his brow was ever so slightly pinched. His eyes, the moment before a downpour.

“No,” she answered honestly, echoing what she’d said to the headmaster several lifetimes ago. “I don’t trust anyone.”

Malfoy considered her answer, eyes boring into her. She fought the urge to straighten her uniform tie. After a moment, he sighed, coming to some sort of invisible decision. His hand flew to his neck, rubbing away a phantom ache.

“We’ll start lessons tomorrow.”

“But I have—”

“Surely, this is more important than twelve inches of parchment on the ethics of cheering charms?”

God, she hated when he was right. Malfoy turned to leave and despite her better judgment, she stopped him.

“Malfoy. I read the book. It’s going to be rather experimental, but I have some ideas about how to heal your—well.” She took a quick breath. “But I’m going to have to use Muggle medicine.”

Malfoy stood shock still, something complicated flashing across his features, before answering.

“Honestly, Granger?” he said, sounding a bit strangled. “I don’t care what bleeding Muggle tosh you use, so long as you keep me alive.”

They stared at each other, only breaking eye contact when the clock chimed, indicating curfew.

Hermione bit her lip, unsure whether to ask the question she wanted to. Malfoy raised an eyebrow.

“What is it?” He leaned against the castle wall, resigned. “Just spit it out.”

She looked up at him, craning her neck.

“What did you promise Dumbledore?” she asked, voice practically a whisper.

“You’re a clever sort,” he replied. His snide tone did not match the solemnity he wore on his features. “Figure it out.”

---

---

As always, kudos and comments and Red Bull give me wings! If you really want to spoil me, let me know your favorite line from this chapter.

This is a lot of set up to introduce some of the mystery/plot points of the sixth year arc including: What's going on with Draco's arm? What did he negotiate with Dumbledore? What guidance will Hermione take/refuse from the Half-Blood Prince? And what's going on between Draco and Theodore Nott?

---

# Detention

## Chapter 9: Detention

---

Hermione turns seventeen, to much commotion.

---

---

I'm sorry for the delay, dear friends! I've had a difficult few months. Life came at me hard. But here we are. I hope the chapter makes up for it.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The morning of Hermione's birthday was a melancholy one, by no means helped by the steady drizzle and slate gray skies. September in Scotland, at its finest. The weather filtered out the usual morning light, so she woke, uncertain of the time. She'd stayed up incredibly late listening to the rain pummel the window panes. Ultimately giving up on sleep, she'd drawn the curtains on her four poster bed and spent the night cross-referencing nasty spells and potions from the Prince's textbook, searching for the origins of seemingly untraceable curses that even she'd never heard of. Between that and the Demonology volume, her bedtime reading had gotten incredibly dark, all blood curses and runic circles set on conjuring the makings of nightmares. It was no wonder she was having trouble sleeping.

At the foot of her drawn curtains, she could make out the sounds that had woken her: her roommates' poorly obscured whisperings.

“— just sign my name Parvati, your penmanship is better.”

“C'mon, just add a sentence...It'll look bad if you don't personalize it, Lav—”

“ —I’ll have you know she didn’t even remember *my* birthday last year—”

Hermione drew her curtains with a sharp flick of her wand, revealing Parvati and Lavender, squabbling over a garishly coloured card.

Oh, she realized, somewhat unceremoniously. She was seventeen.

“Happy birthday!” Her roommates chorused, as Parvati deposited the card in question at the side of her bed. With her wand behind her back, Lavender conjured a single carnation, haphazardly deposited on top like a cherry. The hasty spellwork revealed some wonky petals, and it was a last minute and mostly unwilling addition (as indicated by the mutterings she’d overheard), but it made Hermione’s heart clench in gratitude. Damned birthday sentimentality.

“Thank you,” she responded, grinning despite herself. She smiled at Lavender, who looked conspicuously at the ceiling. “Both.”

Seventeen, officially of age. There was little fanfare for her newfound ability to use magic without the trace— after all, she was allowed to conjure as she wished while within the castle walls — but she felt a bitter sense of freedom all the same. Like reaching out to catch something, only to have it jerked from your grasp. Too little, too late.

After effusively thanking Parvati and Lavender once more, she floated a heap of parcels from the foot of her bed and into the privacy of her velvet curtains; she’d always thought it loathsome to open presents in front of others, especially if one of them happened to be the ever-nosy Lavender Brown.

Conspicuously missing were the usual gifts from her parents: her mother’s sugar-free homemade fudge (that, despite her best efforts, usually ended up in the bin), her father’s yearly tradition of a handsome leather-bound journal and an engraved fountain pen (oh, how it pained him, that Hogwarts had them using quills). He’d been giving her them ever since she had been able to hold a writing

utensil, each engraving signifying the year of bestowal. The last one she received was marked, *With love, on your sixteenth birthday* .

Fighting the urge to sob, she closed her eyes and breathed in until her lungs threatened to burst. After a heavy exhale, she opened the lumpy parcel closest to her: wrapped in newspaper and yarn, undoubtedly Hagrid's doing. Inside was a gnarled bouquet of thorny looking tangles and a note.

*Happy Birthday Hermione* , it read. *Put the everblooms in water. Awfully rare flowers, they are. Love, Hagrid.*

Hermione considered flowers to be a rather strong word for the presentation of twigs and snarls enclosed, but she still conjured and filled a vase with a whispered *aguamenti* . Upon contact with the water, the bouquet grew green and vibrant, thorns receding into new leaves and cascades of periwinkle teardrop blossoms. It was an extraordinary bit of magic.

Ron's gift came next, a deluxe pack of sugar quills, the type she loved but rarely purchased for herself due to dentist-induced guilt. Harry had gotten her an expensive looking addition to her potions kit: a set of unbreakable glass phials, made of magically imbued limestone from the battlements of Blarney Castle. The case was inscribed: *to the best chemist I know — HP*. She traced her fingers over the tribute to their shared muggle heritage and clutched it to her chest roughly, worrying about the glass before remembering it was unbreakable.

Her final gift was unexpected: a handsome men's watch, wrought of goblin made silver and patterned with a subtle filigree design of vines and leaves.

*Dear Hermione*, the note that accompanied it read. *I know this birthday will be a bittersweet coming of age, too close to such tremendous loss to enjoy as you should. Nevertheless, I wanted you to be able to commemorate this moment in the traditional way. This was my father's —hence the Prewett crest on the clasp— before it*

*was mine. It's rather clunky on a young girl, but well made nonetheless. Before you protest, know that Ron would rather die than wear his mother's old watch and Ginny has already requested Muriel's timepiece. Wear it well and know that I am always a letter away.*

*Love,*

*Molly Weasley*

*P.S. Perhaps with some silver drop earrings? That would look rather fetching with your complexion.*

It was the postscript that broke the levees of Hermione's heart, freeing the tears that had been held back for too long. She gasped for air, sobbing with such intensity that she felt uncertain she would survive until her next garbled breath. Why was everyone being so kind to her? If only they knew what Hermione had done, the agency she'd robbed her parents of, the collusion she'd covered up, the cold and certain way she'd raised her wand. Would they love her with such beastly openness, with such generosity then?

It took a while for her grief to subside, never receding completely, but it sank to a manageable level, the slow burn that blistered in the peripheral of her heart. With a final shudder, she clasped the watch around her left wrist. The metal was warm instead of cool, the telltale sign of an embedded protection charm, or maybe just the kindness of Molly Weasley.

After splashing her face with cool water— her best effort to reduce the redness in her eyes— she dressed quickly and headed to breakfast, where she thanked Harry and Ron effusively for their gifts, taking out one of Ron's sugar quills to enjoy right away. He caught her wrist in his hand and she jumped at the contact. He blushed a violent red that clashed horribly with his hair.

"Is this Mum's?" he asked, and then cleared his throat. "I mean, the Prewett watch?"

“Yes,” Hermione confirmed, before adding worriedly, “but it’s too much, sure you or Ginny should have it, or your mother should keep it really, it was her father’s after all—”

“Are you kidding? If you don’t take it, it’ll go to me. You’re doing me a huge favor, see?” He grinned with unmistakable satisfaction, dropping her hand. “They’ll have to get me something *new* .”

“Oi—” Ginny called, sliding from her seat amongst the fifth years. “Happy bi—”

“Don’t you dare sing.”

Ginny looked put out, but after taking in Hermione’s red rimmed eyes, she put a comforting hand on her shoulder. Harry and Ron look at each other, alarmed, like— *should we have considered that?*

“Er, Hermione,” Ron tried, twisting the hem of his sleeve. “Today’s a bit of a tough day, innit?”

Harry groaned. Ginny covered her face in dismay. Even Neville grimaced from where he sat, a stone’s throw away.

“Honestly,” Hermione said, spooning sugar into her tea. “I don’t want to think about it. In fact, if someone would change the subject, I’d be ever so grateful.”

“Alright,” Harry considered, before narrowing his eyes. “Have any of you noticed there’s something strange going on with Malfoy?”

“Mate,” Ron warned. “Not this again.”

“What?” Hermione stammered. “Draco Malfoy?”

“No, his third cousin Druisella— ow, don’t hit me!”

Hermione withdrew her elbow from where she’d jabbed Harry in his side.



“What of it?” She asked. How would she respond if he had caught on to their rendezvous on the train, or worse, meeting with Dumbledore? As a result of the vow, she wouldn’t be able to explain herself even if she wanted to. She imagined herself tongue-tied — *you see Harry, Malfoy saved my parents* — before bursting into flame.

“He’s twitchier than usual,” Harry continued, holding up fingers as he went. “He keeps getting in trouble for dueling. Do you know it took Nott a full week to get out of the hospital wing? Snape must have given him ten detentions by now...Snape! And did you see those scars he has?”

“All right, Auror Potter,” Ron snorted. “Been keeping a keen eye, have you?”

“I hardly think Malfoy getting detention for dueling is a bad thing,” Hermione added. “You’re probably just noticing the extent of it now that he’s off that insipid Inquisitorial Squad and actually held to the same rules as the rest of the school.”

“More like now that Daddy Dearest is in Azkaban,” Ron said darkly. “Hard for him to weasel out of trouble with that axe hanging over his head.”

“I dunno,” Harry muttered, clearly unconvinced. “It’s just not typical Malfoy— he’s usually mouthing off, or threatening third-years. Cowardly git. He’s not exactly the reckless sort, is he?”

“If you thought about your studies half as much as you think about Malfoy, you’d be top of the class,” Hermione said lightly, attempting to pivot away from the conversation.

Harry didn’t know anything, yet. But he was dogged and persistent, and once he grew suspicious, it wasn’t in his character to back down. She’d have to keep her eye on this.

---

There was no mention of Malfoy for the rest of her birthday, until the double block of Potions. Armed with the Half-Blood Prince's textbook, Hermione had quickly become what Slughorn referred to as "a singular talent." The Slytherin table had begun muttering mutinously whenever Slughorn praised her, and although Hermione couldn't hear them, she felt a foreboding that naturally accompanied being the topic of their plotting.

"Once in a generation," Slughorn beamed down at Hermione from his armchair, where he observed the class' attempts at brewing Dreamless Sleep. "You could have given Lily Evans a run for her money, my dear."

Harry's head whipped up, meeting Hermione's puzzled eyes.

"My mother?" he blurted, then blushed. "Er, sorry to interrupt, Sir."

Slughorn looked faintly uncomfortable, avoiding Harry's eyes.

"Ah, yes, Potter. Lily was a dab hand at Potions...Cheeky, too. She was always inventing new brews, making little edits to my recipes. Part of a very gifted pair, always partnered with...Mister Zabini!" Slughorn called, interrupting himself. "Don't you dare waste those knarl quills! They cost me eight sickles a case!"

Harry looked back at his cauldron, wistful. Hermione offered him a comforting smile. For many years, she sympathized with Harry's loss, his hunger to know his parents, but now, she recognized the feeling intimately. She didn't know much about James and Lily Potter, doomed martyrs, besides the fact that Harry's father was a Quidditch Captain and a war hero (and according to Remus, a bit of a prat). There was something unnerving, being compared to Harry's mother. Another clever Muggleborn girl. Murdered for daring to exist so brightly in a world that abhorred her. She morbidly wondered if Slughorn would sigh over her once day, bemoaning the waste of talent the way he did Lily, a brilliant potioneer, an inventor— hold on, an inventor?

She flipped to the cover of her ratty Potions textbook eagerly, tracing the inscription. *Property of the Half-Blood Prince*. Her face fell. *Half-Blood*. Once her mind caught up to the impulse, she scoffed at herself. This couldn't have been Lily Evans text book. But an unearthed part of her wished it had been, because the textbook's margins were full of magic that, while not entirely dark, could definitely be constituted as gray. Maybe she liked the idea of a muggleborn, like her, taking what she wanted for once. Using magic indiscriminately. Powerfully. Then again, maybe this was Hermione convincing herself, bending her own morals so she could continue using the book without consequence. *She'd be discerning with it*, she swore to herself. *She wouldn't hurt anyone*.

Lost in thought, she reached for her wand from where it rested on the bench behind her, only to come up with nothing. A bolt of fear shot through her.

"Harry," she whispered, not wanting to call attention her way. God knew the Slytherins would have a field day if the muggleborn misplaced her *wand*, the literal, definitive extension of the wizard. "Have you seen my—"

A voice interrupted her, crisp Queen's English indicating its origin.

"Hey Granger," Malfoy said from behind her seat. "Catch."

Without thinking, she shot her hand out, scrambling for her wand as it went arcing towards her table. She'd not even gotten a finger on it, when Malfoy's cauldron exploded magnificently. The sixth years sprung to life, screaming and shoving each other out of the way. Covered in half-completed potion, Zabini swore so violently she was surprised his tongue wasn't smoking from the heat of his vitriol. Drops landed on her robes, faintly sizzling through the fabric. Slughorn started from his armchair, eyes the size of saucers, crying, "Oh my! Class dismissed! Miss Perkins, I'd shed that cloak quickly if I were you—"

Leaning back from the stream of students hurrying to put as much space between them and the disaster as possible, Malfoy—engineer of the unfolding chaos—looked her way and *winked*. She'd moved towards him, wand raised in retaliation, when he called out.

“Professor,” he drawled. “Granger’s exploded my cauldron.”

Slughorn looked up from where he was vanishing bits of potion, confused— “Miss Granger?”

Before she could explain herself and begin her tirade against the walking warning against inbreeding that was Draco Malfoy, the door swung open.

Severus Snape swept into the dungeons like he'd never left.

“Horace,” Snape said silkily, unsheathing his wand. With a sharp jerk, the fallen cauldrons snapped into position, right side up. “I was replenishing my boomslang stores when I heard a...commotion.” Snape’s eyes drifted to Harry and Ron, who had hung back with her, narrowing with disdain. “Am I right to assume Mister Potter is involved?”

Slughorn squinted at Snape, confused. “Potter?”

“It was Granger, Sir,” Malfoy piped up. “Vicious little temper, she’s got.”

Hermione wasn’t sure if it was the way his eyebrows pushed together in mocking contrition or the curve of his lips as he tossed the blame her way, but something about the smugness of Malfoy’s face was what finally broke her.

“I’ll kill you,” Hermione said, moving towards him. “You bastard—” She’d managed a fistful of his collar before Ron hauled her back.

“Control yourself, Miss Granger. No need to resort to...” Snape looked her up and down placidly. “*Muggle* methods of violence.”

“Sir, I didn’t do—”

“You can check her wand,” Malfoy added, rubbing his neck from where she’d grabbed him. Putting on a show of soreness. “Everyone knows she’s basically mad.”

“I’ll show you mad, you ferrety fuck—” Harry started.

“Twenty points from Gryffindor for uncouth vocabulary,” Snape barked. “Take Weasley and get out, before I make it fifty.” The two boys looked as if they wanted to argue.

“We’ll meet you in the common room,” Ron called to her.

“Now, Potter!” Snape spat, and with a look of pure hatred, Harry and Ron slunk out of the room.

Snape swept over to where she stood, still shaking from the exertion it took to keep herself from strangling Malfoy.

“Forgive me my intrusion, Horace,” Snape said. “And forgive me for suggesting that in my experience, where Granger goes, destruction generally follows.”

“Miss Granger?” Slughorn addressed her, looking incredibly put out. “This is unbecoming of a student of your caliber!”

“I know, Professor,” she explained furiously. “I didn’t do anything to his bloody cauldron.”

“Another twenty points for language,” Snape tutted and Hermione fought the urge to scream. “One would expect a little contrition, Miss Granger. I’d thought you’d have better control of your students, Horace. Perhaps you’ve gotten...soft.”

“I certainly don’t condone—” Slughorn started, offended.

“Check her wand, Professor,” Malfoy repeated. “I swear on my house, the last spell will be a *bombarda*. ”

Slughorn and Snape both looked her way.

“I— I didn’t have—He took my—”

“Why would Mister Malfoy take your wand to destroy his own cauldron,” Snape asked slowly, as if tempering the speed of his speech to cater to her immense stupidity.

“I don’t know!” Hermione cried. “That’s what I’m trying to tell you!”

“I recommend a severe punishment fitting for such dangerous misbehavior, Horace. Maybe—”

“Both students will be disciplined as I see fit, Professor Snape.” Slughorn puffed himself, clearly rankled by Snape’s questioning of his authority.

“Both?” Malfoy cried. “But—”

“Mister Malfoy,” Slughorn interrupted. “Miss Granger. I don’t know what kind of silly house feud you’re engaged in, but I assure you that explosions will not be tolerated in Advanced Potions!” Despite himself, he glanced at Snape's way.

Snape inclined his head, offering approval. “It’s your authority, Horace,” he said snidely. “I can only offer my recommendation.”

“Indeed it is. Weekly detention, until the end of term, for the both of you. Starting in the dungeons tonight.”

“Tonight?!” Hermione cried. “But sir, it’s my birthday—”

Slughorn offered her a sympathetic little twist of his lips.

“Well, perhaps....”

“Perhaps,” Snape interjected, sharp as a silver blade. “You should have remembered that before your outburst.”

“I’m afraid Professor Snape is right.” Slughorn straightened, his belly protruding significantly. “Dueling in Potions class simply can not be encouraged. Miss Granger, Mister Malfoy, you may go. But please be back here tonight at seven, sharp.”

“Yes sir,” Hermione muttered, defeated.

“I hope to not see such outbursts from either of you again,” Slughorn added belatedly.

“You won’t, Professor,” Malfoy said with false sincerity, shouldering his bag neatly as Hermione struggled with hers. She was on her way out of the classroom when she felt Snape’s eyes, trailing from the distant figure of Malfoy and lingering on her.

“I very much doubt that,” Snape said. His eyes were narrowed into near slits, something uncertain glittering in his stare.

---

Word of the potions disaster spread quickly, and each depiction of the event added a degree of absurdity. When Hermione sat down to dinner in a black mood, a group of third year boys scooted down the table, making abundant room. One of them even gave her a sharp little salute. Bemused, she raised her eyebrows, until the boy flushed and turned back towards his companions.

“I heard she siphoned acid and shot it directly into Malfoy’s eyes,” she heard him whisper. “His eyes! A dragon’s point of weakness!”

Hermione moodily stirred her leek soup until Ron and Harry arrived, attempting pacification.

“Malfoy clearly started it—”

“You were framed, honest. Sniveling little—”

“Of course Snape have to insert his beak—”

“Slughorn will forget all about it by next class, he bloody loves you—”

“I doubt it,” Hermione cut in bleakly. “As I’ll be having detention with him every week until the end of term.”

“Every week!?” Ron yelped.

“Until the end of term?!” Harry added, enraged. “That’s—that’s— it’s fascist!”

“What’s a fascist?” Ron queried, confused at the muggle term.

“Snape,” Harry offered darkly.

“Apparently I should be taking safety in the potions classroom far more seriously.” Hermione’s voice was bitter enough to neutralize a lemon. “At least Malfoy got the same.”

“At least?” Ron exclaimed, horrified. “You’ll be shut in the dungeons with him every week? Cripes, Slughorn should have just sentenced you to a jaunt in Azkaban. At least the dementors don’t spend the whole time blathering on. If it came to detention with Malfoy or The Kiss, I’d choose oblivion every time.”

“Well, I wasn’t offered the option, but thank you for your valuable input, Ronald.” She stood, causing the rest of her soup to slosh miserably in her bowl. “If you’ll excuse me, I’m off to polish cauldrons.”

“He’s making you start tonight!? But it’s your—”

“Yes,” Hermione hissed. “Happy Birthday to me.”

---

The dungeon was empty when she arrived, with only a note left on the blackboard in Slughorn’s looping hand.

*Miss Granger and Mister Malfoy, it read. There are assorted ingredients selected for you to prepare. I trust that in your efforts to*



*behave as responsible potioners, you will not require supervision. Please do not prove an old man erroneous in his trust! Wear gloves.*

On the wooden preparation table, there lay a brimming basket of Billywigs, waiting for their stingers to be extracted. The kind of mindless work Hermione hated most, and if she were to sting herself, she'd surely find a way to hate it even more. Wear gloves indeed.

She'd just pulled her pair on when the dungeon door swung open. Malfoy sauntered in, halfway through eating an apple. For a moment, they stared at each other. Then, Malfoy swallowed and grinned like a satisfied kneazle.

"What a sight," he said. "Saint Granger, in detention."

Hermione didn't respond beyond raising her wand. She was quick, but Malfoy must have been expecting retaliation, because her Bat Bogey Hex bounced off his waiting shield charm, pearlescent in the dungeon's dim light.

"One day," Hermione said plainly, looking him in the eyes. "Someone is going to snap and you are going to be horribly maimed as a result of that fat *mouth* of yours." She smiled at him, saccharine. "I can only hope that if it's not me at the other end of the wand, at least I'll be able to watch."

"Yes, one day I'll get mine, Granger," Malfoy agreed, dismissing her threats. "But until then..." He tossed the core of the apple into the waste bin, a gesture that struck her as so strangely muggle that she raised a brow.

"Oh, don't make that face." He straddled a chair across from her, tipping it forward towards her. "It makes you look like McGonagall."

Hermione scowled. She would not kill Draco Malfoy. She could not kill Draco Malfoy.

"Aren't you going to ask why I did it?" He continued. His eyes were brighter than last time she'd seen him, a gray that nearly bordered on blue. Of course, he was enjoying this. Sadist.

"I don't need to ask," she snapped. "I've had the answer for nearly six years." She leaned across the prep table to make her point. "It's because you're a prat."

"You know what your problem is, Granger?"

"Lately, you."

He ignored her. "You're so uninspired. Everything by the book. Step by step. No strategy, with you Gryffindor types."

"No soul, with you Slytherins."

Malfoy laughed. He actually *laughed*. She dropped the billywig she was extracting from in shock.

"Why," she asked, slowly. "Are you in such a bloody good mood?"

"Well," he started, resting an elbow on her table. She fought the urge to kick the chair legs out from under him. Couldn't he even sit correctly? "I found a way to conduct our little Headmaster required meetings without drawing suspicion from Bumbling and Bungler." She took this to mean Harry and Ron. "I've secured us a practice space where we're certain to not be disturbed. God forbid Slughorn supervise a detention," he snorted. "Hell would freeze over."

"You exploded your own potion. With my wand. *In an effort to find a practice space* ? Are you out of your mind?"

"Do you want to know the last reason, Granger?" His voice oozed satisfaction.

"Enlighten me, Malfoy."

“Now, I get to do this.” He whipped his wand up before she could react. “*Legimens.*”

It was like the floor fell out from under her. Suddenly, there was an enormous pressure at the base of her skull, and she felt Malfoy’s magic, bursting through her mind. She panicked as horrifyingly private moments shot to the surface—Ron’s voice echoing, *she’s a nightmare honestly*; primary school children pointing and laughing; Lavender Brown’s meanest vocalizations, *maybe Weasley should look for his rat on Granger’s head, her hair’s a nest*. Shame rushed through her, conjuring the way she’d traced the darker spells in the Prince’s textbook in guilty fascination, flashing to images of her tears from that morning, chest heaving sobs. Just as quickly, her parents: the last morning she didn’t know was the last, the way she’d waved her mum off when she’d stooped to kiss Hermione’s temple. Somewhere, she heard herself gasp. Malfoy didn’t get to see that.

“Fuck!” As a result of a curse Hermione hadn’t uttered, Malfoy had shot across the room. He lay, twisted awkwardly on the floor in front of the blackboard. Slughorn’s chalk inscription, smeared by the projectile of his body. Oops.

“Serves you right,” she called, wand still raised. “That was pure instinct. You’re lucky I didn’t sever a limb.”

Malfoy groaned and rolled into a seated position. He blinked like a bright light had been directed his way.

“I was right,” he muttered, brushing chalk from his robes. “Your mind is a truly miserable place.”

“Maybe if you had warned me, I could have come up with some of my more pleasant memories. For example, your transfiguration into a ferret.”

Malfoy shook his head mockingly. “Of course, you wanted preparation. Probably would be up to your nose in books on mind magic if I’d told you. That’s not how occlumency works, Granger.”

“I know how occlumency works, thanks.”

“Not the way I was taught. I needed to see your mental defenses, unprepared.”

“And?”

“You have none.” He stood, but didn’t move to approach her.

“Unsurprising, given your—”

“Yes, my dirty, dirty blood.” Hermione rolled her eyes magnificently. Fleur would have been proud. “My inferior, muddy genetics—”

“I was going to say your face,” Malfoy corrected, mildly. “And it seems to tell everyone in your radius exactly how you’re feeling. What you’re thinking.” He moved towards her, wand held by only his thumb, flat to his palm. A wizard’s version of holding his hands up to show no intent of harm. “What are genetics?”

Hermione blinked owlishly. What was *happening* . Draco Malfoy had seen her cry over her birthday. He was asking about *genetics*.

“Muggled science,” she offered weakly, sheathing her wand. He seemed to take that as an invitation to resume his seat. He wrinkled his nose at her response, as if she’d said *dirty old shoes* . “A way of tracing medical conditions and inherited physical traits and— oh, why am I bloody bothering!?”

“Sounds like a lot of tosh.” He put his wand flat on the table. Not holstered, but at ease. “First lesson of occlumency: always be prepared.” He looked up, examining her expression with a frown. “Why do you look like you’re—”

“Always be prepared, Malfoy.” She’d unsheathed her wand under the table, and cast before he could finish his sentence. “ *Legimens*, ” she said, smooth and firm like he had.

There was a quick jumble of faces— she could pick out Narcissa, Lucius, Nott, Snape— and then she felt the uncanny sensation of slamming into a brick wall. Her ears were still ringing as he looked down at her, annoyed.

“Second lesson: don’t underestimate your opponent. I’m a trained occlumens, you fool,” he mocked. “You think you could barge into my head on your first try? What an ego. Do you really think you’re that exceptional, Granger?”

She looked down into her lap. Mortifyingly, her eyes began to sting. She wouldn’t cry in front of Malfoy. She *wouldn’t*.

“I figured it would be like...like memory charms,” she said, very quietly. As if she’d whispered. “Mind magic, right?”

He was silent. She could hear some dampness dripping onto the stone floor. The candles flickered morosely in their sconces, threatening darkness.

“You will have to learn to protect yourself,” he finally said, with a briskness that didn’t match his softened tone. “Visualize your memories and keep them behind a wall, so that intruders can’t access them. There are varying methods— you could consider them bricks, or ships in a marina, or chests in an attic.”

“What do you use?” She asked, once she was certain her voice wouldn’t waver.

He rubbed a hand over his face, the gesture of a much older, more exhausted man. She half expected him to refuse an answer, but then —

“A garden,” he admitted. He looked at her for a long moment, as if daring her to laugh. “I visualize a garden.”

“Oh,” she said, unable to break his stare. There were bits of silver in his irises that seemed to catch what little light the room allowed and

hold it, precious, in his gaze. They sat there for a quiet little infinity, each refusing to avert their eyes. She had a feeling that if she were the one to break, Malfoy would be all too pleased.

“Legilimency,” he said, voice suddenly much lower. Still unblinking. “Is conducted through eye contact. You need to develop a steady gaze— no fidgeting or blinking.” He ran his eyes down her face like fingertips, and she shuddered, finally looking away. “Consider that lesson three.”

Somewhere in the castle, a clock boomed the hour. Jumpy with adrenaline, Hermione realized it was very late.

“I should...” She tilted her head towards the door in indication. She began to pack up her potions equipment. “I finished at least half of the stingers.”

Malfoy frowned at the basket of billywigs, like he’s forgotten the terms of their detention. Flustered by the tenseness of their interaction, she dropped her vials.

“Shit,” she muttered, as they went spinning, and she stooped to pick them up. To her utter shock, Malfoy had leaned over on instinct, reaching for the glass. They touched the same vial and she yanked it from his grip. He looked curiously at her wrist before reaching out and placing a finger on the metal.

“Very traditional,” he murmured, examining her watch. “That’s the Prewett seal, isn’t it?”

She desperately wanted to slip her hand into her pocket, but knew he’d take it as a symbol of embarrassment and have a field day. Besides, she wasn’t ashamed of the watch. It was a truly lovely piece.

“Seventeen?” He asked, and she nodded. “I suppose Weasley had to get in his intent of courtship quickly. A bit desperate, if you ask me, but I figure he didn’t want to risk it—”

“Sorry,” she interrupted. “Intent of courtship?”

He scoffed, as if he’d said the most obvious thing in the world.

“Is this a pureblood thing?” she said with unveiled disgust.

“No.” Malfoy finally retracted his hand, and took her seat to begin shucking billywigs. “It’s *the* pureblood thing. Father gave mother a watch encrusted with emeralds when she came of age. Great-Great Grandmother’s.” He frowned, as if realizing something. “It will probably be bestowed upon me for my intended as well. You know, as something romantic.” He said romantic in the way one might say *dementor*.

“Your...intended?”

“Are you slow?” He snapped, mood darkening faster than a horizon at sunset. “My intended. Like you are to Weasley.” He made a crude sexual gesture that would have gotten him another term in detention. “ *Intended*. ”

“Weasley—Ron— is not my *intended* .”

“Poor Weasley,” Malfoy said with relish. “You probably shouldn’t wear his family watch, then. It sends mixed signals. People might think you’re...intimate.”

Blood rushed into Hermione’s face and Malfoy’s grin deepened.

“We are not intimate, we’ve never even—” Malfoy raised his eyebrows with glee and she stuttered over her words. “It’s not like—he’s my friend, all right, Malfoy? I suppose that’s a difficult concept for you, but do try and get your overinflated head around it.”

“Don’t protest like that, it only makes you look guilty.”

“His mother gave it to me, okay? *Mrs. Weasley* . Which is not, and will never be, me.”

“His mother?” Malfoy sounded even more smug. “He had his mother attempt to secure a betrothal on his behalf? Goodness, he always finds a new low.”

“She gave it to me because she thinks my parents are dead,” Hermione said bluntly. “Because there isn’t anyone else to give me a watch.”

Malfoy’s smile slipped off his face and he grew stony once more. He picked through the insects, his thin fingers deftly de-stinging them. He didn’t even need to look down.

She hoisted up her bag and made to leave. This whole evening had been mad, absolutely mad. It was also the longest stretch she’d gone without thinking of her parents. Until Malfoy ruined that, too, with his stupid occlumency and his smart fucking *mouth* .

She was nearly gone, when he called out to her.

“Granger.” He pretending to focus on removing a stinger. “Happy Birthday.”

She slammed the dungeon door on her way out.

---

---

Next Chapter: “Remedial Instruction”

---

---



# Remedial Instruction

## Chapter 10: Remedial Instruction

---

Hermione handles failure poorly. Ron Weasley handles it worse.

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

---

The dregs of fall spilled into early winter without Hermione noticing. Her days were filled with coursework and research, paging through tomes on ancient healing practices that often left her with a turned stomach and no appetite. Exsanguination and fresh sheep's livers, indeed.

When she wasn't drowning in parchment in the library, she was in "detention" with Malfoy, a weekly occurrence with no reprieve. Slughorn, clearly feeling guilty about chastising his star pupil, left them with minimal prep. For the first hour, they would complete Slughorn's list, skinning boomslangs and stirring potions in a moody silence, only speaking to each other when directly addressed. Hermione avoided meeting Malfoy's eyes with the determination one would use around a basilisk.

Although she'd never admit it to Malfoy, it had proved a decent plan: they had five hours a week to practice Occlumency unbothered, with a built in alibi. If Harry were to check the map, nothing would seem remiss about Hermione and Malfoy out until curfew, always on opposite ends of the dungeon. In an additional stroke of luck, the detentions had provided Hermione access to a brewing space, where she was able to begin her experimental brew for Malfoy's infected mark: *sanitatem*, a healing potion often used on cursed scars.

The only detriment to the arrangement was Malfoy himself, who, once finished with his menial task of the day, watched Hermione brew with the intensity of a hawk tracking prey. Despite her assurances that she was not attempting to poison him, he loudly questioned every minor edit to the recipe, arguing with her over every small detail, from the way she crushed sophorus beans to her switch to counterclockwise stirs. Always one to take the bait, she'd argue right back, often resulting in screaming matches that reverberated on the dungeon walls. Once, a fifth year prefect stepped in, chastising them for their volume levels, which apparently could be heard echoing all the way into the Slytherin dormitories.

It was in this combative atmosphere that they would attempt Hermione's occlumency lessons, which had progressed dismally, mostly consisting of Malfoy insisting she "clear her mind" and "learn to compartmentalize," without offering up any instruction on how to do so.

"It's a feeling, Granger," he said after one particularly poor attempt where instead of constructing mental barriers, she accidentally conjured a fully-formed brick wall. "Don't tell me I have to *show* you how to feel."

"Because you're an expert on emotional intelligence? Stick to what you know, Malfoy. I'll let you know if I require assistance ruining people's lives. "

She would leave their sessions seething and ashamed; Hermione Granger was not accustomed to failing, much less handling her failures with grace. She tried an assortment of organizational methods, each more useless than the last: she tried to sort her mind into a fish tank, a bookshelf, a corridor with endless rooms. But all she had managed to accomplish during the lessons was to share a progressively embarrassing stream of memories with the person most likely to use them as ammunition. Malfoy, ever the professional instructor, commented on them with relish.

“Who owled you bubotuber pus?” He asked snidely after a particularly embarrassing recollection of fourth year. “Rather entrepreneurial idea.”

“Well, he wasn’t wrong was he?” after seeing Snape call Hermione an insufferable know it.

“You cry an awful lot, don’t you Granger,” after a memory of weeping while rowing with Ron over the disappearance of Scabbers. “No wonder you’re shit at occlumency.”

Malfoy seemed to have little to no sense of self-preservation, constantly prodding at Hermione, despite his reliance on her. He needed her to help heal his arm, and the more he was reminded of this, the more his distaste for her deepened, encouraging him to be nastier than ever.

She asked herself why she’d even bother to help him, ungrateful brat that he was. And her conscience would rear its head like a serpent, reminding her. He saved her parents' lives. He spared her. He was teaching her occlumency— no matter how poorly— in an effort to provide her defenses. Didn’t she want to break even?

---

With the majority of her mind occupied with not killing Malfoy (either by potion or wandpoint), Hermione’s defenses were down. She was lost in thought, contemplating the merits of heating the syrup of hellebore before adding it to the sanitatum. That’s when Slughorn struck, catching her without a prepared excuse.

“You must attend our Christmas festivities, there will be some excellent opportunities for networking, you know! I’ll have a few top notch potioneers present: Gertrude Killick, Alton Loxias, even Cyrillis Templeton may attend— you know, he trained under Aesop Sharp himself! You can never start thinking about your career too early.”

“Er—”

“Extend my invitation to Mr. Potter as well and please remind him I won’t hear any excuses about team practices! Despite what young wizards may think, Quidditch isn’t everything!”

“I—”

“And don’t forget to bring a date!”

That’s how she got roped into not only attending Slughorn’s Christmas Party, but dragging Harry into the breach with her.

“There’s no way you’re getting out of this one,” she told him over dinner. “He specifically mentioned he won’t hear anything about your sodding practice schedules. And he wants you to bring a date.”

“A date?” Harry turned an unflattering shade of puce. “Like, a girl?”

“It doesn’t have to be,” Hermione added. “I suppose you could bring a bloke. Slughorn strikes me as fairly progressive.”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“How exclusive,” Ron interrupted, a sneer twisting on his face. “With how often he’s swooning over the Chosen One and the Cauldron Whisperer, I suppose he’ll crown you King and Queen Slug.”

Harry exchanged a look with her that meant, *are you going to take this or should I*. Hermione hoped her eyes communicated: *please, not me*. The thing was, Hermione understood Ron’s jealousy. It made sense: the youngest son of a poor wizarding family, having to simultaneously live up to his brothers and carve out his own space for accomplishments. Not to mention being best friends with the savior of the wizarding world. She could empathize; she knew what it was to be overlooked for the circumstances of one’s birth. But comparison was the thief of joy, and Ron had a nasty tendency to allow it to steal every bit of his usual buoyancy, leaving behind a cruel shell of her friend. When he got like that, any kindness Hermione might have brokered on his behalf quickly evaporated.

“Hermione or I can bring you,” Harry offered mildly, and Hermione tried to look occupied with her soup. “If you want to come.”

“How generous,” Ron sneered. “The charity case gets to tag along.”

“It’s not charity. Slughorn told us to bring dates,” Hermione commented, rolling her eyes and Ron’s behavior. “Not the orphans of London.”

“Dates?” Ron turned towards Hermione, mouth pressed into an ugly little line. “Suppose you’ll be writing to Viktor, then. I’m sure Slughorn will piss himself in joy.”

“Are you still writing to Viktor?” Ginny interrupted from where she sat next to Dean, interested. Hermione willed herself not to blush. She did still write to Viktor; in fact, she owed him a response letter to the note he sent her at the beginning of term. While things between them had not always been exactly platonic— they had a fumbling, but heated summer dalliance after fourth year, when she visited Bulgaria— the distance had allowed the tone of their letters to cool significantly. She certainly wouldn’t encourage any old romantic notions to flare up by inviting him as her date.

“We correspond,” she answered Ginny, who grinned as if Hermione had said something far more salacious. “Believe it or not, *Ron*, it’s normal for two friends to write letters. I don’t appreciate the insinuation.”

“Oh come off it,” Ron snorted. “An international Quidditch star wouldn’t be writing to you for friendship.”

“Why not?” Hermione asked quietly. Harry, more attuned to Hermione’s anger than Ron, began chewing on his thumbnail nervously.

“Mate,” Harry interrupted. “Leave it—”

“Ron, don’t be a pig—” Ginny started, but her brother was well and angry, on his way to furious.

“He’d want to get something out of it,” Ron plowed on. “Why else would he be writing to a sixth year student? Easy pickings, isn’t it?”

By the end of his tirade, the entire Gryffindor table had fallen into a quiet. They’d seen Ron and Hermione row enough times to know the warning signs: the heat under Ron’s collar, the slight raise of Hermione’s eyebrows. Some of the younger students started shoveling spaghetti into their mouths at top speed, trying to finish eating before the inevitable explosion.

“You mean,” she began, eyes narrowed. “Why would a famous, handsome, wealthy Quidditch player be talking to a muggleborn, if he wasn’t trying to— to—” She scrambled for a more dignified word, but fell short. “— to shag me?”

A shadow fell over her plate. A *tall* shadow.

“My, my, Granger,” Draco Malfoy grinned like Christmas had come early. “Who exactly are you shagging?” Hermione groaned. Of course that’s what he’d overhear.

“Oh piss off Malfoy,” Harry spat, voice raised. “Why are you everywhere this bloody term?”

“This has nothing to do with you,” Ron added, his complexion passing red and heading directly towards purple.

“Professor Snape asked to see Granger,” Malfoy answered silkily. “How fortunate that I should pass the message on during this riveting conversation. Please Weasley, continue with your rebuttal. Although between you and me, if you’re begging a witch to take you to an invitation-only party, you probably shouldn’t infer she’s a slag.”

“What’s Snape want with Hermione?” Harry asked, but was universally ignored.

"I wasn't asking her to go with her," Ron said loudly.

"That's what you take issue with?" Hermione's voice was equally raised. Malfoy seemed delighted with this, leaned on one of the hall's pillars with the casual poise of someone taking in a show. "The assumption that we'd go together? Not the part where you inferred a man would only speak to me if I was spreading my legs."

"Let's not—" Harry started, but Hermione had had enough.

"I didn't ask Slughorn to invite me," Hermione stood, raising her chin in a superior manner that she knew Ron hated. "I'm not famous, or well-connected, or obscenely wealthy. I've got no pedigree. And before you accuse me of sleeping with him, too, because APPARENTLY that's all I'm good for, let me inform you: I was going to ask you to accompany me, but now I'd rather ask the Giant Squid." She started towards Snape's office, pausing to offer a final jab. "It would look better in dress robes, anyway."

"You're going to need some ice for that, Weasley!" Malfoy let out a mocking whistle. "Maybe you could ask Potter to take you, I'm sure you won't have to put out...much!"

Before Ron could swing at Malfoy, he was already off, striding quickly to catch up with her. To Hermione's horror, angry tears had sprung into her eyes.

"Your tongue, Granger," he sounded slightly impressed, as he fell into step with her. "I'd hate to be Weasley right now. His pride will never recover. Not that he had much to be proud of in the first place."

"Harry was right," she spat, rounding on him. "Why are you everywhere!? The detentions are bad enough. Why don't you just piss off and torture someone else?"

"But I've gotten quite good at torturing you," he said, and she could hear his grin before she saw it. "Besides, Snape didn't just want to

see you. He's got an idea about—" Malfoy made a gesture, touching his wand to his temple to indicate occlumency.

"Why is *Snape* in on this? Should we announce it to the rest of the castle? Hermione can't occlude, so we're crowdsourcing advice—"

"You know we're not making progress. I needed advice on how to teach— oh, don't look at me like that, Granger. Even your precious Dumbledore trusts him."

"I suppose," she frowned, unconvinced.

"Are you really seeing *Krum* ," Malfoy's voice dripped with a surprising distaste. "That burly oaf? I remember him tossing you around like a sack of potatoes at the ball."

"I thought you were a fan of his," Hermione answered coolly, making a mental note of Malfoy's comment. So he'd noticed her with him, at the Yule Ball. *Curious*. "Switch it up after you saw him interested in a mudblood?"

"It's more the fact that he's built like a door, with the brains to match," Malfoy sniffed. He wouldn't meet her eyes. "Never meet your heroes."

Snape was seated behind his desk, hands folded under his chin. His office, that had once bustled with Lupin's rare creatures and imposter Moody's defensive gadgets, was decorated sparsely. The only adornment on the walls was a yellowed instructional poster on wand grip that looked about two hundred years old. Snape was waiting, plausibly for them, with a bored expression on his face, one that darkened upon Hermione and Malfoy's arrival.

"Sit," he instructed simply. They sat. Next to Malfoy's ramrod posture, she tried her absolute best not to slouch.

"Sir," Hermione started, "I don't know what you heard about our lessons, but—" A glare from the Defense professor stopped her in



her tracks.

“Let me be frank, Miss Granger. Mister Malfoy. I don’t relish in aiding students with extracurricular work during my personal, uncompensated hours. In the interest of time, I will speak and you will listen. *Shut* your mouth, Draco, before you catch flies.”

“Yes sir,” Malfoy said, chastised. Hermione smirked.

“Mister Malfoy has kept me abreast of your situation. I hear, unsurprisingly, that your progress has been dismal at best, Miss Granger? That you require... *remedial* instruction?”

“That’s not fair. Malfoy doesn’t teach me anything tangible—”

“A no or a yes will suffice. I will not hesitate to silence you.”

“Yes, sir,” she gritted, looking anywhere but *him*.

“I’ve instructed very few wizards on this topic,” Snape said, his eyes glittering like beetles in a jar. “Even fewer have been able to sufficiently grasp the theory, much less the practice of occlumency. It is quite possible your mind is simply unfit for this branch of magic, Miss Granger.”

“Respectfully, sir—” Hermione started, in her most disrespectful tone.

“She has to learn.” Malfoy piped up, and both Snape and Hermione swiveled their gazes to him in shock. “She *has* to. My aunt will...” He shuddered horribly, going pale. “Unfortunately, Granger knows things, Sir. Things that will get her killed. That will get both of us killed.”

Snape sat silently, taking in Malfoy’s plea. He looked between the two of them with a vague, unplaceable dismay, as if they were an apparition of something he thought was long dead. After a moment, his eyes flattened into their usual black. *He was using occlumency now*, Hermione realized, intrigued. But why? What thoughts would her and Malfoy have brought to the surface?

When he spoke again, it was so quiet and measured, both Hermione and Draco had to lean forward to listen.

“Many years ago, I attempted to teach a...peer of mine. It was imperative she learn to protect her mind. It was a dangerous time for witches like her.” Snape continued with a muted sort of horror, remembering a fear that had been long realized. “I tried to teach this witch to defend herself mentally, but she was stubborn. She resisted my help.”

For a moment, Snape closed his eyes. When he opened them, they were completely unaffected.

“I begged her to learn. Maybe if she had...” Snape trailed off bitterly. “My point is that occlumency isn’t about resistance.” He eyed her and Malfoy. “It’s about allowing your mind to go slack. Occlumency is how the intelligent wizard plays dead. It’s how he survives.”

“You,” he pointed sharply at Draco, who straightened immediately. “Stop forcing your way in. Your path of entry is part of the problem. Unsurprised, given who trained you.”

Snape turned on Hermione, who found herself copying Malfoy’s movement and sitting up sternly. “And you— stop resisting him. You are only shredding your own defenses and exhausting yourself in the process. You Gryffindors never seem to learn that you cannot master occlumency through *brute force* .”

Hermione bristled, but bowed her head in assent.

“Are we understood?”

“Yes sir,” Malfoy said. He had regained a modicum of color, but still looked rather peaky.

“Dismissed,” Snape waved a hand and his office door swung open, unceremoniously. “And remember, I offer my advisement as a *favor*, Draco. Do not bother me with inconsequential matters again. Do

know your *place*.” Snape spat the final statement, heavy with inferment.

Malfoy seemed rattled by the phrase, and stood immediately, moving towards the door.

She stood, following Malfoy to the hall. Before she could stop herself, she’d turned around.

“What happened to her?” Hermione blurted. “The witch?”

His black eyes snapped to hers, as cold and dark as a winter night.

“She died,” Snape spit. “Does that satisfy your curiosity?”

Before she could answer, he raised a hand and the door slammed in their face.

Hermione strode quickly to catch up with Malfoy, curious. The corridor was empty, with only a portrait holding a few tittering noble ladies, clad in silks and drinking liberally from an amphora.

“What’s he mean by know your place? Rather ominous?”

“My place, Granger,” Malfoy sighed. He seemed more reserved than usual. Tired, maybe. Up close, she could tell there were smears of blue under his eyes. She wasn’t the only one having trouble sleeping. “Scion. Pureblood. Death Eater. I can’t just act right— I have to think it, believe it.”

“Are you not?” Hermione asked quietly. He looked down at her, puzzled.

“What?”

“Not believing it?”

Malfoy looked temporarily stunned at the notion. Like he hadn’t considered it seriously, or maybe, hadn’t been prepared to hear it

spoken aloud.

“Don’t talk like that,” he warned. “Don’t ever talk like that. Not where we could be heard.”

“Malfoy, if you’re questioning—”

“I’m not the only one who needs to know my place, Granger,” he said coldly, picking up his stride until his cloak whisked down the corridor to the dungeons. The dramatics, *honestly*.

---

Back in the Gryffindor common room, the fire crackled uproariously, warming Hermione’s numb hands. The common room had almost emptied, only inhabited by a few students lingering, pushing bedtime. A few third years played a quiet game of chess, pausing for long stretches to share packs of bonbons. Fred Weasley was draped over the squashy orange sofa, his head in Angelina’s lap. Every so often she’d lean down, her curtain of braids obstructing what Hermione thought was some particularly explicit snogging. She hopes fervently they wouldn’t reach for a blanket. Lavender Brown and Parvati held the corner armchairs, periodically scowling at the obscured sky as they checked over each other’s Astronomy assignments.

She looked into the flames as she pondered the evening’s strange conversation. Snape had looked at her and Malfoy so strangely, as if he was recognizing an old, horrid friend. What was his problem with Hermione?

“What did Snape want?” Harry snapped her out of her reverie and perched on the arm of her sofa.

“Slughorn has us working with fertilized doxy eggs in detention,” she invented. “Snape’s invested in making sure we don’t ruin his supply.”

“You’d think he’d butt out of potions now that he’s got the post he’s always wanted,” Harry responded uncharitably. Hermione hummed,

resting her head on his denim clad legs. Outside, it was beginning to snow— the first of the season.

“Look,” Hermione whispered and Harry turned to the window. “First snow.”

“You’ve gotten awfully sentimental, Hermione,” Harry jibed good-naturedly, ghosting his fingers through her hair. She relaxed into his efforts— it felt so good to be touched so gently. Sometimes, she wondered why she didn’t feel any romantic inclinations towards Harry. She should, shouldn’t she? He was handsome and kind and brave and most of all, her friend. But his touch didn’t ignite any sort of longing within her. It just felt like a home that no longer existed. The golden thread of shared loss glinted between them: it was the first winter that they’d both be orphans. This, she imagined wistfully, was probably what having a brother felt like.

“Yes,” she agreed with him. “That’ll happen.”

“Ron’s acting a twat,” Harry added, unknowingly treading into painful territory. “But you know how he gets.”

“Don’t make excuses for him.”

“I’m not—”

“You are,” she stated, sitting upright, his hand still trailing from her hair. “You always do, Harry. Every horrible thing he says when he’s angry is excused because, well, it’s Ron, and he’s feeling badly about money, or Quidditch, or how he measures up to everyone else.”

“Well, isn’t this cozy.”

Ron’s voice carried from the stairs, seeped in brittle accusation. His expression looked horribly snide and it didn’t suit him. In the shadowcast of the firelight, it made him look a bit like Percy. Harry

scooted away from Hermione as if he'd been caught by an ember, an annoyingly guilty expression on his face.

"Please don't fight," Harry started, holding up his hands in a gesture of peace. "I'm so tired of listening to fighting."

"Please," Ron continued, voice notching up, "don't stop fondling each other on my account."

"Oi," Harry said, properly affronted now. "No one was fondling."

"Just do it," Ron turned to Hermione, his face creased in misery. "Go to Slughorn's together. I've been convincing myself otherwise, you know. That it was all in my head. That even next to Harry, next to Krum, you might—" He shook his head like a waterlogged dog. "Forget it. You were always going to leave me behind. No room in the broom cupboard for three."

"Ron," Hermione said, startled. Her face heated as blood rushed to her cheeks. *He honestly couldn't think...* "Harry and I aren't— it's not — our relationship isn't *that* . Not even approaching that."

"The worst part is," Ron said, in a devastated way Hermione was unfamiliar with. "I actually thought I had a chance. At getting Keeper. At getting with— it doesn't matter. It's pathetic."

"Hermione's like my sister," Harry added. "I don't know what's got you like this, but you're making this something it isn't."

"Some sister," Ron spat, derisively. "You're always looking after her, touching her—"

Hermione's temper, which had been simmering for days, finally reached a boil.

"HE'S COMFORTING ME, YOU COLOSSAL PRAT. I LOST MY PARENTS. " Her voice cracked. "*My parents* ," she repeated, and

the words broke again. “And you. You’re thinking about *Quidditch* and *snogging* . You *disgust* me.”

Those remaining in the common room were suddenly transfixed by bits of wallpaper. Ron looked like he’d been clubbed over the head. He’d acted a fool. He’d gotten everything so, so wrong. Embarrassed tears gathered, and threatened to fall from his glassy eyes.

“Hermione,” he said, suddenly heartbreakingly serious. “I—”

“That’s enough, ” Fred Wealsey sat up from Angelina’s lap, expression uncommonly stern. It was the only time Hermione had ever seen him resemble his mother. “Ron, go upstairs.”

“I’m sor—”

“Upstairs,” Harry agreed, firm. He stood, nodding towards the boy’s dormitories. “Not now, okay? You can apologize tomorrow.” Harry swept him towards the staircase, face grave. A wound had been inflicted that even he —ever the peacemaker— could sense wouldn’t be mended tonight. The common room was quiet enough to hear a quill drop.

“Ron,” Hermione called after him, and Ron winced, but did not turn around. Coward.

“The sad thing is...” Her eyes were clear, but her voice was ragged. If Malfoy were to cast an *occlumens* on her now, she’d probably fall to pieces. “If you stopped measuring yourself against your friends for a moment...you’d notice that no one else is making any comparisons.”

---

This certainly isn't a Ron bashing fic, but this is NOT a good chapter for him (granted, his whole first arc in Half Blood Prince is basically him making a colossal ass of himself). But as Draco Malfoy would one day attest, there is always room for redemption.

Comments are like Red Bull, they give me wings!

Next chapter: "The Many Woes of Pansy Parkinson" AKA Christmas Party from Hell.

---



# A Collective Madness

## Chapter 11: A Collective Madness

---

Hermione's Prefect rounds are disrupted.

---

---

Okay I had to split the Christmas Party chapter into two-- we won't get to Pansy just yet! But I hope your introduction to Theo Nott more than makes up for it.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The early winter days brought towering evergreens in the Great Hall and conjured snowflakes drifting from the enchanted ceiling. To Hermione's chagrin, the bracing cold had also brought with it a collective madness for which there was seemingly no cure.

Suddenly, everywhere she turned there were students wrapped in amorous embraces, couples squabbling in the hallway, moony-eyed girls whispering in bathrooms. Lavender Brown had started parading around with love bites on her neck and a coy, *wouldn't you like to know?* prepared for those brave or stupid enough to ask after their origin.

There was a strange, needy buzz amongst the older students: who was taking who to Hogsmeade? To the broom closet after dinner? Parvati had asked no fewer than six times if she was bringing a date to Slughorn's party. Hermione had threatened to jinx her in response.

Most ridiculously, the seventh year Slytherins had started receiving formal intentions of courtship in the morning mail, something Ginny warned was the first step towards marriage contracts. The youngest

Weasley had been accompanying her during meals more and more, after an argument with her menace of a brother over her relationship with Dean Thomas. This was ostensibly to keep Hermione company in her refusal to sit near Ron, but also to avoid increasing rows with an irritated Dean, who'd been shirty with her ever since the encounter.

"Marriage contracts?" Hermione had a passing understanding of pureblood culture: the debutante-style balls, the elbow rubbing, the semi-incestuous arranged coupling of third-cousins. Each new detail cemented her belief that they were all lunatics, willfully chained to archaic tradition.

"Did your mum and dad do that?" Hermione had asked. "The pureblood courting rituals?"

Ginny smirked indecently, looking very much like a cat with a canary in its jaws.

"Didn't you know? Despite her insistence on dodgy math, anyone who can count knows that Mum was *quite* pregnant with Bill at their wedding. Rather quick affair on all fronts. Ron can't mention it without gagging."

"I think it's antiquated," Hermione frowned, thinking of Malfoy's assumption at the sight of the Prewett watch. "Not to mention rather sexist. Can you imagine going through all that?"

"If Dean had sent me a bloody scroll of intention, I'd have cursed him into smithereens," Ginny had asserted testily. "Granted, if he keeps up this mood, I still might."

"Are you bringing him to Slughorn's party?" Even if she ended things with Dean, Ginny was still popular and quite pretty. She'd grown out her hair nearly to her waist, and more than a few heads tended to swivel her way in the hallways, following a flash of copper.

“You sound like Parvati,” Ginny rolled her eyes. “Why bring anyone? I’m only going to drill Gwenog Jones on how to get a shot at trials for the Harpies. It’s not very romantic, is it?”

“A serious business,” Hermione agreed, lips twitching. “No place for a date.”

“Have you asked someone? Oi— what about McLaggen? Yes, he’s handsy and obnoxious and has a mouth like a toilet plunger, but have you considered the fact his uncle is *famous* ?”

“I think I’ve heard that once or twice—” Hermione staved off her giggles. “Maybe I should cut out the middleman and just write to his ancient uncle.”

“Now that’s a man in his prime—” This was the final straw, and Ginny shrieked with laughter before she could finish. Hermione made loud shushing sounds.

“Don’t draw attention, he’ll come over— oh, hello Plunger, *I mean*, Cormac! Late for potions, have to dash—”

The festive mood was making prefect rounds excruciating. If Hermione had a galleon for every point she’d taken after stumbling upon partially undressed pairs behind tapestries, she’d own half of Gringotts. But it wasn’t only because of the increase in public displays of affection. In addition, a stony silence had developed between her and Ron since their blow up in the Gryffindor common room.

Ron had attempted a gruff public apology the next morning, one that Hermione had coldly rebuffed. The combination of her snub and a recent loss at a Quidditch match Hermione had *not* attended seemed to only fuel his bad mood. Embarrassed, he’d taken to making snide comments to whoever would listen and doing a rude impersonation of her raising her hand in class.

Harry had taken up the reluctant role of go-between with a constant refrain of *I know he's a prat, Hermione* and *do shut up, Ron*. The only time Harry couldn't keep the peace was during prefect rounds, so Hermione had asked for a partner swap. Davies, pompous as ever, said Hermione would have to wait until her request was formally processed, likely not until after Christmas.

In the meantime, with no interest to have any contact with the red-headed menace himself, Hermione split their patrols neatly in two and completed her portion in solitude. She sometimes thought it would be nice to have company walking down the chilly hallways in the evenings, but then again, would she really want to find couples fondling each other with Ron by her side? Ron, who turned red at the sight of a quick kiss between Bill and Fleur. Who'd blown up at Dean and Ginny for snogging in a corridor?

No, Ron would be *particularly* poorly suited to this; Hermione would bet he did his rounds with his eyes shut.

That's why it was such a nasty shock, to find him in an empty classroom down the Charms corridor, with his tongue down Lavender Brown's throat.

Hermione stood in the partially open doorway, startled into stillness. Her feet felt heavy, shoes suddenly filled with lead.

Ron's hand was groping somewhere under Lavender's partially unbuttoned shirt as the blonde made noises of encouragement. Even though her mind was urging her to flee, she remained frozen, listening to the eager sounds accompanying what could only be described as a sloppy embrace.

For a minute, she debated taking points, even if it was from her own house, just for the satisfaction of seeing Ron shrivel with embarrassment. But then Lavender moved his hand down her stomach, guiding his fingers under her skirt.

Suddenly breathless with horror, Hermione shot down the hall as if she'd apparated, not stopping until she was two floors removed, halfway to the dungeons.

She wasn't sure what to do with the tight feeling in her chest. Was she jealous? She leaned against the castle wall and tried to imagine herself as Lavender, with Ron's lips pressed to hers— no, she thought, suddenly queasy. She most definitely didn't want *that*.

Hermione couldn't quite explain the sense of betrayal: she didn't want to take her place, but she also didn't want it to be *Ron* that Lavender was snogging. She felt something bitter, something lonely and possessive. Ron was *her* friend, despite his many, many flaws. What would happen when he and Harry became like all the other sixth year boys, obsessed with whoever they could wrap themselves around in the nearest alcove? Where would that leave Hermione?

She wanted things. Was that so horrible to admit? She wanted to be touched. She wanted someone desperate for her.

She wanted what came after the sound Viktor had made, with his lips on her throat the last night of her visit to Bulgaria. The nearly-pained groan he'd let out, breath hot on her skin, that she sometimes thought about when she couldn't sleep. The rough way he'd asked, *may I?* before undoing her with his fingers. They'd been half-drunk on fireflies and salt from the Black Sea and she'd felt soft and pretty under his serious gaze. It had only happened once, but it had taught her that despite her tremendous grasp on logic, she too was predisposed to the delirium of desire.

"Excuse me," a clipped voice asked. "Are you lost?"

Her eyes flew open, cheeks burning. A slim, dark-haired boy in a Slytherin tie leaned dispassionately in the hall.

He was one of the boys who orbited Malfoy. Quieter and less consequential than Crabbe and Goyle, he'd always slid into the background. Hermione couldn't think of a time she'd heard him

speak in class, but there was something familiar to his voice, something she recognized in the set of his jaw. There was a long pause where she struggled to place him and he regarded her with a cool disinterest.

“Nott,” She snapped, her memory finally catching on his name. “Theodore Nott, isn’t it?”

“Hermione Granger, isn’t it?” He mimicked. “I’ll repeat myself. Are you *lost*?”

“I’m a *prefect*,” she sniffed, straightening in order to appear taller. She hoped she didn’t look as flustered as she felt.

“Merlin,” Nott muttered. “*I’m a prefect*. You sound just like him.”

“Like who? And I’m on duty, so you better have a good reason for wandering the corridors after curfew.”

“Curfew isn’t for another thirty minutes,” Nott answered, not bothering to check his watch. “And I was trying to catch Sluggy, but he went down for the night. Not that it’s any of your business.”

Despite the dim corridor light, she could make out a series of mottled bruises on his face and folded arms. Strange, that he wouldn’t have had them healed.

“Are you all right?” She asked, eyes lingering on the marks. Yes, he was a Slytherin and probably hated her for simply existing. But Hermione couldn’t help herself. “Did someone hurt you?”

“Someone,” Nott muttered, lips twisted. “Indeed.” He had a wavering, unsure way of speaking, a mannerism that didn’t seem aligned with the distasteful little frown on his lips.

“Do you want me to—?” She offered, raising her wand. “I’m not bad at healing charms, really.”

“Don’t you dare,” he responded, genuinely perturbed by her offer. *Slytherins*. They’d cut off their own hand if they thought it had offended their sense of capability.

“Suit yourself. Oh, I can—it’s somewhere in this pocket, give me a second—” Hermione dug into the secret, extendable pocket she’d sewn into her robes and Nott watched, bemused. The events of the summer had taught her that she could never be too prepared.

“Here.” She pulled out a small container of bruise cream and after a moment of hesitation, extended a palm in offering. Nott looked at her as if she’d grown a second head.

“What?” Hermione snapped. “Oh, just take it, don’t be stupid. I won’t tell anyone, if that’s what you’re worried about.”

After an excruciating silence, the boy reached out and quickly pocketed the salve.

“How much do I owe you,” he said, with terrible dignity.

“You don’t owe me anything,” she answered, rolling her eyes. “I’m not an apothecary. It’s just cream.”

Nott stared at her, unblinking. She thought, somewhat unkindly, that he looked a bit like an owl. She looked back, unable to shake the feeling they were sizing each other up. After a long pause, they burst out simultaneously.

“What are you doing in—”

“Why were you looking for—”

“Answer me,” Nott insisted. She raised her brows and he softened his iron tone. “I mean, tell me first.” She raised them even higher. “Fine, and then I’ll answer your bloody question, just—” He paused to collect himself, before asking. “What *are* you doing in detention with Draco?”

“Why don’t you ask Malfoy? He’s the one who landed us there with his little cauldron prank.”

“I did,” Nott said simply. “I’d like to hear it from you.”

“We’re fertilizing doxy eggs,” Hermione lied, coming up with the most disgusting explanation she could. “For Slughorn’s stores.”

“Funny, that’s exactly what Draco said,” Nott replied, without a hint of a smile. He tapped his chin, like he was thinking. “Word for word.”

“What are you bothering Slughorn for?” She asked, crossing her arms. For a second, Nott frowned at her question, eyes darting to the floor, but he recovered quickly.

“I’m looking to attend the Christmas gathering, of course,” he offered smoothly. What a practiced liar, Hermione thought.

“Right,” she scoffed. “You’re wandering the corridors at curfew for a *party invitation* .”

“Well yes, Granger. I’m just *desperate* to attend and Zabini won’t take me.”

“Why?”

“Well, he used a lot of expletives, but the gist was—”

“Not Zabini,” Hermione corrected. “Why are you supposedly desperate to go?”

“I value my career prospects,” he intoned, like he was reciting from the driest chapter in a History of Magic textbook. “Networking is an important part of ensuring my future.”

“Right, because you need to *network*. Aren’t you heir to whatever?”

He let out a bark of a laugh: a sharp, mirthless thing. She suddenly remembered how he seemed familiar— she’d see Nott Sr., roaring in



cruel glee, while running for her life at the Department of Mysteries.

“When your father is in Azkaban for services rendered to the Dark Lord, it puts a bit of a damper on the family name. I haven't received many invitations lately. ”

“Poor thing,” Hermione said, unsympathetic. “How difficult that must be.”

“It's dreadful.” He clicked his tongue in mock horror. “I imagine this is what it must be like to be poor.”

Hermione had prepared a rebuttal, acidic on her tongue, when their exchange was interrupted by a familiar figure striding towards them, pale hair like a beacon of irritation. *Of all the Slytherins in the dungeons, it had to be him.*

“*Nott!*” Malfoy called into the corridor looking peeved. “I told you, don't you *dare* —” He stopped short at the sight of her.

“Granger?” Malfoy said, genuinely bewildered, eyes lingering on her face. She fervently hoped that she was no longer blushing from the incident in the Charms corridor. “Why are you all...pink?”

*Oh, blast.*

“From the cold,” she snapped. “What's it to you?”

Malfoy twisted his expression into his usual sneer. He'd shed his robes in favor of a thick green sweater and plain trousers. The sight of him dressed so casually had her startled, like seeing a dog walk on its hind legs.

“Shouldn't you be up in your tower?” He asked mockingly. “Sewing bonnets for elves?”

Was it finally late enough for her to take points? Could she even take points from another prefect if they were out past curfew without being on duty? She glanced at her watch. Eight minutes to ten. Drat.

“Actually,” Nott cut through her internal dilemma. “I was just asking Granger here to Slughorn’s Christmas Party.”

Both her and Malfoy swiveled towards him. She was sure her jaw had unhinged with shock. Whatever interaction they had been having earlier, it had certainly not contained even the slightest romantic undertone. What was he *playing* at?

“No, you weren’t,” Malfoy blurted.

“Yes, I was.” Nott turned to her and offered her the world’s most insincere smile. “ *You’ve* got an invitation to Slughorn’s, don’t you? Would you like an escort?”

“Very funny, Nott,” she added. “You should really both be off to bed. ” Neither boy seemed to be listening. “I’m supposed to finish rounds in ten minutes.”

“Have you gone mad? Have you been around Granger long enough to sustain brain damage?” Malfoy demanded, voice swelling. His words echoed, lingering in the empty hallway.

Hermione was under no assumption that anything Theodore Nott was saying had even an iota of truth to it. But Malfoy’s tone of disgust stung. Was it so shocking that someone would ask her to a party? Forget that she had no interest in Nott. Forget blood status and house rivalry and the fact his father tried to murder her in a government building. There was a part of Hermione that took deep offense to Malfoy’s apparent consideration that as a person— as a girl— she was somehow repellant to romantic attention.

“Why not?” Nott asked, shrugging his bony shoulders.

“Would you like my treatise on the subject? She’s not exactly Sacred Twenty-Eight, is she? And you’re— and she’s — she’s *Granger!* ”

“Yes,” Nott replied, turning in dismissal. “I’ve noted that. Thank you for your thorough input, Draco.” He cocked his head, eyeing her.

“Well, Granger?”

She stared back at him, perplexed. She couldn't help but note that some of his bruises were fresh and some were yellowed. So, whatever had happened to Nott was still happening. Something that made him desperate enough to speak to her, to accompany her. She didn't buy a single word he'd utter about preparing for his future. In fact, she suspected him to be on track for the same career path as his friend Malfoy, Dark Mark and all.

Maybe it was pity. Maybe it was suspicion, keeping friends close and enemies closer. Maybe it was because Nott asked like he was issuing a challenge and she was stubborn to a fault. Maybe seeing Ron and Lavender writhing together like snakes around a caduceus had traumatized her into lunacy.

“Fine,” Hermione said. “Don't wear anything ridiculous.”

“I won't if you don't.” Nott grinned, a cold little gesture that didn't reach his eyes. Hermione had a feeling her definition of ridiculous was very different from his.

“This is madness,” Malfoy insisted. “I don't know what asinine point about inclusivity or mending bridges you're trying to prove, Granger, but this is foolish, even for you.”

She checked her watch. 10:03. Perfect.

“Twenty points from Slytherin for being out after curfew.” She glanced between the two. “Ten for each. Shall we make it forty?”

Malfoy— more irritated than usual—made a rude gesture before turning on his heel and storming off in the direction of the Slytherin common room.

“I'll receive you outside your common room Friday,” Nott offered with a distant sort of politeness.

“Don’t bother,” Hermione sniped. “I’ll meet you there.”

It was only when her pride had cooled that she considered maybe, she’d made a terrible mistake.

---

---

Okay next up is DEFINITELY "The Woes of Pansy Parkinson" which has some of my favorite scenes I've written. Thanks for reading-- your comments give me wings!

---

# The Woes of Pansy Parkinson

## Chapter 12: The Woes of Pansy Parkinson

---

Hermione goes to a party. Pansy airs her grievances. Draco struggles with his words.

---

---

Since I split this chapter in two, I thought it was only fair to give you the second half early. Behold: The Christmas Party

Thank you for supporting this fic. My readers' vibes are truly immaculate.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The announcement— if you could call snogging at breakfast an announcement— that Ron Weasley and Lavender Brown were an item was largely overshadowed by something far more salacious and unexpected:

Hermione Granger and Theodore Nott were going to Slughorn's Christmas party. *Together.*

Hermione didn't realize people were staring until halfway through her first cup of tea. It was a bit like when Skeeter had been inventing slanderous stories about her dosing wizards with love potions, except this time, everyone was looking at Hermione like she was the one who'd been dosed. All four house tables seemed to be united in one thing: gossip. Pansy Parkinson was glaring in her direction, eyes like a sharpened blade. Well, at least one good thing would come of this: getting under the Slytherin girl's skin.

“That skinny git?” Ginny exclaimed, once she’d heard. “Hermione, I had to hear this from *Parvati* .”

“How’d Parvati know?”

“She’s partnered with Greengrass in Herbology— nevermind that. Do you secretly love him or something?” Ginny asked, aghast. Hermione rounded on her.

“No, I don’t *love* him,” Hermione hissed. “Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t even know him really, he just said he wanted to go to the party and would I take him as my date? God knows what possessed me to say yes.”

“I know what possessed you,” Ginny replied, a scandalized look on her face that Hermione didn’t appreciate. “It certainly wasn’t god.”

“It’s not like that. Honestly, I just figured it would annoy Ron,” she insisted, but her protests were interrupted by a mop of messy black hair and a pair of accusatory green eyes.

“Hermione,” Harry said, plonking down next to Ginny. “What’s my favorite muggle candy called?”

“For the love of all— I’m not under the Imperius Curse!”

Harry and Ginny looked at her expectantly until she relented with a muttered, “Mars Bars.”

“It’s really not the Imperius? Did you hit your head? I’m sorry, but what other reason is there to go out with a bloody Death Eater?”

“He’s technically only the son of a Death Eater,” she offered, in the face of Harry’s abundant scoffing. “Sins of the father and all that.”

“There are plenty of, er, good looking blokes out there. How about Neville?” Harry began to gesture wildly, pointing at Neville, who looked up fearfully from a plate of eggs. “Neville is, um, tall. Or

Seamus? You get on great with Seamus, and he probably isn't, you know, evil."

"A high bar, you've set," Hermione replied.

"Hermione," Harry said, leaning across the table to look seriously into her eyes. "You could always take McLaggen."

Ginny, who had been amusing herself watching Harry's antics with a tinge of pink on her cheeks, snorted a laugh. Harry looked over at her, terribly pleased with himself. Hermione watched him as he ruffled his hair unconsciously, like he did when he was nervous. So *that* was happening?

"Why don't you take Hermione," Ginny offered, falsely nonchalant. "You two would look nice together."

"I'm, er," Harry looked momentarily nervous. "I'm taking Luna."

"Oh, that's wonderful," Ginny gave him a genuine smile, a hint of relief in the smoothing of her brow. "She'll be so happy to go."

"Are you going? With anyone?"

"I'm going to stalk Gwenog Jones."

"Cool," Harry breathed reverently. "That's so...yeah. Cool."

"See, Harry is going with Luna and no one is assuming they're indecently involved," Hermione. "What's the big deal?"

"Luna's our friend, Hermione. She's a far cry from going out with Theodore Nott!"

There was a wet, suction-like noise from a few feet down the table. Ron had surfaced.

"Sorry, what?" Ron said, too loud. Lavender grimaced beside him, draping her legs over his lap in an overt show of ownership.

Hermione resisted rolling her eyes. “Did you just say Hermione is going out with Theodore Nott?”

“Theodore Nott?” Lavender sniffed. “He’s not even that fit.” She tried tugging on Ron’s arm to reinitiate exploring each other’s tonsils, but went largely ignored.

“Yes, Theodore Nott,” Hermione confirmed. She looked Ron up and down derisively. There was a bit of spittle on his chin. “Honestly, can we stop saying his name?”

“Have you gone mad?” Ron cried.

“Frankly,” Hermione said, with obvious relish. “I don’t see how it’s any of your business.”

She smiled sweetly, standing in dismissal.

“Harry, Ginny, I’ll see you at the party. You know, since *you* were both invited.”

---

The regret only began to truly sink in when Hermione steeled herself to step out of the portrait hole. Harry and Ginny had already departed to meet Luna in the entrance hall, begging Hermione to heed a reminder that she could “always change her mind” as they left.

Everything was fine. She looked fine. Nott would act fine. She’d have a cup of punch, figure out what on earth he was up to, and be in bed before midnight. This wasn’t an elaborate ruse to embarrass her or murder her. Probably.

Armed with an assortment of muggle and magical cosmetics, Hermione had done her best. She smoothed her hair with Sleakeasy’s until it fell into controlled ringlets, swept up off her neck. On a whim, she wore the dress robes that Fleur had gifted to her in the final days of summer, claiming to have put on weight from eating



“like ‘ze heavy English.” She said they would better suit Hermione, a mischievous look in her eye.

They were very much Fleur’s taste, not hers. In them, she didn’t look like Hermione, not really. High necked and sleeveless, they revealed her entire bare back. Made of acromantula silk in a delicate shade of gold, the fabric seemed to flicker like candlelight when she moved. Her uncovered back felt strangely vulnerable, exposing her shoulder blades and spine, all the way to her waist. Hermione looked...

She smiled to herself. Bless Fleur.

After a bit of unpracticed wobbling in her heels, she steeled herself for the walk to Slughorn’s office. The portrait hall swung open and she stepped through. Despite her protests otherwise, Theodore Nott was waiting for her.

“Took you long enough, Potter and She-Weasel almost snapped off my neck,” Nott said in greeting. He looked at her in sly appreciation. “My, my. You look quite nice, Granger.”

He wore a very formal set of jet-black robes embellished with black satin lapels. At least he had left off a dress cape.

“Er, you too, Nott.”

“Shall we?” He held out his arm, like an old English gentleman. Because she was unsteady in heels, she took it.

Nott filled the walk over with strangely dignified questions, as if he was reading from a script. Things like “How are your studies faring?” or “The weather has been congenial for broom travel this winter, hardly any snow,” or “Do you care for a shall?” He even offered to transfigure one for her from his handkerchief. It was all very pinched and Victorian.

“Nott,” Hermione asked him, cutting through his frigid small talk. “Why are you speaking like you’re in the previous century?”

“You may call me Theodore, if you wish,” he offered, frowning at her question. “These are the appropriate topics of conversation for escorting a lady. At least, that’s what Tutor said.”

“Nott is fine, thanks. What do you mean, *tutor* ?”

“My tutor,” Theo puzzled, like he couldn’t comprehend why she was asking. “Before Hogwarts. You know, for etiquette and dancing and such. Society things.”

“Ah yes, society things,” Hermione couldn’t help but laugh, bright as bells. “You know, that’s a bit antiquated. Just because we’re going to a party together doesn’t mean you can’t talk to me normally. You don’t have to perform...all that.” She eyed him, considering her next statement carefully. “You know, for muggles, dates are quite casual. They just go to the pub or the movies. Almost like being with a friend.”

“How...” She could tell he was searching for the least offensive word in his arsenal. “Different.”

After that, Nott relaxed a bit, but not much. There was still a wildly nervous sort of energy buzzing around him, something she couldn’t merely attribute to a date or a party.

Slughorn’s party was held in his office, which had been magically enlarged from the typical size of a teacher’s study. The expansion held a number of witches and warlocks of various ages, chatting over the gentle sounds of a string quartet. Hermione immediately recognized some of them from photos in the Prophet. The Slug Club’s more famous alumni were Quidditch players and minor politicians, celebrated musicians and academics. If Hermione were really there to network, she’d feel a bit intimidated. Although not everyone felt that way; Hermione caught a peek of Ginny’s red hair swinging determinedly towards an athletic looking woman in Harpies’ purple.

Unsurprisingly, Slughorn had gone very full-on with the decorations; walls had been draped with dark red velvets and green satins, and little gilded lanterns were scattered around the ceiling, surrounded by fluttering specs of light. The overall effect was warm and lovely.

“Those are real faeries,” Nott said quietly, indicating towards the ceiling with his sharp chin. “The lights.”

“Are they trapped in the lanterns?” Hermione wondered, perturbed by the thought. “Is that ethical?”

Nott’s lips twitched.

“Going to sew some bonnets to free them too?”

“For your information, I don’t sew bonnets.” Hermione corrected irritably, reminded of Malfoy’s quip. “I knit articles of clothing as symbols of personal autonomy.”

“How very creative,” Nott replied politely, but his eyes told Hermione that he thought she was barmy.

To her horror, she noticed another of Slughorn’s festive decorations: sprigs of mistletoe bound with little golden bells jingled over the partygoers, cheerfully demanding a kiss. Eager to avoid them, Hermione pivoted directions towards a slightly less uncomfortable option.

Slughorn was beaming in the center of the crowd, fielding introductions with jolly laughs and wagging fingers.

“Shall we say hello?” She offered, already pulling them away.

“Miss Granger!” Slughorn exclaimed jovially upon sighting her. He seemed drunk on attention and a fair amount of brandy, if the smell was any indication. “My prodigal potioneer! And Mister...” He trailed off, words dissipating like dew.

“Nott,” the boy at her side offered, in a cold manner that made it clear he was unused to having to introduce himself. “Theodore Nott.”

“Yes,” Slughorn said faintly. He looked between them and Hermione fought the urge to drop Nott’s arm and assure him, *it’s not what you think, Professor* . “What a...display of inter-house unity.”

“Indeed,” Nott said smoothly. “I was just telling Hermione that I’m a big proponent of cultural exchanges. Were you aware Professor, that courting muggles go to something called the *movies* ?”

Slughorn stared at them as if they were an apparition, occasionally squinting to confirm their solidness, seemingly lost for words for the first time in his life.

“Harry!” Hermione cried, spotting his spectacles from the corner of her eye at the most opportune moment. She let go of Nott to lurch towards his sleeve, yanking him and a sparkly looking Luna into Slughorn’s view. “Thank goodness. Come greet Professor Slughorn!”

“Thanks a lot,” Harry muttered out of the corner of his mouth, sparing only a glare towards Nott. “Hello, Professor...” He was quickly steered away from Luna and towards whoever Slughorn was attempting to show him off to. Poor sod.

“Masterfully done,” Nott muttered, moving away from Slughorn’s booming voice. “Shall we find a drink? Preferably something strong.”

“You look lovely, Hermione,” Luna said, floating alongside them. She had donned a violently spangled dress that made Hermione blink hard. “Like a unicorn foal.”

“What?”

“Unicorns are born golden,” Luna explained. “They only turn white once they’re fully matured.”

“Oh. Thank you, Luna. You look wonderful, too. Very, er, festive.”

Although Luna seemed perfectly at ease, it was Hermione's first time encountering a magical bar, charmed to float tumblers of firewhiskey and goblets of festive flavor-changing punch from a crystal bowl into the waiting hands of wizards. She watched curiously as other guests approached. No one seemed to ask for anything. Instead, a drink would float into the recipient's waiting hand.

"How do we..?" She turned to ask Nott, but found he'd disappeared.

"Theodore seemed like he had to attend to something urgently," Luna replied kindly.

Hermione whipped her head around, eying the crowd for Nott, as if he could be hiding in a bystander's skirts.

"Poor thing is positively infested with nargles. I'll talk to him about treatments later in the evening." Luna reached forward and the bar produced a snifter of Dragon Barrel Brandy. She seemed bemused and delighted by the selection.

"It's not what I'd normally choose," she said serenely. "But isn't it nice to be surprised?"

"That's because it's my drink." Pansy Parkinson elbowed Hermione out of the way, wearing a set of pretty blue robes and a red lacquered sneer. She reached for Luna's glass and downed the amber liquid in a large gulp.

"Why are you here, Parkinson?" Hermione rounded on the Slytherin girl. "I thought mistletoe warded off evil spirits."

"I'm here with Zabini." Pansy rolled her kohl lined eyes, as if Hermione had said something inordinately stupid. "Are you on the invitation committee or something? Looking for a new and exciting way to be a stick in the mud?"

"I never thought I'd feel pity for Zabini," Hermione responded. "But apparently Christmas miracles do exist."

“Loony,” Pansy snapped, a bit of a slur in her tone. She seemed fairly drunk. “Why don’t you go bother someone else about Glimping Pimples—”

“Gulping Plimpies,” Luna corrected, grinning, clearly flattered that Pansy had gotten close. “They’re hibernating now, of course, but spring is their breeding season.”

“Whatever. I need a word with Granger.” The holiday spirit clearly had not cured Pansy of her defining flaw: a terrible personality.

Hermione reached out for a drink and Pansy—apparently cut off by the bar—tried to intercept it, slopping some of it on her own blue skirts.

“Oh for fuck’s sake,” she moaned, glaring at Hermione like she’d spilled the drink. “This is pure lotus silk.”

Hermione brought the glass to her lips before Pansy could snatch it and sipped. The enchanted bar had provided her something similar to mulled wine, sweet while still leaving a touch of cinnamon to smolder on her tongue. It was dangerously good.

“Having fun yet, mudblood?” The word didn’t sting because Pansy seemed so very pathetic as she delivered it: stained dress, reddened eyes, lipstick smeared in the corners of her mouth. From a distance, she seemed like the put together Pureblood princess she’d always tried to portray. Up close, she looked like a mess.

Pansy hiccupped loudly, adding to the effect.

“Slow down Parkinson,” Hermione said. “Before you finish the barrel.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Pansy spit, all brattiness suddenly gone from her tone. Her words tumbled out, uncontrolled. “Did you decide Nott was your new pet project? Got bored with the elves and the half-breeds?”

“For your information, he asked me.”

Pansy winced, as if Hermione had said something far more cruel. She felt a little badly; clearly Pansy was unaware of that detail and it had affected her more than she wanted Hermione to see.

“Do you know how dangerous it is for him to be seen with you?” Pansy said, her sleek dark bob shaking in emphasis. “Do you know what they could do to him?”

“What *who* could do?” Hermione asked, knowing the answer. Pansy’s words all but cemented her previously held suspicions that Nott was involved with the Death Eaters. Drinking her own weight in brandy certainly hadn’t made her subtle.

“Don’t play stupid.” Pansy’s voice cracked. For a moment, it was like she wasn’t speaking to Hermione anymore. There was a gravity to her tone that made the air between them prickly with unease. “You’re going to get them killed. Both of them.”

“ *Both?* ”

“Do you know how I know?” Pansy continued, ignoring Hermione’s question. “Because I’m probably the only person at this school who always looks for him first in a crowded room. And he’s always looking at you.”

“You’re drunk.” Hermione said, moving to leave. Pansy grabbed her wrist desperately, digging in with manicured nails. As she turned to set herself free with a well-aimed stinging jinx, she noticed the door to Slughorn’s private quarters open, ever so slightly. Only wide enough for someone very thin to slip through.

Before she could blink, Nott appeared and obstructed her view, like he’d stepped out from the shadows themselves.

“Pansy!” Nott seemed slightly harried. He looked between them, like their proximity was a bomb he needed to diffuse. “Oh, good, you

found Granger. I've been looking everywhere."

"Have you?" Hermione asked coolly, not one to have wool pulled over her eyes. "Where have you been looking, exactly?"

"Is she drunk?" Nott nodded in Pansy's direction, ignoring Hermione's question.

"Not enough," Pansy confirmed, swaying a bit on her feet as she turned towards Nott. "Did you do it yet?"

Pansy, tongue loosened by a liter of brandy, had said too much. Nott's face took on a dangerous expression, one that urged Hermione to step back. He'd never looked more like his father.

"Pansy is incapacitated and must retire to her quarters," he announced, in his clipped way of speaking. He took Pansy by the shoulders firmly, ignoring her protests. "I profusely apologize, Granger."

"But I don't want to—"

With a flick of his wand, Nott did what Hermione had wanted to do for nearly six years: he silenced Pansy Parkinson. By the look on her face, this was an unforgivable act.

"Nott," Hermione said with a lowered voice, so Pansy wouldn't overhear. "I know something is up. I don't know what you did tonight, but I can help you undo it, we can help—"

He interrupted her. She thought there was a hint of regret in his gaze, but it might have been the fairies, casting their whispers of light.

"Thank you for your company tonight, Granger," Nott said quietly. "At some other time, I owe you a dance."

"Nott, it really doesn't have to—"



Her protests went ignored. With a sharp little nod of his head, Nott was gone.

For a moment, Hermione contemplated going after him. Before she could weigh her options further, a commotion amongst the dancing drew her attention: Draco Malfoy, complaining loudly, being dragged by the ear towards Slughorn by a disgruntled Filch.

Filch pointed an accusatory finger at Malfoy, who in turn seemed to plead his case. Slughorn, moderately drunk and deeply uncomfortable, patted Malfoy gingerly on the back, apparently allowing the boy to stay.

Malfoy yanked himself away from Filch and smoothed his robes before making a beeline directly towards her. Hermione frantically considered an escape route, but found only a morose looking vampire as a potential conversation partner. For a second, she considered it. She could handle a little blood loss, surely.

"Granger," Malfoy greeted sharply. He stopped short a few paces from her, startled and then blurted, "what are you *wearing* ?"

"Dress robes," she snapped, suddenly conscious of her dress. She desperately fought the urge to make herself smaller by slouching. "Why are you here?"

"Obviously, they're dress robes," he responded, like *she* was the idiot. He ignored the question, instead thrusting a hand out over the bar expectantly, until it provided him with a tumbler of clear, shimmering liquid. Fairy gin, if the botanical aroma was any indication. "What's the enchantment on them?"

"The enchantment?" Hermione asked, genuinely bewildered. Why was he going on about her robes?

"The charm, to make them..." He seemed to struggle temporarily for words, making a vague gesture. "...Like that."

“It’s acromantula silk, if that’s what you mean.” She frowned. The wine had created a warm, tingling effect in her chest that migrated into her cheeks. “They were a gift.”

“Didn’t you come with Nott?” Malfoy scoffed. “Where is the prat, anyway?”

“He took Parkinson back to the dormitory. She’d been overserved.”

“How chivalrous,” Malfoy said, in a tone that indicated *chivalrous* was not the adjective he’d prefer to use. He drained his glass, wincing at the taste, before reaching for another. “Trust Slughorn to never spring for the top shelf.”

“Malfoy,” she said seriously. “What business did Nott have in Slughorn’s office?”

Malfoy blanched, going even paler than usual. He didn’t look angry. She knew what anger looked like, on Malfoy’s face. She also knew what he looked like when he was afraid.

“Would you like to dance, Granger?” He asked suddenly, expression smoothing into something far more placid.

It was her turn to appear startled.

“With you?” She spluttered. “No, not particularly.”

“I think,” He finished his drink and stepped closer. “We should have a dance. The music is very *loud* over there, isn’t it?”

She finally clued in— he didn’t want to be overheard. With great trepidation, she took his arm. He hissed quietly, moving her hand closer to his elbow. Right, his Dark Mark; she wouldn’t have what she needed to complete her experimental *sanitatum* until after the holiday.

Malfoy led her towards the string quartet, carefully to stay close to the edges of the room. It would be in both of their best interests for

this to stay in the shadows.

He extended his hands, offering one for her to hold and resting the other on her waist. Almost hovering, the barest of touches.

“Spit it out, no one can hear us here.”

“Take my hand, Granger. Are you certain you *know* how to dance?”

She glared at him, privately thinking that any bystanders would consider it even stranger to see them in a dance, but followed the direction.

His hand was soft and cool. She was surprised by how much larger than hers it was, practically eclipsing her fingers. The sight made her strangely dizzy. Maybe she shouldn't have had any wine.

Clearly practiced, he began to rotate them smoothly to the tempo of the music, something low and moody from the cello. Drawing her slightly closer, he leaned into her hair and began to speak.

“I'm only saying this because I know how bloody obstinate you are and I don't want you going after Nott. You have no idea how dangerous your association is.”

“I'm quite tired of others deciding what's too dangerous for me,” she responded fiercely. “Mostly because I end up in danger regardless.”

“Let me remind you how poorly your efforts to protect your mind have been going.” His grip tightened incrementally on her fingers. “I don't even know the specifics.”

“But you know something.”

“Think about what was asked of me,” he hissed. “Think about who else was apprehended alongside my father. How do you think the Dark Lord handled those debts, hm?”

They spun gently as Hermione reeled with the information.

There were two things she was sure of: first, that Malfoy was trusting her with information in the most devious way possible, by offering her blanks and allowing her to fill in the absences. And second, that Theodore Nott had also been sacrificed for the sins of his father at the altar of the Dark Lord.

“You didn’t do it,” she muttered into his collarbone, blatantly naming the debt that had burned between them for nearly half a year. “You found a way out.”

Malfoy was silent for a moment, long enough that she looked up. His eyes weren’t gray so much as they were molten silver. There was a sort of grief to his expression that she couldn’t place.

“I found a bird on the manor grounds, once.” Malfoy spoke almost absently, like he’d suddenly gone very far away. “When I was young. It was half-dead, fallen from the nest and I carried it in. I wanted to help it fly. Mother says it was my first accidental magic, the healing. I think she’s just being sentimental.”

The tune switched to something smoother and brighter, dancers around them recoupling for the new song. But he held onto her, keeping his slow, smooth movements unchanged. He wasn’t done speaking.

“Father killed it. He waited until it could fly, and then he wrung its neck, right in front of me. I couldn’t understand why. I wouldn’t look at him for nearly a month. Now I know why he did it, what the lesson was.” His voice dropped lower, nearly gravel. “Pity made me weak.”

There was something very precarious about the moment. Maybe it was the wine, but Hermione swore she could feel it.

What she said to him, right now, would matter. Not in how her words could offer him comfort or affirmation. What she said in this moment could change how Draco Malfoy moved through the world.

“Once,” Hermione said, in a near whisper. They had gotten very close. “You went against the most powerful wizard in history for a girl you didn’t even know. Someone you don’t like or hold in any sort of regard. You went against him, simply because you felt on her behalf.”

She tilted her chin up in order to meet his eyes directly. Her gaze was strong and blazing, like metal over a flame.

“Empathy doesn’t make you weak, Malfoy. It makes you strong.”

For once, she knew she’d said the right thing. She could feel it, strong and certain, humming around them.

He looked at her hard, mouth parting incrementally. No one had ever looked at her like that before.

“You’re half-wrong, Granger.”

Crestfallen, she tried to pull away, but he held fast. His fingers flexed around her waist, brushing at bare skin.

“I don’t like you. But I very much hold you in high regard.”

She stared. She knew she was staring, and yet she couldn’t get herself to blink.

The room was all at once too loud, uncomfortably warm, overperfumed. The wine lingered, too sweet on her tongue.

She stepped back. His hands quickly fell away. The unnamable force conjured between them vanished, first in wisps and then all at once.

She felt a bit like she’d just happened into complete darkness, after standing in the blinding sun.

Malfoy opened his mouth, as if ready to retract his statement, and then closed it. For a moment, they stood uncomfortably, unsure of how to part.

“Merry Christmas, Malfoy.”

The words escaped her without her permission. Somewhere, a violin sang out brightly. She walked away, only the slightest bit unsteady.

---

---

Theo got so much love last chapter, I hope this did him justice. I can't confirm any Nott theories in the comments, but I love reading them.

And yes, the mistletoe in this chapter was a red herring. No kiss...yet. I told you it was slow burn, and we're at "dim little flame."

Also: I've been playing a little game called "what was Draco thinking when he saw Hermione in Fleur's dress?" The answers range from "oh fuck" to "this must be a trick" to "how is she the source of all the light in the room?"

---

# Merry and Bright

## Chapter 13: Merry and Bright

---

Christmas at the Burrow leads to more than one heart to heart. 'Tis the season.

---

---

Thank you for all the love, new readers! I am so delighted to continue sharing my story with you! Without further ado, lucky chapter thirteen

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Despite her best efforts, Hermione spent Christmas at the Burrow. With no home of her own to return to— just a pile of ash, thanks to her and Malfoy—she'd told Harry to tell Ron she'd be staying at Hogwarts for the holidays, wanting to avoid the uncomfortable situation of having to explain to Arthur and Molly Weasley that she was giving their son the silent treatment.

Harry, refusing to allow Hermione spend her first Christmas without her parents alone in the castle, kicked up a fuss.

"I know you *think* you want to be alone," Harry said, a little haunted. "But what if you change your mind? What about Christmas morning?"

"I'll be fine," she insisted.

He looked at her like she was a child; not in a condescending manner, but with a devastating tenderness.

"But what if you're not?"

When she further refused, he turned traitor by employing the forces of the collective Weasley siblings. Hermione received a flurry of letters— some sweet, some threatening— making it clear that she would be spending her holidays with family, thank you very much.

Fred and George wrote her a vaguely threatening missive, stating the side effects of non-attendance: *it will make U-NO-POO look like a walk in the park*. Fleur sent her a letter entirely in French, charmed to translate loudly into English upon receipt. It followed her around for two days, accent getting heavier as the charm wore off. At the end of the day, it was Molly who delivered the final blow to her resolve.

*My dear, you simply cannot remain in that drafty castle at Christmas. I've already made up your bed in Ginny's room. Grief shouldn't be taken on alone, Hermione.*

That's how she ended up bundled off the train alongside Harry and Ginny as Ron and Lavender said—or rather, demonstrated—their goodbyes.

Neither Harry or Ginny had mentioned any of the going ons between her and Malfoy at Slughorn's party, the whispers and dance they had shared in the shadows. It seemed out of character for Harry not to press, until she realized he'd blush and look anywhere but Ginny, whenever the party was brought up in casual conversation. It was apparent that he'd been otherwise preoccupied that night, a blessing on Hermione's part.

"Aren't you going to say bye to Dean?" She asked Ginny, who in turn, looked vaguely embarrassed. Harry, apparently trying not to listen in, suddenly began admiring the station's marble flooring. It was one of the least subtle attempts of eavesdropping Hermione had every seen; she fought the urge to laugh.

"I ended things," Ginny admitted. "I know, it's lousy for me to do right before Christmas, but—"



“You don’t have to explain yourself,” Hermione offered gently. “If it wasn’t right, it wasn’t right.”

“It wasn’t right,” Ginny confirmed, as Harry smiled conspicuously at the ground. She turned to Hermione, slightly wary. “Are you saying goodbye to Nott?”

“Christ, no. It really was just a one-time outing,” She did not say: *I took him to spy on him and he went with me to sneak around Slughorn’s office. Then I had a strange dance with Malfoy that ended in the world’s most uncomfortable heart to heart.*

“C’mon, we haven’t even talked about it yet! Did the skinny bastard try for a cheeky kiss?”

“Nope,” Hermione confirmed. “But if I have a secret romance with any poncy, repressed Slytherins, you’ll be the first to know.”

---

She hated to admit it, but Harry was right: the constant thrum of activity at the Burrow prevented her from lingering too long on painful thoughts of her parents, offering her a buoyancy she hadn’t realize she needed.

Christmas at the Weasleys’ was a crowded affair, noisy and bright. Strings of glittering paper snowflakes and tinsel streamers draped almost every surface. The air was always scented with roast chicken or sugared plums, and the wafting of soft rolls fresh from the ovens kept Hermione constantly hungry.

The Burrow seemed ready to burst at the seams: Ron and Harry were bunked with the twins, while Hermione and Ginny were relegated to Ginny’s room in the attic. For propriety’s sake, Fleur was supposed to be staying with them as well, something Hermione found was more realistic in theory than in practice.

“Why are we going through the motions,” Ginny muttered under her breath. “Have you seen the two of them? Bill’s basically always a

hair-flip away from ripping off his clothes. I don't exactly think they're taking it slow."

Privately, Hermione agreed. If the way Fleur looked at Bill— with a sly, heated sort of interest— was a surefire indication that she would not be sleeping in their room this holiday.

The only uncomfortable aspect of the situation was her standing with Ron. They had reached a sort of frosty, unspoken truce: Hermione greeted stiffly him over pancakes, Ron passed the milk jug without protest.

The inevitable confrontation between Hermione and Ron brewed up until Christmas Day— when their simmering mutual animosity finally hit a boiling point.

After presents, while Molly bustled around the kitchen preparing Christmas dinner, the Weasley siblings plus their respective guests gathered over cocoa and cards.

Hermione idly flipped through Malfoy's demonology book. Harry had gotten her a clever little page marker that could identify phrases in the text on command, and she was enjoying testing its capabilities. It wasn't the only gift in the spotlight: upon receiving an owl with a large pink package in the shape of a heart, Ron mentioned Lavender's standing as his *girlfriend*, an error that proved near-fatal.

"*Girlfriend!* But Fred, Ickle-Ronnie is barely out of diapers!"

"Oh George, don't tease. I'm sure she's got something really wrong with her, like tentacles for arms or permanent spell damage."

"You were asking for it, mate," Harry warned a disgruntled Ron. "Why would you give them ammunition?"

"I thought they were mature enough to handle the information," Ron sniped. "I forgot they're about as romantic as a pair pickled toads."

Hermione snorted at this.

“What?” Ron turned to look at her, eyes narrowing.

“Nothing,” Hermione said, not raising her gaze. “I just find it funny that you’re dishing out romantic advice.”

“Yeah?” He said, too loud. Harry’s eyes widened, preparing for impact. “Swapped out Krum for Nott and suddenly you’re the expert?”

“I didn’t swap out anyone,” Hermione said pointedly. “*I* don’t see people as interchangeable. *I* don’t just stick my tongue into whatever will have me. ”

Fred and George let out a low *ooh*.

“At least I don’t trip over myself for a Slytherin.” Ron glowered, heat rising into his cheeks and clashing horribly with his hair. “At least I’m trotting along after someone who’s called me a— ”

“Oi,” Ginny barked, standing for effect. “That’s enough. It’s *Christmas*.”

“So?” Hermione asked, irritated. “Your brother acts like a prick year round.”

Ginny strode to the back door, yanking it open so that a cold rush of wind flooded the cozy room. Fred and George protested loudly, gesturing for her to shut it.

“Out,” she insisted, and although Hermione would never dare tell her, she sounded a lot like Molly. She pointed an accusatory finger towards the yard. “Go outside and don’t come back until this is put to bed.”

Both Ron and Hermione opened their mouths to protest, but Ginny had unsheathed her wand in an implicit threat of her signature Bat-Bogey Hex.

“Fine,” Ron grunted, stomping into the cold air. “Have it your way.”

Hermione gave a long suffering sigh before following him.

Outside the Burrow, the grassy fields had been coated with a blanket of snow, creating the impression of a blinding stretch of infinite countryside. The unforgiving wind nipped at her ankles until she conjured a warming charm to envelop her. After a moment of hesitation, she begrudgingly expanded the charm to include Ron.

*There, she thought, and the meanness in her chest purred, satisfied. Now I'm the magnanimous one and he's the rude twat.*

They stood in silence for longer than Hermione could bear. It was clear that the initial anger of their fight in the common room has mostly dissipated. What remained was a stubborn sort of pride, an unwillingness to let go of the knife.

Hermione had a greater capacity for obstinance than awkward silences, so it was Ron who finally broke first.

“I didn’t mean what I said,” he said, so quietly that the whistle of the wind almost eclipsed his words. He grit his teeth, bracing himself for his admission. “I was jealous.”

“It’s alright,” Hermione said, and she found that she meant it. She wasn’t sure she was ready to bury their hatchet, but a significant part of her did long for peace in the Gryffindor common room. “I wasn’t very kind to you either.”

Ron sighed, looking out at the bereft fields. Only a few months ago, they’d walked the garden path together. After what happened to her parents, Ron hadn’t left her side.

“I don’t actually think you and Harry are— I mean, I know you’re not —” He interrupted himself, horrified at the possibility he could be wrong. “You’re not, right?”

“We’re not,” she confirmed, adamant. Even the thought felt fundamentally *wrong*. “It’ll never be like that with us. He’s like my brother. Or at least, what I imagine having a brother feels like.”

Ron contemplated this stonily, before taking a breath and summoning the courage to add:

“And us? Could we ever be...like that?”

Hermione closed her eyes. In third year, when she was desperate to be chosen by anyone for anything, she’d have died of happiness to hear his question. But now, she didn’t know how to say he was dear to her in a way different from the familial love she felt for Harry. She struggled to articulate that while there was a sort of romance to their relationship, there wasn’t no insistent drive of desire. Not in the way she’d felt with Victor groaning into her neck.

Her relationship with Ron was intimate and comforting, but not...

There was a part of her that considered giving Ron hope. It would make him happy, would make him feel secure and chosen. It would allow her to bask in the warmth of being wanted.

If she was unsure, she could even offer the limp promise of *maybe someday*, as a way to keep them tethered together, as if the vague possibility would keep her from losing him. They could linger on the outskirts of love, carefully cupping their hands around a lit match of desire in an effort to keep it from burning out.

But Hermione didn’t want a flicker. She wanted a forest fire. She wanted a love that scorched the earth, that would leave its mark on everything it touched. She was sure of it.

She opened her eyes and blinked hard to prevent the tears that had gathered from falling.

“I know,” Ron said softly. In this way, he’d always be braver than her, more ready to face harshness and reality. “I know we couldn’t.”

She felt ashamed at how grateful she was that she didn't have to say it.

"I *do* love you, Ron," Hermione whispered. "I love your family. You're one of my dearest, best—"

"Don't do that." Ron scuffed his slipper onto the ground. "You don't have to do that."

He looked vaguely embarrassed and so she trained her gaze on the garden gate, allowing him a semblance of privacy.

"It's okay, Hermione. I'm not going to get mad at you for not feeling the same. I don't want to be that bloke anymore. I just thought—"

"I did too," she confirmed, not wanting him to question the delicate interactions they'd shared the previous year. "For a while, I hoped that maybe....but then everything happened with my parents and ..."  
She shivered. "Everything feels different now. Like I've gone rotten."

"C'mon Hermione," Ron stalwartly put an arm around her. "You haven't gone rotten."

"I'm so angry," she confessed, her voice breaking. The cold braced her, pulling honesty from hidden places and into her throat. "I'm so angry all the time."

Ron, never one to mince words, drew her into a death grip of a hug. She allowed the air to be squeezed out of her, temporarily going limp in his arms.

"I'm sorry," He muttered into the crown of her head. When had all the boys gotten so tall? Just yesterday they were first years. Now when she stood pressed to Ron, she fit neatly under his chin.

"I am too. Really."

For a moment they held fast in their embrace, lingering sweetly.

“Sorry I didn’t get you a present,” he said, over her hair.

Hermione smiled into his chest before responding.

“Sorry I got you a dungbomb.”

“That’s what’s in those socks you knit?” Ron yelped. He released her and she took an exaggerated gasp of air. “I thought they smelled off!”

“I got it from Ginny!” Hermione grinned, fooling no one. “Shall we go in before I confess to any of my other sins?”

“Please,” Ron pleaded. “I’ve nearly frozen my bollocks off.”

Hermione laughed, a sound mostly borne of relief. He cracked a little smile in response, reluctant but honest.

She finally felt like the magnitude of animosity lifting from where it had weighed, heavy on her shoulders.

Christmas, she thought, was such a strangely restorative time.

She felt lighter than she had since the beginning of the term, like a gust of December air could carry her up into the low hanging branches of the bare fruit trees.

---

In the absence of their tension, the rest of Hermione's break was filled with games of exploding snap and pranks courtesy of the twins. Too cold to recreate the long walks they'd taken over the summer, Hermione and Fleur spent the afternoon hours knitting and sewing companionably in front of the fire, while the others played pickup games of Quidditch.

When Hermione thanked her effusively for her dress robes, Fleur's perfect lips turned up in response. She had a crafty smile that made her look a bit fox-like.

“You wore the dress?”

“Yes, to a Christmas party.”

“And were there any wizards at that Christmas party?” Fleur asked, with false innocence.

“Of course,” Hermione frowned, unsure of where she was going with this.

“And how many professed their love for you before the night was through?”

“None, if you can believe it.”

Malfoy’s reluctant confession skirted to the front of her mind: *I very much hold you in high regard.*

“They were all blind then,” Fleur noted wisely. “That is the only explanation.”

They listened to the crackling of the fire for a few, golden moments, before Hermione blurted a question that had been plaguing her since her conversation with Ron on Christmas Day.

“Fleur,” she said softly. “How did you know about Bill?”

“What about Bill?” Fleur teased and Hermione shot her a warning glare in response.

“How did I know?” She tossed her silver mane over her shoulder, leaning in conspiratorially. “I believe he knew before I did. For a while, I knew nothing. I didn’t like Bill Weasley. He walked around Gringotts with his leather coat and his earring, acting like he was in charge of the entire department of curse breaking. So arrogant, even for the English.”

She rolled her eyes magnificently at that, and Hermione bit back a grin.



“Bill was the only man who didn’t act a fool when I walked in a room. He took a ‘special interest’ in my training, would correct everything I did. Make pages of notes on all my reports. I didn’t realize he was desperate to be noticed. I just thought, who is this *connard* with fire for hair.”

Fleur smiled softly, remembering. The flames of the hearth seemed to swell with her emotions, cracking at her outrage and leaping delightedly at her contentment.

“One day I had enough. I went to his office and said, do you know who I am? I was ready to—what is the expression — tear him to shreds?”

“Poor Bill.” Hermione thought of the spellwork she’d exhibited during the Triwizard Tournament. “I’d not like to be on the receiving end of your wand.”

“He said, of course I know who you are. You’re the witch I’m going to marry.”

Hermione groaned at this, although she was partially delighted. That was the line that had hooked Fleur Delacour, infamous beauty? It made her feel strangely affectionate towards the older girl. Even she was not immune to the cursed charms of handsome men.

“That worked?”

“Not at first,” Fleur admitted. “But I liked how willing he was to grovel.”

---

The day before the break came to a close, Hermione made her excuses and walked alone to the nearest muggle village under a warming charm.

Everyone had been reticent to allow her to go alone, but she’d begged off with some transfiguration of her features, giving herself

terrible yellow-blond hair and a rather beaky nose. Ginny had almost pissed herself laughing.

She bore the indignity of the disguise in order to complete her most pressing errand: Hermione had to find a muggle pharmacy and preferably a doctor.

The town was very small: one church, a market, and— thank heavens— a clinic. She only felt a little guilty for confounding the girl popping gum at the till, who under her charm, happily handed over the required supplies.

She was able to acquire more of an array than she hoped, and flushed with her success, left a few extra pounds on the counter. The girl wouldn't remember anything besides a regular transaction and a generous tip.

Before packing her trunk that night, she penned a quick note, hoping desperately it would arrive at Hogwarts and not Malfoy Manor.

*I've got what I need.* She wrote, hoping that if it was discovered, the note would come across as coy and flirtatious, the kind of message Pansy would surely send. *Let's play hospital wing in the dungeons.*  
— xx G

As she sent it off with Fleur's owl, so that the bird wouldn't be recognized as affiliated with the Weasleys, Hermione felt her old friend— a overwhelming sense of trepidation — return to her chest.

The familiar tension signified to her that the holidays were over. Her attempts to heal Malfoy had just begun.

---

---

Oh, Ron. I think he's earned some redemption.

I wanted to write the very real situation of a relationship where you felt more intimate than friends, that bordered on romantic, but didn't

inspire any sort of sexual desire. It's a confusing situation, but Hermione has finally wrapped her head around what she doesn't want. What she does want is an entirely different story...

Next up, we return to Hogwarts to see Draco in various states of distress.

---

# The Ritual

## Chapter 14: The Ritual

---

Hermione plays healer. Draco objects, until he doesn't.

---

---

A little refresher:

Draco's Dark Mark became infected after he helped Hermione hide her parents, because it was a direct disobeying of Voldemort's first order to him. As there was never any true obedience to cement the mark, it also started polluting his body with Dark Magic. He connected "marking" to demonic binding rituals, and asked Hermione to help him heal it as payment for the life debt she owes him for saving her parents. Hermione researched how to unbind and treat the wound, and proposed using a mixture of magical and muggle technology. Draco reluctantly agreed. They've been brewing sanitatum for this purpose during detention.

Thank you, reader, for your support-- your comments give me wings!

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Hermione returned to Hogwarts in the days after the New Year, when everyone was still riding the highs of the holidays and reveling in post-break reunions. She spent the train ride home scribbling notes on binding rituals, occasionally looking up as acquaintances dipped in and out to pass on their greetings.

To Ginny's palpable annoyance, most of these visitors seemed to be a series of girls, who blushed in Harry's direction as they asked after his Christmas, steadily ignoring the other occupants of the

compartment. Romilda Vane lingered for a full twenty minutes, leaving Harry with a box of truffles as a "Christmas present."

"I wouldn't eat those," Ginny advised, as he went to open the box. "I heard her talking about love potions before Slughorn's party. You dodged a real bullet with that one."

A quarter of the way through the journey, they were joined by Ron and Lavender. Despite Hermione's initial trepidation, Lavender remained frosty by polite, clearly pleased with whatever Ron had told her in regards to the conversation they'd had over break. Claiming she had extra Christmas sweets, she even made a point to offer Hermione some muggle Cadbury chocolates. They dissolved on her tongue with nostalgia, reminding her bittersweetly of home. It wasn't exactly a white flag, but a minor thawing in the ice that had steadily developed between the two girls.

Maybe it was the promise of a new year, or the absence of the mountains of homework they would undoubtedly have in a few weeks, but there was a general sense of good spirits as they returned to the castle, a peace that Hermione desperately hoped would hold.

As classes were reinstated, her bubble of hope was popped almost instantly by Draco Malfoy.

Malfoy was in one of the foulest moods Hermione had ever witnessed. Snapping at anyone stupid enough to approach, he had started using his prefect position to take swaths of points for infractions as small as untucked shirts and walking too slowly in the hallways. He'd also begun casting permanent sticking charms on the robes of those unfortunate enough to get in his way, pinning them helplessly to the nearest surface. It had taken Hermione fifteen minutes to get Justin Finch-Fletchley down from the library arch after he'd unknowingly checked out a book Malfoy had apparently been waiting for.

There were no jabs or sticking charms sent *her* way. In fact, Malfoy gave zero indication that he had received her note, made no effort to catch her eye or pass her a response. He even stopped using an overly-loud voice to make his signature snide comments in her direction. It was something she'd be grateful for, if it weren't a clear indication of a coming storm.

In the courses they shared, Malfoy was strangely quiet and reserved, planting himself at the rear of every classroom and taking studious notes with his head down. In Potions, even Nott nodded a polite hello, until Malfoy jabbed his wand into the boy's ribs, putting a stop to the greeting immediately.

Hermione couldn't help but wonder if it had something to do with their uncomfortably earnest, wine-tinged conversation at the Christmas party. What else could have caused a complete transformation in which suddenly, the preferred target for his vitriol ceased to exist?

Malfoy's reign of terror only intensified her dread for their next detention. She'd have to deal with him as she pitched the use of muggle medicine to heal his Dark Mark, and if Justin checking out a book had been a breaking point, Hermione could only imagine how badly her endeavor would be received.

She lingered in the entrance, hesitant to enter the dungeons the first Friday of term, bag laden with a few pumpkin pasties and a thermos of tea, along with her notes on Demonology and the supplies she'd plundered from the muggle clinic.

It would be fine, she told herself. She'd set boundaries by being perfectly cordial, and he'd be forced to respond with professionalism.

This sounded delusional, even in her own head.

The room was even draftier than usual, as if the January cold had embedded itself in the castle's stones. Malfoy was already settled when she arrived, lounging with his feet up on a desk.

"You have a tendency to dawdle in doorways." He looked up, a grimace already pasted on his face. "You'd make a terrible spy."

She rolled her eyes, double-locking the door behind her, so that there was no chance they'd be disturbed.

"Malfoy," she greeted, offering him a sharp nod of her head. "Good break?"

He ignored her. Okay, maybe her fantasies of civility had been overly ambitious. Maybe she should have armored up, prepared herself for their usual sniping. Stubbornly, she plodded on.

"Did you, er, go home?"

"No," he replied. "Mother wouldn't allow it."

"Allow it?"

"Yes, Granger. When your husband is in prison and the Dark Lord is swooping in and out of your home, it's advisable to spend your holidays elsewhere. Mother was in Barcelona, using the excuse that her delicate constitution couldn't withstand another English winter. I stayed here."

Hermione felt a pang of pity for him as she contemplated that he'd spent the holidays alone, and immediately scolded herself: why did she even care? Malfoy certainly wouldn't give two knuts, even if she'd spent Christmas under a bridge.

"Well, some peace and quiet must have been...restful."

"I was drunk the whole time," Malfoy snorted in disbelief, eyeing her with derision. "Don't you have a discovery to crow over? *Let's play hospital wing?* "

Hermione flushed. So he *had* gotten her note. She began unpacking her bag on the prep table, pulling out the pasties and pouring a cup

of tea. On a whim, she transfigured the lid of her thermos into two cups, filling both with steaming hot earl gray.

“Milk?” She asked politely. Malfoy seemed taken aback by her question.

“Sorry?”

“Would you like milk?” She over-enunciated each word very slowly, speaking to him like he was very stupid. Old habits died hard. “In. Your. Tea?”

He pursed his lips suspiciously, as if she’d offered him a cup of frog spawn. He searched her face for ill intent and she looked back placidly, refusing to blink.

“Just sugar,” he sniffed. “Unless there’s lemon. And if it’s swill, I’ll take milk, but then, no sugar.”

Christ, even the way he took his tea was obnoxious.

“It’s swill,” she replied dryly, adding a stream of milk from the little jug she’d charmed to stay cool.

He took the cup and sipped, making a face that confirmed he was a complete snob. Despite himself, he watched curiously as she removed the tea bags from the charmed thermos, vanishing them.

“What are those? The soggy little sachets. Were those in the tea?” He seemed bewildered. It occurred to her that wizards didn’t use tea bags, just steel strainers.

“They’re called tea bags,” she informed him. “They’re little pouches made of natural fibers that come pre-packed with loose tea leaves. It’s a muggle invention.”

At the word *muggle*, Malfoy looked as if he were contemplating spitting out his mouthful. His sense of propriety won, but he still seemed incredibly reluctant as he swallowed.



This was a part of her plan: *see, Muggle tea wasn't so bad, was it?* Gradual conditioning. Maybe then, the possibility of muggle medicine would go down with begrudgement, but not overt refusal. It also helped that she'd slipped some analgesics into the tea, subtle enough that their taste wouldn't betray her. Like hiding crushed aspirin in an animal's feed.

Hermione got right down to business.

"If I've timed it right, the *sanitatum* should have reached maturity at dawn on the first day of the new year."

"It did." He held up vials of a clear, sky blue liquid. "I took the liberty of bottling it."

"Shall we take a look at your arm, then?" she asked, eying his perfectly done up shirt cuffs. Harry and Ron never even approached that level of neat.

Malfoy had already shed his robes already in favor of their uniform shirt and a soft looking gray sweater emblazoned with the Slytherin crest. His white blond hair brushed his collar, a little longer than usual. Not shaggy but certainly approaching it, a few strands falling onto his forehead. She thought absently that he was in need of a haircut.

"Will you—" She gestured at him to roll up his sleeves and expose his forearm.

He turned from her and pulled off his sweater, untucking his shirt in the process. It rode up as he lifted his arms, exploding a sliver of his lower back, skin pale and smooth.

She busied herself with arranging her supplies, not looking up again until he cleared his throat. He took a seat in front of her, almost like an official medical exam. His sleeve was rolled up, exposing his Dark Mark.

It was worse than the last time. The flesh around the mark was approaching purple and hot to the touch. The tar-like blackness had spread further up his arm, encroaching on essential veins and arteries. She cast a diagnostic spell, lighting up his arm with a series of angry indicators, evidence of his worsening infection.

"You should have said something," she told him reproachfully, as he gritted his teeth at her examinations. She tried to poke and prod as gently as possible. "If I'd have known that it had gotten this bad..."

"What could you have done," Malfoy scoffed. "I knew the *sanitatum* took two months to brew. What would complaining have done to speed up the process?"

"Well, that's never stopped you before," Hermione snapped. She arranged the items she'd plundered from the clinic: antiseptics, an assortment of pills and vials, and an intravenous kit.

"What is that?" Malfoy blanched at the needles. "What's the sharp bit for?"

"Most of this is theoretical," Hermione defended, as she filled a syringe. She was very nervous, but hoped it didn't show. It's not like she was unfamiliar with the act; she'd seen her parents prepare these syringes for countless oral surgeries, listened to their nurse explain how she went about finding a vein. *Trained monkeys could manage it*, the nurse had said. Somehow, that didn't comfort Hermione now, as it would still be the first time she'd endeavored to place an intravenous needle on her own.

"I've messed around with Muggle medicine before, adding dittany to scar cream and what not, but I'm not trained as a proficient healer by any means. Ideally I'd be able to get you on a hemodialysis machine, but I don't know how I'd get one into a ritual circle..."

"Top marks in Potions, Herbology, and Charms, aren't you?" Malfoy asked, making a face. "St. Mungo's would take you in a heartbeat.

Don't fake modesty, I'm not complimenting you. Just stating the facts."

"From what I understand," Hermione continued, cheeks slightly pink despite Malfoy's assurances that his words were not, in fact, praise. "Muggle antibiotics work by killing and stopping the spread of bacteria, which they identify through differing cell structures. Bacteria is what's causing your infection."

"The Dark Lord is what's causing this," Malfoy sniped, thrusting his arm forward to make a point. "Don't try to use muggle solutions for wizarding problems."

"The mark—the binding, I should say—is part of it. We'll need a ritual as well. It's not one or the other, Malfoy." She sanitized the surfaces with a flick of her wand. "You should know better than anyone about operating within shades of gray."

She oversimplified the information for his wizarding consumption, but her theory was based on what she'd read about ancient binding rituals in *The Lost Art of Demonology*. One of the very few ways to release a wizard who took the mark of a demon willingly was to exsanguinate their blood, casting purifying charms as it exited the body, before channeling back into empty veins. Usually, this ended up killing the wizard before the ritual was through.

But Malfoy had taken Voldemort's mark under duress. This changed things, weakened what was owed. The bond had already begun dissolving at his initial sins against the will of his master. She just had to find a way to sever it completely, while simultaneously treating him for the consequences (potential magical corrosion, death).

She'd gotten the idea from the Prince's textbook: a scribbled instruction under a deconstructed healing potion that simply read: *divide to conquer*.

The edited recipe for a healing potion used ingredients that were usually at odds— wormwood and fresh dew, powdered dragon's

claw and fairy moss—in order to treat congruent symptoms both individually and simultaneously. It made sense: purification magic treated the physical and the metaphysical. It cleansed not only the illness of the body, but also of the soul.

Hermione didn't know who the Half-Blood Prince was, but she suspected they were a genius. If the Prince's theory held, she'd be able to accomplish the same with the far more powerful *sanitatum*, a potion that took months to prepare depending on how close you were to a new year.

After endless arithmetic calculations to configure the dosage, she hoped that intravenous administration would fulfill the spirit of exsanguination for the ritual, without the danger of total blood loss. If she were right, the injected *sanitatum* would sanctify the cursed blood and the antibiotic would fight the infection. *If* being the operative word.

"Honestly," Hermione continued aloud. "It's criminal that we don't study basic science and anatomy here. It's not like wizards are a different species, this all applies to them. To us."

Malfoy was quiet and his lack of interference gave her pause.

"What, you think we're a different *species*?" She put down her supplies, rounding on him. She felt her pulse in her ears, a clear indication that she was gearing up for an argument.

"Magical blood is kept separate for a reason, Granger," Malfoy defended. "We're not...compatible with muggles in that way. It would be like comparing a hippogriff and a hydra."

"How would that account for muggleborns? Two hydras can't make a hippogriff. If anything, magic has to be a recessive gene that's propagated in muggle families by carriers."

"Muggleborns are unnatural." Malfoy couldn't meet her eyes.  
"They're the exception, not the rule."

"That's not exactly a well-reasoned scientific explanation, is it? *Something is bad because I said it is.* Has no one really ever questioned that methodology?"

Malfoy looked pale and uncertain, seated before her. He was picking at a non-existent thread on his shift's hem and shaking his leg furiously, a nervous tic that he'd never previously displayed in her presence.

"Of course I've asked questions," he muttered, resentfully. "I know *you're* not different from me. Well, not magically. Well—"

"Oh, shut up."

A stony silence fell as she worked, placing four coloured candles around Malfoy's chair to mark the cardinal points: evergreen for north, rich gold for east, bloody scarlet for south and deep indigo for west. They were connected with sweeping crescents of salt, a ritual precaution. Malfoy had no questions about these preparations, quietly accepting as she sprinkled marigold petals into the salt, for their antipyretic effects.

She carefully flipped open both the Prince's textbook and *The Lost Art of Demonology*. Before she started, she took a deep breath, bracing herself.

"You don't have to believe in what I believe." She looked Malfoy in the eye. His were flat and worried, a sheet of gray slate. Their proximity had the strange effect of making her feel the phantom touch of his hands on her waist, as they'd been the last time they were this close. She shivered at the memory, before continuing. "But you have to trust that I know what I'm doing."

"What happens if this doesn't work?" His desperation splintered at her heart

"You have to trust me," she repeated, gently.

Malfoy lowered his eyes in apparent affirmation, signifying she should go on.

Hermione walked slowly around the circle's perimeter in the fashion the ritual had indicated, endeavoring to charge it with her words: *for healing, for sanctification, for release, for freedom*. She imagined stretching her energy out, visualizing it to form a complete sphere that enveloped them, half above the ground, half below. When she stepped into the point that signified due north, she held her wand aloft and a sage-coloured mist rose and writhed from the candle's flame. She cast all thoughts of the green flash of the killing curse from her mind: in this circle, green would signify rebirth.

The other candles followed suit: red for life giving blood, yellow for healing sunlight, blue for cleansing waters. The circle took on a breath of its own, rising and falling until it became opaque. She could only see Malfoy, and he could only see her.

"I'm going to restrain you now," she said, hoping she didn't sound as nervous as she felt. "So that you don't move too much."

He flinched as she flicked her wand, conjuring neat ties to hold him in place.

Hermione wiped his exposed inner arm with antiseptic, and Malfoy hissed in pain. She offered him the same soothing sounds her mother once offered her in a doctor's office, forever ago.

"This is going to hurt a little bit."

"Just do it, Granger."

He screwed his eyes shut tightly as she found a vein, pressing down on the syringe's plunger until the combination of *sanitatum* and vancomycin flooded his veins.

At first, there was nothing. Then, Malfoy cried out, sharp and terrible.

"It burns *inside* me." Malfoy's bravado fell away in favor of pain. "It's making my blood feel like fire."

"Everything is all right," she soothed, trying not to appear as worried as she felt. "It's all right."

"*Please!*" Malfoy's face screwed up in agony. "Make it stop."

"Shh," Hermione hushed, worried he would disrupt the ritual. She hesitated before reaching out her left hand, smoothing Malfoy's forehead comfortingly.

Instead of shying away as she'd anticipated, he leaned into her touch, pressing desperately into her palm. He exhaled sharply and she willed him comfort, a release from the pain. *For healing, for sanctification, for release, for freedom.*

"Is it over?" He turned his head, so that she could feel his lips moving against the skin of her hand. The back of her neck prickled at the sensation, so strangely vulnerable. So *intimate*. It was as if once she'd touched him, a dam had broken. He surrendered to it, hungrier for contact that she'd anticipated. His eyes remained firmly shut.

"Not just yet," Hermione hummed, using her thumb to stroke along his cheekbones softly. "That was for the infection." She took a deep, grounding breath. "Now, we're going to undo your servitude."

She removed her hand gently from Malfoy's face, and he leaned forward in an attempt to follow, chasing her touch. Using a wrought silver knife, she opened a small cut in his hand and another in her own.

His eyes flew open, surprised by the sudden prick of unexpected pain.

"Did you...is this *blood magic*? "

“What did you think it was,” she hissed in response, momentarily forgetting herself. “Cheering charms?”

The circle shimmered, resistant to the change of emotional tone. This was old ritual magic: it required honesty, intent, and above all, sacrifice. She collected herself.

“It’s all right,” she whispered to him, remembering the words her mother used to soothe her. They filled her with a sort of solidity, a strength. “I’ve got you.”

She held her bleeding hand aloft, until droplets of her blood fell directly into his wound.

“Blood taken forcefully, mark of your master's bindings,” she whispered, reciting the words from the ancient tome. “Blood willingly given, release that which is bound.”

Malfoy’s mouth parted in shock. Their magic brushed, twining together in a way that was far more sensory than she expected. It felt like she was pressed flush against Malfoy's beating heart.

A light flared from each point of the circle, brighter than any ray of sun, before sputtering out, leaving them in complete darkness.

Hermione scrambled to cast a lumos. Did she mess it up? Had she somehow ruined the ritual? Was Malfoy—

“Fuck, this *hurts*. ”

Ah, he’d lived.

Instead of the slate gray from before, Malfoy’s eyes burned silver in the dimmed wandlight, blinking to adjust to the sudden changes of brightness. He looked violently alive: blood filled his cheeks and he breathed heavy, exerted breaths as if he'd just finished running several miles at breakneck speed.



She undid his bindings quickly, and he raised his arm, offering it without her having to ask. He refused to look down, keeping his gaze steadfast on her face.

When she cast a diagnostic charm, she found there had been slight improvements to his infection. This was excellent news, although Malfoy seemed to be of the opposite opinion.

"It didn't work, did it?"

"Muggle antibiotics take a few days to kick in fully," Hermione explained. "It may be faster for you, due to the *sanitatum*. But they start working as soon as they're administered, especially intravenously. The fact that there is any improvement at all is a sign that this is working. But Malfoy, look—"

Very gently, she raised his arm, so that he was forced to look at the marred skin. Although the infection hadn't subsided, the diffused black ink had receded to a point of near nothingness. The hold that Voldemort's brand had once maintained was dissipating, leaving only a scar in the familiar shape of a skull and snake.

"Granger," Malfoy breathed, staring at his arm in disbelief. "I think you were...right."

"Say that again, Malfoy." She couldn't help her grin, dizzy with delight that it had *worked*. "I don't think I'll get enough of hearing it."

"You twit," he replied, still fixed on the mark. She doubt he'd intended it to sound so reverent.

To her great surprise, he used his good hand to cup the back of her neck, drawing her closer. When their eyes met, his gaze was blazing and clear. Something in her sang out in warm recognition; her magic remembering the feel of his.

Her heart almost stopped as Malfoy shocked her by pulling her into a tight embrace, burying his face in her hair. It took her a minute to

realize what he was muttering. Over and over, not in an effort to speak or be heard, but to savor the feel of the words passing his lips.

“I’m free,” he whispered into her neck. “I’m *free*.”

---

---

These scenes are super important in the development of Draco and Hermione's relationship, the first real indication of real trust and care between them on more than a basic, human level.

Hermione, who gives trust and care away to her friends and loved ones freely, is surprised, but less affected. Draco, who rarely gives or receives either, is utterly shocked.

Part of me really wanted to write a kiss. But the embrace at the end is almost more intimate in that it's not a selfish act of chasing pleasure. It's Draco trying to thank Hermione, struggling to find a way, and settling on just pulling her close so she could feel him, alive and grateful.

(Please forgive any blunders in the healing scene. I'm not a medical professional, so I probably lack a lot of accuracy. But you know, it's MAGIC.)

---

# Seating Arrangements

## Chapter 15: Seating Arrangements

---

Hermione receives worrying news. Draco implements a new teaching philosophy. There is an unprecedented change in seating.

---

---

I am officially halfway done with my Ph.D. coursework! As a post-finals, early Christmas gift, I present...a long chapter, with lots of our favorite pair sniping at each other. Thank you as always for reading, if it's cold where you are, I'm sending you warmth!

---

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

After the unbinding ritual, Hermione dreamt of a clinic.

In her dream, she found herself searching the empty rooms and deserted corridors of a facility that looked similar to where she'd gotten her appendix out many years ago. Behind a door at the end of a long hallway, she found Malfoy, writhing in pain on a surgical table. She looked for a doctor or nurse, only to realize she was the one clad in seafoam green scrubs and latex gloves, the kind her parents had used for oral surgeries.

When she tried to soothe him, Malfoy screamed, clutching at an unsourced wound near his heart. Hermione tried to find the source of the bleeding and shove gauze into the cavity of his chest, only to realize each time that she was holding a scalpel, making clumsy new incisions. Somewhere, someone familiar was screaming her name.

*Hermione!*

It couldn't be Malfoy, she thought hazily, still half asleep. He only ever called her Granger.

*Hermione, wake up!*

She shot awake to find the tear-streaked face of Ginny Weasley, leaning over her sleeping form. The youngest Weasley was still clad in flannel pajamas, flaming hair piled in a wild tumble atop her head. It wasn't yet light out, maybe six in the morning. She shook Hermione, desperately.

"Christ!" Hermione scooted backwards, banging her skull into the headboard. Hot dread filled her throat at the fear in her friend's expression.

"Hermione, get dressed." Ginny threw her a sweater from the pile on the floor. "Hurry."

"Ginny, what's wrong? Why are you crying?"

"It's Ron." The dread in Hermione's throat sank suddenly to her stomach, like the swooping sensation of an unexpected fall. "He's in the hospital wing."

Ginny's eyes shone with an infectious worry that began to root itself in Hermione's heart.

"He's been poisoned."

---

Hermione and Ginny dashed through the corridors without a second thought, slippers thumping against the castle floors as paintings squawked with disapproval— *young ladies should still be in bed at this hour!* — until Ginny silenced them with a selection of language so foul, it would have made even Moody blush.

When they arrived, the hospital wing doors were locked. Ginny rattled them loudly, and when they didn't open, attempted to rip them

from their hinges. Hermione nudged her aside to try unlocking charms.

“Oh, come on,” she muttered, as another variation failed. Pomfrey’s spellwork was apparently impermeable.

Finally, the doors creaked open. Hermione blinked for a second, uncertain, until Ginny held up her hairpin in explanation.

“Did you pick the lock?”

“How else do you think I broke into my brothers’ broom shed?”

At the far end of a row of beds, the silhouette of two boys stood out against the dim, early morning light. One lying prone and the other, sitting with his head in his hands.

As they approached, Hermione saw that Ron was deathly pale and unconscious. Harry looked up from where he was tearing his hair at Ron’s bedside, and launched into an apology.

“Ginny, I’m so sorry—”

Ginny let out a broken sound and moved towards Harry, throwing herself into his arms. He pressed his lips to her temple and she shuddered beneath him, crying in earnest.

“It’s my fault—” Harry continued desperately, but Hermione cut him off.

“What happened to him?” Hermione whispered furiously, aware it was the middle of the night, but unwilling to reduce the sheer amount of rage in her voice. When would the routine, devastating injuries at Hogwarts stop? Weren’t they always told they were supposed to be safe here? Hermione had seen little evidence of such safety, growing more and more disavowed with every accident and regrown set of bones.

“He ate those chocolates, the ones Romilda Vane got me. He thought they were a birthday present. They were laced with some sort of love potion.”

“This is the result of a love potion?” Hermione asked with no small degree of disbelief. “He looks as if he’s in a coma, Harry.”

“No,” Harry scrambled to explain. “I took him to Slughorn for an antidote. Slughorn set him right, but then he gave him a glass of mead he’d gotten as a Christmas gift to settle his nerves and—”

“*Slughorn* poisoned Ron?” Ginny cried, shocked.

“I don’t think it was on purpose! Slughorn shoved a bezoar down his throat. Bloody lucky we were studying antidotes last week.”

Hermione filed the information about the bezoar away for later. The poison had clearly not been intended for Ron, but who would be stupid enough to attempt to spike the drink of a potion’s master, someone who literally specialized in poisons and antidotes?

“You didn’t see him, Hermione.” Harry continued grimly, shaking his head. “He was foaming at the mouth, he looked...” He trailed off, miserably.

Before Harry could clarify, the door to Madam Pomfrey’s office flew open.

“Why are there students in my hospital wing?!”

Their admittedly noisy entrance had summoned Pomfrey, who somehow looked even more menacing than usual while wearing a quilted dressing gown with a floral pattern reminiscent of upholstery and silk sleeping cap.

“Madam Pomfrey, we—” Hermione started, but was cut off with a squawk.

“The hospital wing opens for visiting hours at eight! And what time is it?”

“But I’m his *sister!*” Ginny shouted, her formidable expression clashing ridiculously with her pajamas, which were patterned with whizzing bludgers, charmed to fly around the fabric. The words HIT THIS were emblazoned across the back of her flannel pants suggestively.

“ *What time* , Miss Weasley?”

“Seven,” Ginny answered sullenly, looking like she might stomp on Pomfrey’s foot. Hermione checked her watch. It was nearly forty past six.

“My patients need rest. Girls, take Mister Potter and—” The school matron suspiciously eyed Harry, who had promptly stuffed his invisibility cloak behind him and put on his best dismal orphan expression. “When did you get here, Mister Potter?”

“Er—” Harry started, but his predictably flimsy excuse was spared by the opening of the double doors. The headmaster had arrived.

“Poppy,” Dumbledore greeted warmly. “I see Mr. Weasley’s loved ones have come to check on his state.” He gestured widely, keeping his terrible hand shrugged into his sleeve. “As have I.”

“Headmaster, I must insist—”

“I believe it’s in everyone’s best interest to make an exception to visitation hours, just this once. Mr. and Mrs. Weasley are on their way, as are their sons.”

“Sir, what has he been poisoned with?” Hermione asked, drawing Dumbledore’s attention. The headmaster regarded her gravely, meeting her eyes for a little too long. *Right, occlumency*, Hermione remembered frantically. What had Malfoy said he did? Picture a

garden? She envisioned tomato plants, feeling rather stupid about it. The thin line of Dumbledore's mouth twitched slightly.

"That is a conversation I wish to have with Mr. Weasley's parents present. Rest assured that we are treating his condition aggressively, using a curative regiment with precedent for good results."

When Ginny seemed ready to protest, Dumbledore continued gently. "Miss Weasley, might I suggest it would be best for you to wait here for your family's arrival? And Mister Potter, I'm afraid I'll require a viewing of your memory, as you were a witness to these events. Madam Pomfrey, I may require use of your office, should you be so accommodating?"

"Of course, Professor," the matron responded, still a bit churlish. "It would be my honor."

"It'll be okay, Gin." Harry gave Ginny a warm look and squeezed her arm reassuringly. The redhead leaned into his touch momentarily before moving to perch at Ron's bedside. Over her shoulder, Hermione could see Ron's chest rising and falling incrementally.

"Miss Granger," Dumbledore turned his attention to her. "Perhaps it would be best if you collected some of Mister Weasley's belongings and returned during visiting hours? We are unsure of when he will wake exactly; he's been given a restorative potion compounded with a single drop of Draught of Living Death. If my own experience with infirmities is any basis, I'm sure that when he does, he would prefer the comfort brought by familiarity."

Hermione regarded Dumbledore with narrowed eyes. She was certain that in this instant, it was not imperative to fetch Ron's pajamas. But what was the headmaster trying to signal to her?

"Sir, if I may—" she started, but Dumbledore breezed past her, a guiding hand on Harry's shoulder.

---



When she exited the hospital wing, it became immediately clear why Dumbledore had sent her away: Draco Malfoy was lingering in the staircase, feigning a casual lean on the banister. Hermione hadn't encountered Malfoy in the days since the ritual. Despite her insistence, he had failed to provide her hourly updates on his condition, forcing her to jot down two notes of varying degrees of concern before bed. The first, a worried check-in:

*Malfoy, I looked into potential antibiotic allergy side effects— go straight to Madam Pomfrey if you start experiencing any hives or blurred vision. And whatever you do, don't drink any Dreamless Sleep. I warned you about potential interactions before, but it bears repeating, since you have such a phenomenally thick skull.*

The second note was far more direct:

*If you don't send me proof of life, the next one will be a Howler.*

She'd only received a single directive in response: *stop stalking me*. After that, Hermione decided she no longer cared what happened to the ungrateful tosser anyway.

He looked fine, she supposed. A tinge of brightness has resurfaced in his previously dulled gaze and his countenance seemed markedly less clammy and feverish. He wasn't having any sort of obvious reaction to the ritual or the antibiotics, which drew the question: why on earth was he loitering outside the hospital wing at nearly seven in the morning?

"What are you doing here?" She crossed her arms in a way she knew made her look particularly severe. Ginny called it her McGonagall impression. "Are you ill?"

"I'm fine, Granger," Malfoy said, still leaning, although markedly less casually. "Gods, you worry worse than the old bat." He nodded in the direction of the hospital wing, indicating his distaste for the matron in question.

“Malfoy,” Hermione pinched the bridge of her nose. The sun had begun to peak out properly, sending rays of soft light into the staircase. “Not now, okay?”

“Who is it?” Malfoy said tightly. He ran a hand through his hair, smoothing the strands that had fallen haphazardly onto his forehead. “Who was poisoned?”

Hermione regarded him with a raised brow. She stood a few steps above him, bringing her to stand at his height for once. Close enough that she could see the slightly raised line of the healed scar along his jaw. Face to face, she gave him a measured look before asking:

“Who said anything about poison?”

Malfoy’s expression didn’t change in the slightest. He was such a good liar, she mused, and she was preparing to accuse him of as much, when two pairs of footsteps echoed from the top of the stairs.

“This isn’t the place for this conversation,” he hissed, gesturing down the stairs. “Come on.”

“I’m not going anywhere until you answer me.”

Dumbledore’s melodic voice drifted down towards where they stood precariously on the steps below.

“Harry, I do ask that you...”

“We should do this elsewhere, Granger,” he growled, exasperated. She was about to agree—unsure of how to explain their familiar interaction to Harry—when his hand reached out and encircled her wrist. When he came into contact with her skin, she felt a little pulse, almost like brushing up against a loose wire. Malfoy, apparently not the cause of the sensation, seemed just as startled as she was.

They shared an accusatorial glare, both unsure of the sensation they'd experienced.

"Static," Hermione finally offered, making a show of rubbing her hands together. "It's winter."

He frowned in the direction of his own hands, seemingly unconvinced she hadn't intended to shock him, before striding down the stairs and into the first closet he came upon. He hit his head clumsily on the dangling lantern.

She lit her wand to avoid tripping on Filch's litany of maintenance supplies, gingerly stepping over a case of self-wringing mop heads. Malfoy, still rubbing his temple, closed the door behind them.

"Explain," she prompted and he looked up at her, flushing. There was a charged, nervous energy about him that she wasn't used to seeing. He shook his head angrily, as if he were trying to rid himself of a swarm of hornets.

"I told him not to do it!" The words burst from his lips, seemingly without permission. He touched his mouth, affronted by his body's betrayal, but couldn't seem to stop disclosing information. "I warned him that he couldn't control who might get hurt."

"Poison," he scoffed. "Might as well throw a dragon in a crowded room and ask it to only eat your preferred target."

"Who are you talking about?" Hermione asked, exasperated. "Who did you warn?"

"Who do you think?" He said, like *come on Granger, you're supposed to be clever*.

All at once, Hermione realized where the pieces fit. Slughorn's mead. A supposed Christmas gift, never intended to be shared. Harry had taken Ron to Slughorn's office. The Christmas Party, when her date slipped away.

“Nott,” she breathed. “He poisoned Ron. He’s trying to poison Slughorn for the Dark Lord.”

Hermione was a logical person, often to a fault. She could sympathize with Nott’s plight— after all it had been the same as Malfoy’s— and the part of her that believed in redemption and forgiveness ached upon realizing that another teenage boy was being driven to desperate attempts at murder because of the extremist political ties of his maniac father.

But there was another side of her that was first and foremost Ron’s friend— Ron, who had stood by her after the loss of her parents, who had blundered through years of admittedly rocky friendship but remained loyal, always at her side— and that part of her wanted blood.

“I’m going to kill him.” Hermione moved to fling open the door. Malfoy went to restrain her, but she raised her wand quickly, backing him into a stack of buckets. She closed some of the proximity between them, until she was near enough that the tip of her wand brushed his chest.

“Use your head, Granger. What will going after Nott right now actually accomplish?” Malfoy said in a low, charged voice, sandpaper rough. He was being peculiarly cool-headed. “How does an animal act, when it’s backed into a corner?”

“Yes, it lashes out. Congratulations, you used an analogy.”

“He was already desperate enough to do something this stupid,” Malfoy urged. “And there’s nothing more dangerous than a desperate wizard, flying by the handle of his broom. Imagine what he’d do if he felt like he’d been found out?”

“All right, so I won’t confront him. I’m not a moron. But that’s no reason not to ensure he won’t find it easy to try again,” Hermione considered, pursing her lips into a grim line. She was certainly no advocate of violence; in many regards, she considered herself a

political pacifist. But she also believed that occasionally the best defense was a preemptive strike.

“What do you think I did, the first time?” Malfoy responded, frustrated. “I put the wanker in the hospital wing for a week. Fat lot of good that did.”

“The first time?” Hermione cried. “He’s tried before?” She wasn’t sure what surprised her more: that she and Malfoy had the same initial instinct towards using force or that Nott had attempted multiple murder plots on behalf of the Dark Lord under Dumbledore’s nose.

“He tried to buy a cursed necklace from Borgin and Burkes,” Malfoy explained, expression pained.

“What, was he assuming Slughorn would *wear it* ?” Hermione scoffed. “I thought Nott was supposed to be clever.”

Malfoy’s lips twitched at this. The more time they spent in each other’s proximity, the more she got the sense that he enjoyed her vitriol. After all, how could he judge her?

“Does he still have it?” She asked, concerned by the possibility. Leaving Nott in possession of a dark artifact could be a potential fatal error.

“I snooped through his mail and cursed him so he couldn’t hold a quill for a week, much less receive a package.”

“Oh great, you confiscated it. That’ll stop him.”

“Unlike your two blundering sidekicks, I’m not an amateur, Granger.” He smirked in a way that disconcertingly resembled his younger self. “I threw it in the lake with a notice-me-not charm.”

”Good, now do the same with Nott.”

“Cursing him out of the way will only result in being expelled for maiming a student.” Malfoy grew serious again. “Tell me, how long

do you think you'd last outside Hogwarts with your shifty occlumency? A week? Two?"

"You've thought all this out, haven't you?" She responded, nastily. "What are you planning on doing, standing by while he kills someone? Going to help him?"

At her accusation, Malfoy scowled, a line appearing between his fair brows.

"I obviously haven't thought out all of it," he admitted, annoyed. "I've been a bit concerned with keeping myself alive. And yes, I'm trying to help him, but not to commit murder, Granger. Must you always think the worst of me?"

"Why didn't you tell me? Before I took him with me to the party."

"He would have found another way in."

"But if I had known, maybe..." she trailed off, stricken with guilt.

Malfoy traced her face with his gaze

"Your mind is an open book, Granger. Forgive me for my hesitancy." There was a strange earnesty to his words that was particularly off putting.

It all led back to occlumency, didn't it? The one skill she couldn't seem to master. She didn't have the luxury of a blind spot. She rubbed her face in frustration.

Malfoy, mistaking the gesture as wiping away tears of grief, hesitated before resting a hand delicately on her shoulder.

"Weasley will be fine. Nott is no genius when it comes to brewing poisons and Pomfrey is...adequate, I suppose."

His hand burned over her sweater and suddenly, the air in the supply closet felt thick and cloying.

“How did you know?” She looked at him from under her lashes. “Why were you waiting outside the hospital wing?”

“I didn’t know it was Weasley,” he defended, mistaking her curiosity for accusation. “I overheard whispers of an incident with Slughorn in the dungeons. And I...” He frowned as if considering something for the first time. “I had a feeling.”

“A feeling? Are you having me on?”

“Honest,” he responded, a little hoarse. “I just knew.”

His hand had slid from her shoulder to loosely cup her elbow. She realized that they hadn’t been this close since the healing, when he’d pulled her into his chest and held her there. He still smelled like wood chips and pine soap. Clean and masculine in a way she hadn’t anticipated.

She blinked, cutting through her thoughts.

What was she even on about?! And what kind of game was this, dragging her into closets and crowding her space and *touching* her?

“What are you playing at?” She drew back from his hand, quickly putting space between them. “Why are you being so...”

“I’m fine.” Malfoy looked just as off put as she felt, making his assertion of normalcy particularly unconvincing. “You’re the one constantly on the verge of a fit.”

Hermione checked her watch so she wouldn’t have to look at him, still rather warm around her face. It was almost time for visiting hours. She moved to leave and Malfoy instinctively responded by standing in her way, blocking the exit. After a charged moment and a dirty look shot his way, he opened the door for her, looking twice to check the hallway for onlookers, before gesturing that she pass.

“Don’t be late to detention,” Malfoy called to her.

“I never am.” Hermione shot her response over her shoulder. She was careful not to brush against him on her way out.

---

Ron didn't rouse until hours later, remaining in a medically-induced slumber, while a visiting Molly Weasley spent the morning terrorizing Madam Pomfrey within an inch of her life. When he'd finally blinked awake, he mumbled blearily about *these girls being the death of him*, before drifting back under.

Hermione managed a watery laugh. Harry—who'd posted himself at Ron's bedside like a wiry, bespectacled sentry— put an arm around her and squeezed in relief.

“Should we get Lavender?” She whispered. She didn't want to be the one to tell her overzealous roommate— unwilling to disrupt the tenuous armistice between them—but surely someone should.

“Er, I guess.” Harry looked at her with surprise, like he didn't expect her to be the source of the suggestion. “Didn't think they were that serious to be honest.”

“Well, no one's told her that. Last week, she was selecting the colors for their wedding.” She tore a page from a journal and wrote a sparse note, before folding it into a clumsy paper airplane. With a tap of her wand, it sprung to life, launching itself in the air and zipping out of the hospital wing.

For a moment, she watched Ron sleep, breath deep and even, before rising to follow her paper plane.

“I should go.” She grimaced, looking skyward for strength. “Detention.”

“Slughorn will write you an excuse,” Harry insisted, waving her off. “He's probably three sheets to the wind right now, he had such a fright.”



The reality was that Slughorn hadn't continued their detentions for the spring term, but she'd not alerted anyone of this, preferring to continue Malfoy's ruse for their meetings. She'd been approved to continue using the classroom for her supposed extra-curricular brewing of Pepper-Up Potion. It was the least she could do to assist Madam Pomfrey, she'd said innocently, and Slughorn gave his permission without a second thought. At least she was no longer de-spleening newts.

"Will you fetch me if anything changes? And let him know I was here, if he wakes up again."

Harry regarded her carefully and she avoided his eyes. Although Harry Potter was no legilimens, he had an uncanny habit of intuiting when he was being lied to.

"Sure," he finally said, and Hermione's gut unclenched with relief. "Give Malfoy my worst."

The long and terrible day culminated with one of her least favorite ongoing commitments: occlumency lessons in the dungeons.

She was bone tired. After the terrifying events of the early morning, she'd been operating on pure adrenaline, which meant that by the evening, she was running on fumes. Although she was loath to admit it, she didn't quite know how to be around Malfoy at the moment. Post-healing, everything felt heightened. When they'd spoken that morning, she'd completely lost her head, and she walked away from him feeling dazed and tender, as if she'd had a run-in with a rogue bludger.

She arrived in the potions room to find he had already cleared their practice space and cast a warming charm, taking away some of the dungeon's usual chill. She shrugged off her jacket, hanging it on the back of a chair.

"I take it Weasley lives?" Malfoy asked, too cavalier for her liking. Why did he always sound like he was mocking her, even when

asking a simple question?

“He’s going to be fine. Laid up for about a week though, thanks to your friend.”

Malfoy ignored her quip in favor of rolling up his sleeves, a sign that he was ready to start their lesson. Despite her exhaustion, Hermione was committed to getting somewhere today. The need for her to use occlumency was becoming more and more urgent and so far, her efforts to push back at Malfoy’s invasions had only managed to produce a series of splitting headaches.

“After our encounter with my godfather,” Malfoy drawled, in the irritatingly superior fashion she’d come to know well. “I’ve considered a different approach to your inaptitude.”

“The student is only as inept as the teacher.” Her voice was imbued with false sweetness. “Snape tried to teach Harry, you know. He ended up in the Department of Mysteries with Voldemort in his head.”

”Sorry— in his *head*?”

”Yes. So you’ll forgive me, if I doubt his pedagogical prowess on this topic.”

“You’re much smarter than Potter,” Malfoy answered, before realizing he’d slipped up and said something nice. He scrambled to return to rudeness, pasting an artificial sneer on his face. “Not that that’s saying much.”

“Careful, you might accidentally compliment me.”

He glared before continuing.

“After the fruitlessness of our initial sessions, I’ve come to the conclusion that certain teaching methods are not conducive to your

tendency towards sheer obstinance. As we've established, you'd rather break every bone than even consider bending."

She smirked at this, taking his insult as a point of pride. After all, she'd be sorted into Gryffindor for a reason. *Tenacious*, the hat had said. *Iron-willed*. It had been the deciding factor.

"Don't look so pleased. If I'd tried it the way I was taught, your brains would be leaking out of your ears."

"How were you taught?" Hermione asked, her curiosity getting the best of her. "I've wondered— is this common? Are there formal schools of instruction? How widespread would you say occlumency usage is amongst the average wizard?"

Malfoy's face grew pinched at her questions.

"My Aunt Bellatrix taught me," he said shortly, ignoring the other inquiries. "I believe you've been acquainted?"

Hermione had been acquainted with Bellatrix Lestrange, if ever so briefly, in the Department of Mysteries. She'd killed Sirius, her own flesh and blood, with a smile on her face.

"I have a passing familiarity," she muttered, considering. "Although, I was taken out pretty quickly once the fighting started."

"Taken out?" Malfoy tilted his head slightly, like he was unsure at her use of the muggle phrase.

"Dolohov hit me with a dark curse. Luckily he was silenced, so it didn't kill me." She tilted her head in contemplation. "But that also means I don't know if there will be lasting spell damage."

"Spell damage?"

Apparently, Malfoy had been reduced to repeating her phrases as questions. Had no one told him of the previous year's events at the ministry? At least, beyond his father's involvement?

“It left a cursed scar,” Hermione admitted, and her chest twinged, right on cue. She held back a wince. “I still feel it, sometimes.”

Strangely affected, Malfoy’s eyes flicked to her feet and back up again, undoubtedly searching for the mark that was buried under the layers of her sweater, shirt, and silk camisole. After some consideration, he spoke.

“My aunt used the *cruciatus* curse,” he admitted, his expression as guarded as a padlocked gate. “To motivate my learning.”

Hermione fought the urge to exclaim in horror; she knew, from their multitude of forced interactions, that Malfoy seemed to equate worry with pity.

“That’s awful.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Pain proved an effective teacher.”

Hermione got the sense that a peculiar detente had formed between them: each time she revealed a personal experience, he seemed more inclined to match it. It was a very Slytherin way of operating, tied up in an ever hostile battle for balance. An eye for an eye, a weakness for a weakness.

“The Black family has a...predilection towards mind magic,” Malfoy continued, voice mediating between pride and bitterness. “It’s in our blood. As you may have noticed, there are some wizards who are particularly powerful in this regard. Wizards like Snape and Dumbledore and,” — Malfoy stopped and shuddered incrementally— “the Dark Lord. Any wizard of decent talent can practice it, but for those of a certain lineage, it’s as second nature as breathing.”

Hermione very much doubted lineage was the defining factor in wizards with such prowess, but it made for a very convenient narrative for those touting pureblood supremacy. They did logical backbends in order to fit this within their ideology: after all, if power were tied to strength and aptitude, it had to come from blood.

“Those are the really powerful occlumens,” Malfoy continued, unaware of Hermione’s internal critiques of his society. “The wizards and witches who can plant false truths and turn memories into rolling fog. The few who have the kind of mind that intruders get caught in, like a fly in a web.”

Hermione leaned forward, interested despite herself.

“Did it come naturally to you?”

“Eventually.” His clipped tone revealed that he wouldn’t be sharing more of his own experience. “But others of my line have had difficulty mastering it. My mother, for example.”

When Malfoy spoke of his mother, he grew slightly unfocused. Without fully realizing he crossed his arms, like he was holding himself up. Hermione could commiserate.

“She’s an occlumens?” Hermione asked, gentler than she would have been regarding other subjects. She understood how it felt, to have an open wound in the place of your heart that your parents occupied.

“Not exactly. She tried to help me, so that Aunt Bella wouldn’t be so...rough. She told me that back when she was learning, occlumency felt unnatural to her. Cold.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you,” Hermione insisted. “It doesn’t feel right.” She wasn’t sure how to properly articulate that the act of protecting her mind felt distant and ill fitting.

“I have,” Malfoy said, stilted, like he was reluctant to tell her the following information. “A few theories about that.”

“Well,” Hermione gestured, sweeping her hand at the empty tables. “Do share with the class.”

“My mother said that her first attempts were like trying to break ice on a pond that had completely frozen over. She thought that perhaps, the gift had skipped her, that she was some sort of exception to the Black rule. She didn’t realize what she was until she attempted the exercise...reflexively.”

He gestured to the practice space he’d cleared for them. Instead of his usual stance— wand raised, arm ready—he left his arms hanging casually, leaving him unprotected. Would she be expected to cast first this time?

“Reflexively?” Hermione questioned, mind spinning.

“As you may have guessed, my mother is a natural born legilimens. A rare trait for a Black daughter, something found more often to be present in male descendents.”

“Maybe it’s just more expected of men,” Hermione pushed back, moving to stand a few paces away from him. “I doubt your ancestors engaged in gender-blind studies on the matter.”

“You recall the headmaster’s reasoning, for why he’d be unfit to impart your lessons? While most wizards can be equally competent in both regards— my aunt, for example— those who specialize tend to struggle with the opposing talent. Like my mother. And if my hunch is right...” Malfoy gestured at her to raise her wand. “Like you.”

She stared. She’d expected the usual barrage of insults towards her capabilities. Instead, Malfoy stood expectantly, waiting for her to catch on.

“Do you really think I’ll be inclined towards legilimency, just through the anecdotal evidence of the *heralded* Black family line?” She said *heralded* in the same tone she’d use for *dung beetle*.

“I have my doubts, of course. Legilimens tend to be usually observant, perceptive, and inclined towards restraint.” Malfoy ticked off his fingers as he named traits. “They usually exercise incredible

control over the self.” At this, he flicked his eyes to the run in her stocking, the strands of hair that had come loose from her bun. “They are rarely brash, headstrong Gryffindors, who have a hopeless tendency to verbally shoot themselves in the foot.”

She scowled at his description of her. She wasn't *brash*.

“Go on then,” Malfoy goaded, wand loose and relaxed in his hand. “You know you want to.”

Actually, she didn't know that she did. What if she wasn't a natural and had finally found the one branch of magic walled off to her? She had butchered the spell the first time she'd attempted it, during their very first detention. Despite the fact that she was now far more prepared, there was a strand of dread that had woven itself around her heart, one that feared failure over almost anything else. After all, what would she have—who would even she be—if she wasn't *good*?

And if she succeeded, would that mean that she was only suited to destroy and take, like Dumbledore had said of himself? For an awful moment, she remembered the sensation of the memory charm that had sent her parents away, the prickle of undiluted power as she sorted through their minds.

“Instead of trying to stop me, visualize trying to get through,” Malfoy explained, noting her unease. “Look for the cracks, the places my magic feels most brittle. Think about what you want to find.”

She steeled herself before calling out the spell.

*“Legilimens!”*

It felt very different from her clumsy attempts at occlumency. Instead of her usual panic upon facing the force of Malfoy's magic, she *was* the force itself. It was a heady sensation, pushing her magic like light through tree branches, filtering through gaps in the leaves.

It wasn't about putting up a wall, she realized. It was as if she was water and Malfoy's occlumency was a sieve.

When she pushed further, undoing the fine mesh he'd constructed, she was rewarded with snippets of image and sensation: the coolness of bare feet in dew stained grass, the swooping sensation of kicking off a broomstick, a fragrant hint of roses. Too fleeting to place, they carried all the sensation of a memory with none of the configuration, the where and when she was accustomed to searching for.

Each moment— experience, really if she were to be specific, as she could feel it all as he had— carried the uncanny feeling that it was undoubtedly *his*. Seen through his eyes, felt through his skin, lingering on his tongue.

She considered: what did she want to find? Finally she decided on a safe topic: herself.

In search of cracks, she willed her magic to flatten itself into a force precise enough to push through the finest of mesh.

In the part of his mind where he stored her, there was anger and relief and a swooping sensation she couldn't quite place. Anxiety, maybe? She caught some sensory flashes: dripping snarls of dark hair against a flushed neck, blood-tinged water running into a porcelain sink, the slippery texture of golden silk—

That's when he threw her out, sending her magic snapping back like a rubber band. The force ricocheted into her, sending her pulse skyrocketing. She pressed a hand to her chest, feeling for her heart.

"Was that—?" Hermione gasped, still recuperating. Her senses still felt strange and foreign, like they weren't hers at all. "That felt—"

While she gulped down air, he wasn't even panting. He was good at this, she realized. Very good.



“Congratulations Granger.” Malfoy conjured her a glass of water. “You’ve shown a moderate talent for legilimency. Thank Merlin, I was beginning to fear you were hopeless and that I’d have to throw myself off the astronomy tower rather than fulfill my vow.”

She ignored his complaining and took the drink, gulping it down. The coolness against her throat was calming, a sensation she could place. It grounded her: she was Hermione Granger, in the Potions room, standing across from Draco Malfoy.

“What did you look for?” He asked, casual in a way that made her suspect he was already in possession of answer.

“Well, I was trying to avoid anything too private. Out of courtesy, although I doubt you’re familiar with the concept.”

“And?” Malfoy pushed. Bit twitchy, wasn’t he?

“I saw...not memories, exactly. Not like you’ve gotten from me.” She blushed, remembering the series of embarrassing events Malfoy had witnessed during their initial lessons.

“No, I should think not.” He smirked, obviously thinking of the same interactions as she was. “This is how you throw off powerful legilimens without using brute strength. That’s what Snape meant, when he told you to play dead. Instead of offering the legilimens nothing, you offer unconnected bits and bobs. Sensations, close ups. You don’t linger for long.”

“Like a ballerina,” Hermione considered. “You stay light on your feet, try to touch the ground as little as possible.”

“Sure,” he shrugged, amused. “I never took you as a patron of the arts, Granger.”

He hadn’t said the word *unsophisticated*, but it hung in the air nonetheless.

“I used to go with my parents.” She touched the rim of the water glass he’d conjured her, circling it delicately with an almost hovering touch. It made a sound like a note breathed from a flute, high and fleeting. “They had season tickets to the Royal Ballet.”

“Muggles have a ballet?” Malfoy looked gobsmacked by this, and Hermione waited for him to finish the punchline of his joke. When nothing came, she blinked in realization.

“Are you serious?” She asked and he looked away, unwilling to admit his lapse in knowledge. “Did you really not know?”

The little ways Malfoy revealed the ignorance of pureblood culture never ceased to shock Hermione. What did he think, that muggles still lived in unlit huts and defecated in the streets? Surely he’d seen bits of muggle London before, at King’s Cross or while navigating towards Diagon Alley.

Had he really been that sheltered, as to not even consider that muggles might have a culture of their own, one that had complementary wizarding equivalents like ballet? She opened her mouth to tell him as much, but he was faster.

“I looked into your muggle healing,” he blurted, catching her completely off guard. “The antibiotics. They’re made in laboratories?”

“Bit like potions, isn’t it,” Hermione said snidely. “How’s the arm then, still attached?”

Malfoy’s other hand flew to where the Dark Mark was etched into his forearm.

“Fine..” He looked like he was searching for words, parting his lips before pressing them together tightly. “It’s...fine.”

“Good,” Hermione found that she meant it. “Any strange after effects?”

“No,” Malfoy looked off over her shoulder, apparently fascinated by the grain of the wooden door. “Nothing noticeable.”

---

The next morning, Hermione woke to realize she was the sole person remaining in her dormitory, a clear sign she had overslept. In her exhausted state, she’d collapsed after lessons with Malfoy and forgotten to set an alarm.

“Bugger,” she muttered to herself, dressing without half noticing what she was throwing on. What day was it? Where was her scarf? She took the stairs to breakfast two at a time, digging through her bag as she went. She’d slept too well; the kind of borderline comatose state that left one feeling bleary, rather than refreshed.

She plopped down at the mostly empty Gryffindor table to snag the last of breakfast: only the rye toast was left, of course. Gulping down a cup of tea as quickly as possible without burning her mouth, she didn’t bother looking up when Harry sat down in his usual seat next to her. He must have been late too, she reasoned, after staying at Ron’s side.

“Pass the milk, Pansy,” the voice next to her said, groggily. “Ugh, is it really nine?”

She passed the jug to her right, still caught on the toast dilemma: rye and orange marmalade, would that clash? Beggars couldn’t be choosers—

Wait.

*Pansy?*

She turned, filled with a trepidation that had nothing to do with her rushed start to the day.

Draco Malfoy was sitting next to her at the Gryffindor table, looking glazed with sleep while seeping his tea. A cursory glance showed the

smattering of students lingering at breakfast had also noticed, the remainder of the table paralyzed into stunned silence.

Noting the quiet, he glanced at her briefly, before beginning to pour his tea. He looked up again, only to do a farcical looking double take. The tea overflowed from his cup, pouring into the saucer. He didn't seem to notice.

"Why in Merlin's saggy bollocks are you sitting here, Granger? Are you *trying* to get a jinx in the back?"

"Malfoy. This is the *Gryffindor* table."

Flummoxed, he looked around to confirm her assertion, face growing more and more horrified with each passing second. He seemed completely unaware that he hadn't chosen his normal seat at his house table. As if his body had pulled him to the otherside of the hall without thinking.

"Oh, *fuck*." He said, suddenly awake. They stared at each other, eyes wide and dire. "This can't be good."

---

Since I always ask you to share your favorite moments, I figured it was only fair to post the moments I most enjoyed writing:

- Ginny's HIT THIS pajamas
- Hermione reluctantly asking after Lavender Brown (because girls support girls, even when they are diametrically opposed).
- Hints at what Malfoy mentally associates with Hermione
- I had the "running late and didn't realize my arch-nemesis sat down next to me for tea-- also, he didn't realize either" scene in my head since I started writing this.

This chapter is a big one, which means there are tons of little easter eggs hinting at earlier events and what is to come...

---

# The Prefect's Bath

## Chapter 16: The Prefect's Bath

---

Wherever Hermione goes, Draco follows. Old ghosts are confronted in the Prefect's bath.

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

After their exchange at the Gryffindor table, Hermione did a series of unprecedented logical backflips in order to convince herself that Malfoy's odd behavior was a fluke. They'd stayed up late practicing occlumency, she reasoned. It would make perfect sense for her to be subconsciously on his mind. If she added in sleep deprivation and the stress of Theodore Nott's plotting, she had a convincing argument for her accidental misstep theory.

It wouldn't happen again, she thought, so long as she didn't afford him the opportunity. And so, Hermione started studiously avoiding Draco Malfoy.

As it turned out, hiding from someone was rather difficult when they suddenly seem to have an innate sense of where to find you. If he hadn't reacted with shock each time, she'd have thought he was pulling some scheme in order to make her life even more hellish. But when they came into contact, he seemed just as surprised as she, and doubly irritated.

In the week that followed, he'd gravitated towards her on various occasions, from wandering into the stack she'd been perusing in the library, to lingering in the greenhouse while she repotted a Venomous Tentacula. Even when Zabini nudged him to depart for their next class, Malfoy waved him off with the excuse that he was "enjoying watching Granger struggle." Blaise regarded him with thinly

veiled contempt, more aware than Hermione would like about the fact that, whether consciously or not, Malfoy couldn't seem to stop himself from seeking her proximity.

Her friends had also begun to notice his behavior starting with his table mix up, clearly not buying her excuse that he'd come over "just to be a prat."

Harry— who'd become irritatingly perceptive of Malfoy's every move — raised his concerns to her directly.

"You should go to Dumbledore," her friend urged during Potions, as they peeled gurdyroots side by side. "He's singling you out."

"Why would he single me out?"

"Maybe he thinks hurting you in some way would put his family back in Voldemort's good graces." Harry frowned, contemplating. If only Harry knew, she thought, as her friend accidentally skirted too close to the truth. "Maybe I should ask Kreacher to tail him... "

"Harry, don't you're think you're being a bit overly paranoid?"

Like he'd been summoned by a malignant higher power, Malfoy chose that moment to go the long way to the supply cupboard, taking a detour in order to brush by their table. When she leaned back from his approach, it was as if his body responded instinctively, lurching towards her. At the last minute, he regained control, attempting to pull himself back, only to jockey her shoulder.

"Watch it, Granger."

"You're the one who bumped into me!"

Harry raised his eyebrows like, see?

Ginny, whose fifth year class had come upon Malfoy dawdling outside the Charms classroom as Hermione spoke with Flitwick, had a different theory.

“Hermione,” the redhead ventured, while they were delivering missed assignments to Ron’s sleeping form in the Hospital Wing. “I think Malfoy likes you.”

Hermione missed a step, catching herself on the banister.

“That’s not funny, Ginny.”

“I wasn’t joking,” Ginny replied. Frustratingly athletic, she took the stairs to the hospital wing two at a time, pausing every few flights, so that Hermione could catch up. “Did Harry tell you that he thinks he’s plotting something?”

“Harry always thinks Malfoy is plotting something.”

“He’s been lurking around you an awful lot though, hasn’t he? Maybe during all those late night detentions, he developed a bit of a crush.”

“Sorry, let me get this straight— you think Draco Malfoy is bothering me incessantly because he *likes* me? The Draco Malfoy who called me a mudblood in second year? The one whose father tried to kill us last June? That Draco Malfoy?”

The Draco Malfoy that warned her outside the pond. The Draco Malfoy who was punished for failing to kill her, and still bore the scar. The Draco Malfoy who made an unbreakable vow to teach her occlumency. The Draco Malfoy who’d danced with her, who had told her the story about the dead bird. The Draco Malfoy that had held her flush to his body after the ritual, whispering his relief.

It was disconcerting to realize that when she put these two versions of Malfoy together, the latter had begun to win out. Malfoy wasn’t just the boy who’d sneered at her on the Quidditch Pitch anymore; he’d become something far more complicated.

“Listen,” Ginny said, from the top of the stairs as she waited for Hermione to catch up, unaware of her inner turmoil. “The way I see it is that he’s either a Death Eater, plotting the world’s least subtle



attack. Or, he's a teenage boy, who's realized the girl he liked to torment is rather pretty." Ginny grinned, flashing her teeth. "What's that saying again? When you hear hoofbeats, think horses, not hippogriffs."

"It's zebras. Think horses, not zebras."

"Either way, you've got a target on your back." Ginny waved her correction off, offering her a final warning before they greeted Ron. "Unrequited interest can be just as dangerous as hate."

In an attempt to have a long, solitary think about the situation, Hermione sequestered herself in the prefect's bath. After turning the taps as hot as they could go, she added a liberal amount of thick, lavender scented foam and golden bubbles that shimmered opaquely on the surface of the pool-sized bath.

She shook out her hair, transfiguring her camisole into a simple black swimsuit, before submerging herself up to her neck. The steam and heat quickened her pulse and flushing her skin, overwhelming her senses in a way that strangely, offered her some relief.

With her eyes closed, she tried to banish her invasive thoughts and practice clearing her mind in hopes that she'd improve with her occlumency. Malfoy had been right: the only time she'd seen any progress in her technique was after she watched the ways he moved evasively under her legilimency. Like a flipped photo, it showed her how to orient herself as a mirror's image of him.

She'd never been very good at meditating, or any practice designed to impede active thinking, so it wasn't a surprise that she found herself zeroing in on the little sounds of the bath: the trickling drip of a leaky tap, the fizzing evaporation of the bubbles, the light, padding sound of footsteps against tile—

Her eyes flew open to a robe-clad Malfoy at the foot of the prefect bath, an expression of dismal realization on his face.

Hermione shrieked, sound ricocheting off smooth tile and porcelain to create a resounding echo. She sunk up to her shoulders in bubbles, shielding herself from his view.

She told herself there was no reason to be embarrassed: she was wearing relatively appropriate swimwear and the bath was technically open to all prefects and Quidditch captains regardless of gender, even if it was common courtesy to wait for your turn. Then again, Malfoy had never been particularly courteous.

“Of course.” His gaze had a heated, dangerous quality that made him look particularly dragon-like. She half-expected him to spit fire with his next breath. “I thought I’d just suddenly fancied a bath, but of course, I can’t even have that.”

“God.” She swept her wet hair up off her neck, where her pulse hammered insistently, still startled by his presence. “Again?”

“Yes, Granger,” he gritted, pinching the bridge of his nose like she’d personally given him a terrible headache. “Again.”

“Did you try—”

“Distracting myself? Meditating? Occluding into oblivion? Locking myself in my dormitory?” He scoffed, not waiting for her response. “Do you think I’d be here, if any of that worked?”

“Malfoy, I—”

“Please don’t insult me with one of your overly earnest, self-aggrandizing soliloquies. I don’t think I can stand it right now, not when I’m being made to follow you around like a lost crup. If I stop concentrating on what I’m doing, even for a second, do you know where I find myself, Granger? One minute, I’m solving arithmancy problems, and the next I feel this...” He flushed, blood rushing to his face. Even the bare skin at the opening of his robe burned pink. He opened and closed his mouth several times, clearly at war with himself, before blurting. “I felt like you needed me.”

Hermione's jaw fell open.

"Like I *needed* you ? Sorry, why would I need you while taking a bath?"

"You tell me." His eyes grew shadowed in a way that reminded Hermione of a forest canopy, blocking the light. She felt a bolt of something nervous—almost anticipatory—that caused her breath to catch in her lungs.

He stepped into the shallow end of the pool, shedding his robe to reveal strong shoulders and a wiry frame. He wore the same sort of swimming shorts she'd seen Harry and Ron don during the summers. Somehow, seeing him in a state of partial undress was very different.

"What are you *doing* ? " She could hear the shrillness in her voice, high and panicked.

"What does it look like I'm doing?" he said. He submerged himself to his waist, hissing at the sudden rush of heat. "You've been avoiding me. So now, we're going to talk about my little problem here."

"In the bath?" She taunted, trying desperately to rile him enough to leave. "Aren't you afraid I'll contaminate you?"

"If I were," he said, dryly. "I wouldn't have allowed you to bleed all over me. I think we're a bit past that."

For a moment, they observed each other warily. It was all so warped: the thought that Malfoy was unbothered enough with her blood status to get in a bath. The thought that maybe, the events of the year had begun to undo some of the baseless, malignant thinking he'd always ascribed to.

She wondered if she should be on guard, if maybe this was a ploy to manipulate her when she was at her most vulnerable. *But this isn't your most vulnerable* , a reasonable voice in her head reminded her.

*He's in your head once a week. If he wanted to hurt you, what better opportunity?*

The doubtful, realistic side of her still had reservations: *just because he doesn't think you're scum specifically, doesn't mean he's changed his whole worldview. People are always willing to make exceptions to hate when it suits them.*

"Alright then," she said, steadier than she felt. "Talk."

"I don't always notice it coming on before it's too late, but it's like this itch I *have* to scratch." He leaned back, partially submerging his head. The bathwater darkened his hair at the roots, adding dimension to the wave of platinum blond. "This feeling like I'm supposed to be near you. Like sometimes, if I'm not, I can't breathe."

His admission caused her pulse to quicken, her heart sprinting ahead of her body. Why did he have to say it like that? Why did his voice have to get low and serious? Why did he have to stare at her like she was a burning building he couldn't bring himself to look away from?

"You're sure that it started after the ritual?" She questioned, voicing her doubt. "There's no chance this is some sort of...prank? Something one of your friends would pull, to have a laugh?"

Malfoy scoffed at this, a rough sound that made the back of Hermione's neck prickle.

"No one I know would consider this remotely comedic."

"Right," she responded. "As if their prime idea of a joke wouldn't be forcing you to follow a mudblood around?"

"Why do you have to make it about *that*?" The strangest part was that he looked like he was seriously asking, unsure of her answer.

The question was a lit match on a heap of kindling that Hermione had been collecting for the past six years. She felt the little flame of anger that burned consistently within her swell into a great, roaring thing, demanding to be heard.

“Are you serious?” Her voice was like a steel blade. He didn't want to talk about blood supremacy now that it made him uncomfortable? He deserved to feel discomfort. “You’re the one who has made it about this—about my blood— since we first met. You made me think like this. You made me expect this. Do you know you were the first person to call me a mudblood?”

He didn't respond. Suddenly, the dripping tap was the loudest thing in the room.

“Yes,” he finally said, when the silence became too much to bear. “I could tell by the look on your face. I laughed about it afterwards, how confused you seemed. I couldn't stand how you walked around like you were so much better than me. First in every class, taking a pureblood's rightful spot. Father warned me that I was to put you in your place.”

She hated hollowness with which he admitted it, the lack of emotion in his voice always a good indication that he was occluding. She wanted him to feel what she had felt, the uncertainty that had sunk its claws into her and never let up.

“I was better than you.” Her tongue was loosened by his honesty. “And when you couldn't handle that, you made it so that I'd always have some doubt about how people saw me. About whether I was good. Or just good for a muggleborn.”

Hermione hadn't meant to reveal so much, but it was all true. After he had called her the slur on the Quidditch pitch, she truly became aware of the intense prejudices of wizarding society, and felt a delirious pressure that pushed her to take extra classes, miss precious sleep, all while soaring to top marks in every exam. She couldn't simply be the best. She had to be extraordinary. She had to

prove them all wrong. To slip up wouldn't simply be a stain on her reputation, but the standing of everyone with her blood status.

"Well you're certainly getting yours now, aren't you?" Malfoy scowled performatively, but she couldn't shake the feeling he was uncomfortably affected by what she'd said. "Have you enjoyed the irony of me being compelled to follow you around? I've got half a mind to say that you've done this on purpose, to teach me some sort of lesson."

"Oh, you've certainly only got half a mind," she snarked back. They had gotten gradually closer, shouting at each other over the steaming surface of the water. "Why would I want to be near you? Why would that possibly be advantageous for me? "

"For *you*?" Malfoy barked a laugh, devoid of humor. "You don't do anything for yourself. You get off on sacrifice, on anything you can do for Potter or Weasel or your damned Order. I'm sure they'd consider me being tied to you inextricably as a very helpful tool. A pet Death Eater on a tight little leash."

Something was rising in her, demanding that she attend to all the splintering tensions, the ragged seams between them. She'd never confronted it so plainly before, reluctant to draw attention to how deep the wound actually ran. That was the thing about long buried hurt— eventually it would insist on being heard.

"I'm not at fault for this." She could feel it— her temper, getting the best of her— but she couldn't grasp control of the reins. "I did my best to save your life , because for some bloody reason, you saved mine. But *I* didn't swear my allegiance to Voldemort. *I* didn't make you take the mark. I'll bet you thought it was an honor, wasn't it?"

Malfoy responded with a cold fury she hadn't seen from him before. She'd seen him wounded and nasty, aiming to injure with his sharp tongue. But she'd never seen him like this: there was a menacing intensity to him that would seem deceptively calm to a fool, like a placid lake, frozen over. Ready to crack open under her weight.

“Do you think,” he whispered raggedly, flicking droplets of water in her direction as he gestured at his nearly healed arm. The Dark Mark was still visible, but the dark, trailing ink and festering infection had all but disappeared. “I wanted this?”

“Didn’t you?” Hermione was unwilling to back down. “All you ever talked about was following in your father’s footsteps.”

“I *meant* inheriting the Malfoy family seat, not sworn servitude to the most dangerous wizard of the century. Would you like to hear the story of the night I was marked?”

Hermione had a growing certainty she did not, but Malfoy was so close, so dangerously focused on her, that she thought it would be best to treat the situation as one would with any large predator, by avoiding sounds of distress and any sudden movements.

“When I came home from school after you and Potter had pulled your little stunt, I knew my father had been incarcerated, but I didn’t know that my mother was entertaining *guests*. I should have understood the gravity of the situation when no one met me at the station.”

He held himself to his full height— a foot taller than Hermione— every muscle of his bare back pulled taught. A soldier’s posture, alert and overly formal.

“I hear that even when receiving the mark willingly, the pain is astonishing. But when you’re forced...” He shuddered with the memory and Hermione’s stomach twisted. “Do you know who held me down while I screamed, Granger?”

Hermione shook her head mutely, regretting her flippant comments. She’d been quick to anger and now, she feared that was learning something she had never wanted to know.

“My mother was given that honor.” Malfoy’s voice had torn at the seams, no more than a ragged breath. “She tried her best to keep

me still.”

Hermione closed her eyes, but that didn't help shield her from imagining Malfoy, screaming in pain, or Narcissa's fingers digging into him desperately. She knew innately that the scene would find its way into her nightmares.

“I remember that when she used to sing, even the portraits would stop to listen.” His eyes unfocused with the memory. “She doesn't sing anymore. She's barely said a word since. It broke her; she couldn't do anything without getting herself killed, but she knew she couldn't save me either.”

Hermione remembered how stricken his mother had looked when she'd seen her in the robes shop, skin sallow and expression drawn. How her eyes had seemed notably unfocused, her hands unsteady. The way Malfoy had gently chastised her and sent her back home through the floo, as if she was too delicate to even leave the Manor.

“In the end, marking me was the best punishment for Lucius Malfoy that anyone could have devised. The Dark Lord took his heir and his wife in one fell swoop.”

“I didn't know.” Hermione finally answered, voice small. She looked down to where her fingers had begun to prune. “I thought...”

“It's fine.” All the fight had slipped away from him, relinquished in favor of something much more raw, a deep blue regret. “I gave you no reason to think otherwise.”

The heat of the bath had grown dizzying. She could see hints of white flickering in the corner of her eyes, so she felt behind her, pulling herself up to perch on the edge. The air was bracingly cold against her wet swimsuit, and she hoped that the jarring sensation would ground her.

Instinctively, Malfoy moved to fill the space she once occupied, as if it were natural to react to her. He bracketed the place she sat with



his hands, causing her to become excruciatingly aware of the heat-flushed skin around his collar bones. His head was slightly bowed, staring at the goosebumps on her completely exposed legs, far more skin that was shown under even the shortest of uniform skirts.

She wasn't sure how they'd gone from bickering to full on shouting, throwing accusations and tearing at old wounds. Now, he was standing before her, on the precipice of regret.

"I don't think you're just good for a muggleborn." He didn't say mudblood. Suddenly, Hermione realized she couldn't remember the last time he'd used the word, much less directed it at her. "I think you're... a singular talent."

She felt his hand brush against her knee, right at the scar she'd obtained while dodging the Whomping Willow in third year. He was too close. She could see his eyelashes, a dark-gold dusting. A *singular talent*. If he kept this up, she was never going to get a full breath again.

Hermione cleared her throat.

Malfoy started, realizing how he'd positioned herself around her and swiftly pulling away. Hermione felt his absence, like the sun had been suddenly shaded behind clouds.

"That's the magic talking," she said, half to convince herself that Malfoy would have never said anything like this about her, if it weren't for the ritual.

"You know what's happening, don't you?" Malfoy said, and she knew he was talking about the pulling sensation he'd described, the urge to be close to her. "That's why you've been avoiding me. "

When had he learned to read her so well? Because he was right. She did know' she just hadn't wanted to look at the answer. Hermione hadn't even known that such a thing could happen. A transference of an oath of allegiance. She wasn't sure what that

would even entail; was Malfoy bound to her, as the Death Eaters were bound to Voldemort, sworn to loyalty and forced to answer at his beck and call?

"I think that during the ritual, you were accidentally bound to me in some way," she confessed. "Blood magic is emotional. It looks for balance. An eye for an eye. That kind of magic never completely disappears, it leaves residues."

"I'd guessed as much." Malfoy sounded pained. "So what, now I'm tied to you?"

She remembered with a pang how elated he'd been at the perspective of freedom. If she were Malfoy, she wouldn't want to be bound to anyone, especially after what she'd heard about how he was marked.

"We'll undo it," she said. "I would never..." *Try and control you*, she thought. *Force your loyalty. Use you against your will.*

"I know, Granger." He spoke with a quiet authority, as if he believed what he was saying. "I know *you* wouldn't."

At least there was that, she thought. For whatever it was worth, there had been an understanding forged between them. He believed that she wouldn't exploit him, use him as a pawn or bargaining chip. For Hermione, who knew that Harry and Ron would die for her, and almost had on numerous occasions, this was nothing novel. For Malfoy—who had been dressed up and paraded by his family, swapped into the Death Eaters without a second thought, his life used as punishment for his father's missteps—it was an important indication of trust.

She didn't forgive him for the cruel things he'd said and done. When she thought about it, forgiveness was really just the absence of active hurt, and the wounds he'd inflicted still smarted when touched. But she was grateful to him, for his strange fits of altruism, his lapses into compassion.

Malfoy was cruel and kind and cowardly and brave. Somehow, all of these truths existed within her, twisting around each other like snakes on a caduceus.

Hermione was no believer in divination, but in that moment, she couldn't help but feel premonitory sensation that ritual magic aside, there was something binding the two of them together, some red string of fate that had pulled at her since he showed up outside her parent's house. That his choice to spare them had changed a thousand trajectories, including his own.

Something was changing, shooting him into uncharted territory, faster and more erratically than she could follow. There was a war on the horizon, Hermione thought. She wondered what side Malfoy would find himself on.

The water had gone cold. She stood and summoned her robe, wrapping it tightly around her. She had to put some space between them before she lost her head entirely. Malfoy's eyes tightened as they lingered on her, a certain tenseness returning to him, as if her distance was something he could feel.

---

---

Thank you for reading! One of my favorite tropes of all: Hermione and Draco angst in the Prefect's bath (which I like to imagine as a European style bathhouse, rather than a fancy bathroom)

These two had to deal with the ghosts of Malfoy's fucked up beliefs...what better place?

---

# The Prince's Design

## Chapter 17: The Prince's Design

---

Hermione has a more violent Valentine's Day than anticipated. Per usual, Draco's is worse.

---

---

Wishing all a Happy New Year! Here's an action packed chapter to celebrate.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

In the days following their interaction in the prefect's bath, Hermione didn't have much time to dedicate to her new Malfoy problem, mostly because she couldn't manage to shake Harry's constant presence. With Ron out of commission, it had just been the two of them, and while she enjoyed spending time with Harry, she also had a far harder time sneaking off when he always seemed to be looking for her.

In her younger years, she'd felt resentful of Harry and Ron's inherent closeness, seeing it as just another indication of how she would always be seen as a friend of convenience, or worse, obligation. They'd never excluded her purposely, but their tight knit bond and innate understanding of each other had felt like a cruel reminder that she'd never, ever be chosen first.

But after a week without Ron, her old insecurity shifted into a different feeling: annoyance. Without having his best mate around to burn off his more boisterous energy, Harry had grown increasingly bored, and thus, increasingly on her nerves.

He'd started tagging along with Hermione to the library, where he'd taken to amusing himself by paging the books Hermione was always carting around in search of interesting spells, something she considered a sign of total desperation. She couldn't even tell Harry off for being loud or disruptive: when he finished his own homework and his interest in her books had waned, he would quietly pace around the shelves and look longingly out the large windows.

It was funny how as soon as someone wasn't around, Hermione could clearly see all those attributes they contributed to her life. With Ron in the hospital wing, she felt the absence of his comforting presence, his sure laugh and colorful swearing. He brought a certain lightness to their trio, an up-for-anything sort of energy. You could always count on him to join Harry for an impromptu jaunt around the castle or a trip to the Quidditch pitch; Hermione, on the other hand, scheduled her time with a near surgical precision. Ron also had a knack for diffusing tense situations that Hermione had never been able to replicate. Given what her mother would have called her "high-strung nature" and Harry's signature hotheadedness, the two of them had certainly developed a tendency to wind each other up.

Thankfully, after a regiment of curative potions and a week of Pomfrey's eagle-eyed supervision, Ron was released from the Hospital Wing. Given the events that had led to his hospitalization, he seemed strangely cheerful about the whole ordeal, and was relishing in the attention he received post-poisoning. She was glad he was enjoying his flirtation with celebrity, but also thought that Ron's spirited reenactments (mostly consisting of him dramatically clutching his throat) rather downplayed the severity of the situation.

The timing couldn't have been better. To his great chagrin, Ron was given the all clear to resume classes and prefect duties on Friday, which meant he had to join her on Saturday morning in supervising the busiest and most combustible Hogsmeade weekend of the year: Valentine's Day.

"Pomfrey couldn't have kept me for a few extra days?" Ron moaned, as they herded a group of giggling third years exclaimed over

enchanted Valentine's cards along in the entrance hall. Under the tutelage of Professor Flitwick, some eager fourth year Ravenclawes had been in charge of the hall's decorations, resulting in a flock of ugly, squashed looking cherubs fluttering about the ceiling. They were charmed to sing classic love songs—mostly Celestina Warbeck — but whoever had performed the charm hadn't thought to ensure that the cherubs weren't completely tone deaf, and so many students were covering their ears in order to drown out the off pitch warbling.

The spirit of the holiday was making the student body act a bit strangely: a curly haired Hufflepuff boy that Hermione didn't recognize had bumped into her while stammering unintelligibly, before handing her a little metal bookmark in the shape of a heart and promptly running off. One pink-faced girl with two plaits approached her with a homemade ribbon monstrosity, which she shyly asked Hermione to give to Harry on her behalf. Not wanting to encourage other admirers, Hermione gently informed her that given recent events, she wasn't allowed to deliver packages that hadn't been inspected by the post.

It was lucky Harry hadn't joined them; she had a feeling the girl wasn't the only one attempting to bestow unreciprocated affections on The Boy Who Lived. Eager to avoid the commotion (and another mishap with love potion laced chocolates), Harry had prudently chosen to use his invisibility cloak and meet up with them once the crowds had dissipated in Hogsmeade.

"They should have just let me die peacefully of poisoning," Ron moaned, once they'd gotten everyone out the main gates and along the snowy path. In the cheerful sea of red and pink, he looked comically like a man headed towards the gallows. "Lavender is going to kill me anyway."

"Are you two rowing?"

"Not yet," Ron replied, darkly. "She wanted me to take her to that horrible tea room, Miss Puddletoes or whatever—"

“Oh, Madam Puddifoot’s isn’t so bad,” Hermione replied, lips twitching in amusement. “At least the cherubs sing on key?”

“It’s where lads go to die.” He paused and shrugged, like he was unsure if he should continue before plowing forward. “I keep trying to end things with her, but she distracts me into an argument. Maybe it’ll happen today, if we row badly enough...”

“It’s Valentine’s Day!” Hermione said reproachfully. They were admittedly a terrible couple, but no one—even Lavender—deserved to be dumped on a holiday that celebrated love. “You don’t split up with a girl on Valentine’s Day.”

“Why not?” Ron countered. “Worst case scenario, it’ll be so awful that she’ll have to dump me. I’ve been trying to find a way out anyway—this way I don’t even have to be the one to do it!”

“It’s a relationship, Ronald, not a torture dungeon. You don’t have to find an escape. Just be upfront and honest with her. Say, *Lavender, I think it’d be best if we go our separate ways, no hard feelings* —”

“Oh, she’d show me separate ways, all right. She’d *separate* my bollocks all the way from my body.”

Hermione snorted at the lewd joke and Ron grinned, encouraged by his success.

“I’d have no *hard feelings* for the rest of my life.”

Hermione exploded into giggles, and after catching her attempt at a scandalized expression, Ron joined in. They laughed so hard they had to momentarily stop walking and lean on each other in order to catch their breath. The delay caused a few younger students to look back and begin whispering conspiratorially among themselves. One of the younger girls even shot Hermione a wink and a thumbs up.

“Oh, just what I need,” Hermione groaned. “Another conspiracy about my love life.”

“Another?” Ron asked, slightly clipped. His gait took on the jaunty effect of false casualness.

Hermione hesitated, unsure if she should share Ginny’s theory with him. They were still toeing the line of respectful friendship since their altercation at Christmas and she was reluctant to set him off again; she could only imagine his reaction to Malfoy being...well, Malfoy.

“You can tell me stuff,” Ron said gruffly, as if reading her thoughts. “I won’t be a prat. Or at least, I’ll try not to be.”

“I know.” She gave his arm a grateful squeeze. “I will.”

“Well, don’t tell me everything.” He took on a queasy expression. “Er, maybe just talk to Gin about, er, attempts at getting *better acquainted* —”

“Please stop talking,” Hermione entreated, and Ron snapped his mouth shut with relief.

They rounded the bend towards the village, the snow capped clay roofs peeking out merrily from beyond the path, and some students started a merry race towards the shops. Hermione didn’t have it in her to spoil their excitement, so she just called reminders to mind the icy bits on the path.

“It’s something Ginny said,” she told Ron, as they half-heartedly patrolled the village streets, paying far more attention to the sparkling displays in the shop windows than the students bustling around them. She didn’t feel badly about her negligence; they hardly needed two prefects to patrol when Hogsmeade was already crawling with undercover aurors, Scrimageour’s attempt at placating a growingly fearful public. “About Malfoy. She thinks that he has a certain, er, fixation with me.”

She willed herself not to think of the way he’d cornered her in the bath or his recent, heated proximity and hoped that her pink cheeks could be explained away by the cold.



“Hermione,” Ron asked seriously, a bracing hand on her shoulder. “If that blonde muppet is bothering you, I swear I’ll—”

“Ron,” she said, removing his hand with a shrug. “If I’m going to tell you things, it means you can’t charge off wand-first to avenge my honor, before I’ve even finished.”

Ron rolled his eyes, but made a dramatic zipped-lips gesture in acquiescence.

“It’s nothing dangerous. Ginny’s just got this mad theory that Malfoy’s got a bit of a crush on me,” Hermione scoffed. “That’s all.”

“*Malfoy? And you?*” Ron wheezed. At first Hermione worried she’d upset him to the point of asphyxiation, but quickly realized the breathless gasping was a result of hysterical laughter. He wiped at his eyes breathlessly. “Merlin, I’ve got to tell Gin she’s reached her limit of bludgers to the head. You really had me going for a moment there.”

Ron shoved lightly at Hermione’s arm in teasing. Hermione shoved him in return, and the back and forth continued until they were bumping shoulders companionably. They paused at the top of a hill overlooking greater Hogsmeade, and Ron sighed deeply as they took in the little shop in the distance that had charmed its chimney smoke peony pink.

“Go on,” Hermione said, inclining her head in the direction of the village. “Have it out with Lav.”

“Really?” Ron moved in the direction of the shops, before remembering himself and sheepishly offering to stay. “I don’t mind finishing patrol.”

Hermione waved him off. It was really only a fifteen minute walk around the Shrieking Shack, and she’d always been a dab hand at warming charms.

“I’ll meet you back at the Broomsticks for a butterbeer and a mope,” she offered, “and medical attention, if necessary.”

“Wish me luck escaping the dungeons!” Ron gave a little salute before striding down the path. She secretly thought he’d need more than luck if he was going to try dumping Lavender on Valentine’s Day, but that was something Ron would have to figure out on his own.

“Find Harry too while you’re at it!” She called after him, and he waved in acknowledgement.

She absently kicked at some pebbles as she wound through the outer pathways, where the edges of the forest crept up on the village. Forget rogue acromantulas and armed centaurs, what she truly dreaded was stumbling into amorous couples who’d chosen a more secluded place to become —as Ron so deftly put it— *better acquainted* .

With this in mind, she cut her patrol a bit short, blasting through the snow with a heating charm to form a neat path through the grounds of the Shrieking Shack and back towards the pub.

As she approached the Gothic architecture of the dilapidated house, Hermione quickened her stride. Even though it was only early afternoon, the winter sun was dwindling in a testament to Scotland’s short February days, and she had to repress a shiver.

The Shrieking Shack had lost most of its eeriness after she had learned that its famed haunting had actually been their Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, transforming into a Class XXXX Magical Creature. But Hermione could concede that, even without a credible haunting, there was an unnerving stillness to this place, as if the abandoned house and its surrounding grounds had absorbed the violence from sheer proximity. She still remembered the stale scent of fear and the prickle of dark magic on the night that she’d crept down the tunnel that connected the shack to the Whomping Willow.

The night she'd met Sirius, the night Peter Pettigrew's treachery had been unveiled.

As she rounded the shack's rickety gate, Hermione saw a flash of red, the tail end of a velvet cloak. Her eyes followed it instinctually, leading her to its owner: Pansy Parkinson, lurking on the outskirts of the run-down property.

"*You*, " Pansy snarled, face ruddy with cold, like she'd been out in the elements for a while.

"Me," Hermione confirmed, tapping her silver badge. "Prefect rounds. Why are *you* lurking about?"

"Are you looking for a date, Granger?" Pansy mocked, avoiding her question. She tossed her shiny black bob, a gesture of contempt. "Hoping maybe a poltergeist will have you? At least you can't bore him to death."

Hermione couldn't help but note the way she positioned herself firmly in Hermione's way, angling her body so that she blocked the entryway.

"What are you hiding, Parkinson?" On a hunch, Hermione took a step forward, approaching the shack.

Pansy immediately raised her wand, a curse on her lips. " *Stu —*"

"*Expelliarmus!* "

After a year of practicing dueling with Harry, Hermione was much faster, and the Slytherin girl's wand flew into Hermione's hand in a neat arc.

Pansy looked murderous, mouth hanging open in outrage. Hermione knew that nothing could have enraged the girl more than having her source of magic neatly removed by a mudblood. A vindictive part of Hermione—a part that had been growing louder and more insistent

as the year progressed— relished in the sweetness of Pansy’s defeat. It was the part of her that, worryingly, insisted force was the only way to deal with someone like Pansy. The part of her that demanded an eye for an eye.

“You mudblood cunt!” Pansy shrieked, lunging for her wand. Hermione jerked away, but came close enough to notice that Pansy’s kohl rimmed eyes had a hunted quality to them, making her look all the more deranged. “You filthy, ill-bred—”

“Maybe you’ll get it back once you learn some manners, Parkinson.” Hermione cut off the rude tirade, clicking her tongue in mock consideration. “Or maybe McGonagall can return it, after you explain to her why you’ve been skulking around private property unsupervised.”

Hermione should have realized that Pansy—who didn’t have an impressive quantity of self control on a good day, and this was a very bad one, indeed—had been pushed too far. But she hadn’t known and so, she was caught completely off guard when Pansy launched herself at Hermione, tackling her into the snow.

“Ow! Gerroff me, you lunatic!”

“I’ll kill you, you Muggle-loving bitch!”

They tussled momentarily, as Hermione scrambled desperately for her wand. Pansy managed to get in a hard slap that left Hermione’s ears ringing, and Hermione kicked out hard, connecting with Pansy’s shin.

There was a burst of white hot magic, and they were thrown apart and into the snow.

“What the fuck?!” A boy’s voice cried, and a hand extended down towards Hermione. She took it, pulling herself to her feet, ignoring the twinges of protest from her body. One side of her face was on

fire, no doubt reddened by the impact of Pansy's slap, and her entire side throbbed angrily from her collision with the ground.

She shook snow from her hair and face, wiping her eyes to find a furious Theo Nott, arms folded in displeasure as he admonished Pansy, who was struggling to her hands and knees in the snow.

"Have you lost your *mind*, Parkinson? Fighting like a muggle?" Nott barked, his tone more contemptuous than she'd ever heard it. Although he acted haughty and cold, Nott was rarely outrightly cruel in the way Pansy could be. He struck Hermione as too smart for that.

Pansy wobbled into a standing position, still looking very much like she'd like to hit Hermione. Her carefully curated appearance in complete disarray: her cloak rumped and her hair mussed, with streaks of black running down her face. Even Hermione would have felt a bit badly that she was in such a state, if Pansy hadn't bloody *attacked* her.

"She took my wand!"

"Only after you tried to curse me," Hermione spit back. "That'll be twenty-five points from Slytherin for fighting, don't make it fifty!"

"Oh, who cares about the bleeding House Cup, you insipid—"

Nott wedged himself between them before Pansy could smack her again, catching the brunt of her long, lacquered nails on his cheek. Tiny scarlet droplets bloomed from the wound, like poppies.

"Shit! Teddy, I'm sorry—"

Nott gave Pansy a look so vicious it cut her off mid sentence, as if he'd silenced her with a charm. He turned to Hermione with a blank, careful expression that seemed strangely familiar.

Nott looked much worse than when he'd escorted her to the Christmas party. He was peaky and drawn, notably thinner than ever

before. It made his clothes hang off him, ill-fitting, as if they were cast offs from someone much larger. Exposed to the wind, billowed away from his body.

The pale slices of skin at his collar and wrists seemed fuzzy and unfocused, catching strangely on the dregs of winter sun. The mysterious bruises she'd seen him with were nowhere to be found; he'd obviously glamourised them.

"You'd better go, Granger." Nott dismissed her with a stiff nod. "Take the points and I'll sort her out."

He looked like Malfoy, she realized, when he was occluding.

"Nott...you look dreadful."

"Show me a Gryffindor without any tact, and I'll show you any Gryffindor," Nott muttered in response, crossing his arms protectively. Although it was a defensive gesture, it made him appear as if he was holding himself up.

"Are you all right?"

"Spare me your concern, Saint Granger." Nott's voice had turned bitter, like a citrus rind. "I don't want you involved—you already made a mess by getting into it with Draco, and look where that's gotten the poor bastard."

Hermione blanched, taking an uncertain step backwards. She couldn't quite get a read on what Nott knew, nor truly understand the two boys' relationship. They fought like rivals, but demonstrated a protectiveness of the other that could only have been forged through friendship.

"What do you mean?" Hermione asked him. The bare tree branches rustled, as ominous as any warning.

“What does he mean?” Pansy had regained her voice. She let out a laugh as cold and as clear as a mountain stream. “Don’t you *know*? I suppose not, given the pathetic way you’ve been following Draco around. We’ve *all* noticed. Is it that you think you can save him, Granger? Have you drawn up a petition?”

“I haven’t been following *him*!” Hermione protested, at the same time as Nott barked, “Pansy, *stop*,” in a manner that told Hermione he was accustomed to giving such orders.

“I doubt you’d be so interested Draco if you knew—”

“I’m serious!” Nott warned in a raised voice, trying to drown the other girl out. But Pansy brutally forged ahead. Her lips, smeared with either blood or cherry red lipstick, twisted into a snarl, ready to land a deathly blow.

“—if you knew just *how* your filthy muggle parents met their end! Or should I say, just *who*?”

For a moment, Hermione couldn’t breathe. All she could hear with the pounding fear of *she knows, she knows, she knows*. How could Malfoy be so stupid, as to reveal what happened? Hadn’t he made Hermione make a vow to swear she wouldn’t say a word? But then, Pansy’s accusation caught up to her, and the logical part of her interrupted her panic: whatever Pansy did know, she clearly wasn’t aware that Hermione’s parents were still alive. If anyone knew the whole truth, Hermione considered, both her and Draco would already be dead.

“That’s right,” Pansy taunted, unaware of Hermione’s internal spiral. “The Dark Lord gave Draco the honor of putting your parents down, like the dogs they were.”

Later, Hermione would wonder if maybe she could have stopped what happened next, had she not been so distracted worrying over what Pansy did or didn’t know. Maybe she would have caught Malfoy in the corner of her eyes, sprinting towards them with a blazing look

on his face. Maybe, she would have noticed a second set of footprints, following him in the snow.

In actuality, all she could do was watch in horror as Nott swung around and drew his wand on Pansy in warning. With his back turned, Nott wasn't able to see Malfoy's approach.

He couldn't react in time, when Malfoy called, "Fuck, are you hurt Granger!? I felt—"

But before Hermione could find out what Malfoy had felt, Harry Potter ripped off his invisibility cloak, his wand raised in his hand. She knew immediately that he had heard Pansy's revelation based on the furious tears in his eyes. Before Hermione could yell for him to stop, Harry roared a spell at Malfoy that Hermione had only ever seen written down, neatly labeled *for enemies* .

*"Sectumsempra!"*

---

---

I hope the sectumsempra reveal was as satisfying to read as it was to write!

Other notes:

- Ron is absolutely the guy who would dump a girl on Valentine's Day
- Hermione is motivated by fairness and justice, and when that isn't available, vengeance. In other words, she's a Virgo.
- I hope there can still be softness after this for Pansy. I write her as how I see her: a prejudiced, privileged girl with a sharp, defensive tongue, who is scared out of her mind.
- props if you connected how Harry learned the spell
- double props if you pick up on any Easter eggs!



Next chapter: "Vulnera Sanentur"

---

# Vulnera Sanentur

## Chapter 18: Vulnera Sanentur

---

Hermione acts fast. Malfoy remembers an old lesson. Theo attempts to even the score.

---

---

I was going to wait until Friday, but I split up a megachapter into two- so you'll get the shorter Chapter 18 now, and the longer Chapter 19 on Friday. A double update week, as a treat.

They are my two favorite chapters to date. I feel really proud of them (which I rarely feel about my writing because I'm a hyper-critical perfectionist) and am excited for you all to read!

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

---

When Hermione was young, her father used to watch horror films on the television set, late at night when he thought she was already in bed. He'd catch her peeking from around the doorway and relent, allowing her to scramble onto his lap and stare, utterly transfixed, at the age-inappropriate scenes of men with chainsaws and the girls who ran from them.

At the crescendo of promised violence, right before the masked killer descended with his knife, her father would cover her eyes to shield her from the gore. She'd squeal and wiggle and try to peek out from between his fingers, but he'd hold fast. *Sorry, sweetheart. If you have nightmares about this, your mother will kill me.*

This was all Hermione could think of, when Harry's curse hit Malfoy squarely in the chest and his slate grey eyes went wide with surprise. As his knees buckled under him and something dark and wet began to bloom from wicked looking lacerations on his chest. Heavy droplets of blood hitting the ground before his body.

All she could think was that she wished someone was there, to cover her eyes.

"I didn't— I didn't know, I swear—" Harry babbled from shock, voice gone high and shaky. "I wouldn't have—"

*"Draco!"*

It was his name that snapped Hermione out of her horrified reverie.

She wasn't sure who shouted it, Pansy or Theo, because her body had propelled itself to where Draco Malfoy was bleeding out on the shack's blanketed grounds, faster and more instinctual than her sluggish mind. The snow, which had looked so soft and charming moments before, only made the blood more stark. It looked like the scene of a massacre.

"Teddy, *do something* !" Hermione heard the girl shriek, the sound distorted, like she was underwater.

"Go get Pomfrey!" A boy's responding order, in Nott's voice. "Pansy, *go!*" Her footsteps rapidly faded in the direction of the castle grounds.

"Okay," Hermione said out loud, attempting to ground herself. She knelt next to Malfoy, careful not to disturb his body. "It's okay, Draco — can you hear me?"

His eyelids fluttered, revealing a sliver of silver. By some miracle, he was conscious. *Oh god*, she thought, realizing the amount of pain he must be in. *He was conscious* .

*“Episkey!”* She tried. She could see his wounds through his mangled sweater, shimmering with a thick maroon substance. *“Episkey!”*

Malfoy continued to bleed, growing paler by the second. He was hemorrhaging, Hermione realized, feeling faint. The Prince’s spell was keeping his blood from clotting and regular healing charms wouldn’t stick. Without a countercurse, he’d bleed to death.

She tried a third time, voice nearly a sob. *“Episkey!”*

“That’s not fucking working!” Nott’s voice came from somewhere above her, raw and desperate. “Take this—press hard.”

A white cotton shirt was shoved into her hands and she dutifully obeyed, using it to apply pressure to the wounds. She could taste blood in the air, iron-tinged and rusty all down her throat. She closed her eyes and fought the urge to vomit.

If he died, it would be like— like—

She could not make death into a metaphor; if he died, it would be her fault. Harry had cast the spell, but it was her who had kept that cursed book even while knowing its danger. In her hunger for instruction, she’d allowed the Half-Blood Prince the benefit of her doubt.

Malfoy groaned something from under her, the words stuck agonizingly in his throat.

“Don’t talk,” she begged, one hand on his chest in an attempt to staunch the flow, the other gripping her wand so hard she feared it may snap. The shirt Nott had handed her was already soaked through. She could feel his heartbeat, thrumming erratically.

“Granger,” Malfoy panted, gritting out her name. He struggled to lift his head. “Just let me...”

He could not die, Hermione decided. There were a few things she knew as absolute truths: the sun would rise at dawn, the tides would swell and wane with the moon, and Draco Malfoy would be a perpetual thorn in her side.

He wasn't allowed to die; he couldn't leave her to bear all of their secrets, alone.

"I'm not letting you go towards the bloody light, okay?" She leaned in, close enough to see each of his labored breaths dissipating into the cold air. "Not after all the work I've done to save you."

"Not...trying...to die." Malfoy's lips tightened in pain, the column of his throat flexing tightly as he fought for breath. "Look... at me."

"Wh—what?"

Her gaze snapped to his, and she suddenly understood what he wanted. Hadn't they looked at each other like this across the potions' classroom, every week? He wasn't trying to die. He was trying to communicate.

With her eyes boring into his, she whispered the spell very quietly, hoping the sound would be swept up by the winter wind.

*"Legilimens."*

In the absence of his occlumency, she realized how much Malfoy had managed to keep from her during their lessons. Without his walls up, his memories were loud and overly bright, marked with excruciating bolts of emotion that seemed violently at odds with the placid, uncaring expression he kept perpetually pasted on his face.

Faces and sensations moved quickly before her, like swapping out slides on a microscope, until he settled on the memory he needed her to see.

*A younger Draco—maybe thirteen or fourteen based—lounged in a stately library, framed by floor to ceiling windows with opulent velvet drapes. Hermione looks around, disconcerted. Was this the Malfoy family home?*

*Their sallow-faced Potions professor was lecturing him from behind a mahogany desk, as a piece of self-writing chalk transcribed notes on a conjured blackboard. The younger Malfoy was barely listening. She could feel his disinterest; in this memory, he wanted desperately to go flying, to escape the dark opulence of the library and step into the sun.*

*“Are you paying attention, Draco?” Severus Snape’s silky voice rang out, echoing in Hermione’s head. “Your parents pay a small fortune for a summer tutor, in order to ensure you are the top of your class. And you repay them by wasting their efforts daydreaming like a simpering fool— is it any wonder you’ve been consistently bested by a muggleborn? Now, what did I just say?”*

*Snape was talking about her, Hermione realized. She’d bested Draco in all of their classes in third year, except Divination.*

*“A countercurse is the most important weapon you’ll ever wield,” Malfoy parroted back. She could feel his irritation, and under that, shame from his godfather’s scolding. “It can be the difference between life and death.”*

*She squinted at the board, where the enchanted chalk was writing out a spell: *Vulnera San*—*

*“GRANGER, IF YOU DON’T STOP STARING AND GET OUT OF MY BLOODY WAY—” Theodore Nott’s bellow broke into her thoughts and she ripped out of Malfoy’s mind with a ragged gasp.*

*Under her, Malfoy’s breaths grew worryingly weak, their warmth fading quickly against her cheek.*

*Organize your mind* , she heard in his voice, like he'd instructed in their very first occlumency lesson. She hadn't finished viewing Malfoy's memory, but it had been enough to trigger one of her own: sitting in her four poster bed, poring over Advanced Potion Making. She focused until she could see the countercurse, written in the Prince's spiky sprawl.

She felt for her magic, willing it to well up inside her like it did when she was elated or furious. Like it did when she healed him the first time, during the unbinding ritual.

*"Vulnera Sanentur. "*

After six years seeped in the fascinations of the wizarding world, Hermione sometimes found herself growing immune to the sheer awe of magic. It was in moments like this, while watching Draco Malfoy's skin knit itself back together and his shuddering breaths grow smooth, that she remembered: magic was the power to stand tall against death.

She cast the spell again and again, moving up his torso. When her eyes finally reached his face, he was watching her through his golden eyelashes with a burning, half-delirious sort of focus.

"Knew you'd get it," he whispered, like the words were only for her. "Clever girl."

She met his molten gaze for the second time that day, and something in her *sung*.

Nott fell to Hermione's side, batting her hands aside so as to desperately press his own to the spaces that had been wounded only a few moments prior. His bare chest was wrapped in a heavy winter cloak; it was his shirt that she had used.

As her adrenaline declined, the world around her came back in snippets, sounds skipping like an untuned radio.

“Is he all right?” Nott was asking Hermione wildly. He jerked away from Malfoy, who had seemingly passed out cold. Nott’s movements were tight and terrified as he grabbed her shoulders and shook, rattling her. “*Is he going to be alright?* ”

“I think so,” Hermione replied, still dizzy with adrenaline. She was going to burst into tears or throw up or both. “But I’m not a healer. He’s unconscious, thank god. Where is Pomfrey?”

“I sent Pansy to fetch her, but there’s no way they could have gotten here fast enough. I just didn’t want her to have to see...” He trailed off, the implication of his sentence filling the air between them.

“Where’s Harry?” Hermione breathed.

It was the wrong thing to say. Nott’s head snapped up, as if suddenly remembering who cast the spell in the first place. He’d been entirely focused of Draco’s bleeding, but now that it had stopped—

“*Potter,* ” Nott snarled, pulling himself up in one fluid movement. Harry stood a few paces away seemingly paralyzed, his still figure standing out against the winter landscape like a gravestone.

“Dabbling in Dark Magic, are you? Allow me to give you a proper demonstration.”

“I didn’t know that’s what the spell did.” Harry was looking at Hermione pleadingly. His hand scraped through his hair, gripping at the scalp. “I found it in a book, I swear. I heard Pansy say that Malfoy killed Hermione’s parents and—”

When Malfoy dueled, he would try and play with his food. He liked to talk, always preempting his hexes with taunts. Nott was no Malfoy. He raised his wand at Harry without preamble, and Hermione realized what he was going to do a split second too late.

“Nott, *don’t!* ” She cried.

“ *Cruci* —”



A series of loud cracks cut off Nott's spell, as half a dozen figures materialized around them. Their scarlet robes stood out starkly against the snow, bronze badges winking on their chests. They moved with a practiced, collective efficiency: appraising the scene, securing a perimeter. Two red cloaks swooped down on Malfoy, casting a complicated diagnostic spell as Hermione scooted out of their way.

As if innately aware of her absence, Malfoy's hand twitched, reaching in her direction. She stared at it, dumbfounded. Did he want her to —?

"Don't move!" One of the newly apparated figures called, wand trained on Nott. "Stay where you are!" They knocked back their hood, revealing a familiar, heart-shaped face. The normally-pink haired Auror looked drawn and pale, a mousy-brown ponytail blowing in the wind.

"Tonks!?" Hermione cried, flooded with something stronger than relief.

The Aurors had arrived.

---

---

Notes:

- \*drumroll\* We've hit the very first time Hermione uses "Draco" !!!
- Last chapter mentioned the Auror presence in Hogsmeade, a little hidden hint
- In the canon, Tonks goes up to the castle and bumps into Harry, so I wanted to play with her presence in my story
- In the same vein, it's Canon!Malfoy who tries to use the Cruciatus on Harry. Keeping with my rewrite and the swapped roles, it's Nott who attempts the curse here.

- Only Harry uses a curse labeled "for enemies" without noting the counter curse (which Snape also invented, fyi)

- Hermione "Why Do I Feel Like I'm On Fire When Malfoy Calls Me Good Or Clever" Granger strikes again.

See you all on Friday for Chapter Nineteen: "Merlin's Miraculous Medeorée"

Things are about to get...tense. ;)

---

# Pain Relief

## Chapter 19: Pain Relief

---

Harry receives a dressing down. Hermione connects the dots. Draco makes a suggestion.

---

---

As I said last chapter, these scenes are truly one of my favorite that I've written. Thank you to everyone who reads, comments, and shares this fic; you are--quite simply and sappily-- the reason I write.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The return to the castle was a blur. Tonks steered, a firm hand on her shoulder; ahead of them, a burly man in a red cloak led Nott and Harry in the direction of the Headmaster's office.

"Why are they staring at me like that?" She whispered to Tonks, as a group of first years gasped and pointed at her, whispering to each other behind cupped hands.

"Hermione," Tonks said, gently. "You look like you've crawled out of a slaughterhouse."

She noted her appearance for the first time since Malfoy was cursed. She was coated from her hands to her elbows in his blood. It had seeped all down the front of her robes, and even gotten into her untied hair, matting her curls. If she were the sort of person who delighted in life's ironies, she'd surely appreciate this more: a muggleborn, drenched in several pints of one of the oldest and most esteemed Wizarding dynasty's precious blood. Malfoy, at least,

would certainly find it amusing. That is, if he survived her amateur attempt at healing.

She felt dizzy at the thought, and tried to focus on Tonks' face instead. The Auror's usual elfin features were subdued, the sheer lack of color to her appearance making her look particularly morose.

"How did you find us?" Hermione asked, the question slipping off her tongue before she'd fully realized what she was asking.

"I'm sure you know that Scrimgeour assigned a team to monitor potential Death Eater activity in Hogsmeade." Tonks chewed the inside of her cheek in indecision, unsure of how much she should share, before replying in a low tone. "And Scrimgeour is no Fudge; he authorized us to use a trace of sorts, for Dark Magic. Anything stronger than a defensive spell will trigger an alarm, and the Nott boy's butchering curse was certainly dark enough—"

"Tonks," Hermione interrupted. She'd find out as soon as their wands were inspected, anyway. "It wasn't him. It was Harry."

Tonks stopped walking mid-step, causing Hermione to trip on air. The Auror ahead threw a cursory glance backwards, before continuing.

"Dumbledore will sort this out," Tonks mumbled, partially to herself, shaking her head in disbelief. "Best wait to tell him what happened."

The Headmaster was waiting for them in his office, flanked by their respective heads of house: a white-faced McGonagall and a murderous looking Snape. Between the three students, two Aurors, and three teachers, the usually airy room was cramped, approaching stifling.

"Professor, it's my fault!" Harry cried immediately, looking stricken. "I cast the curse, but I didn't mean for —"

Snape's hand twitched towards his wand, itching to silence the flow of contrition.

"Be quiet, Potter," McGonagall said in condemnation. "You've done more than enough."

Harry wilted under her stare, falling silent.

"Auror Tonks, Auror Dawlish," Dumbledore addressed the pair formally, his usually serene demeanor replaced by something far more stern. "Thank you for your timely assistance. Professor Snape, Professor McGonagall and I are more than equipped to handle the matter from here."

Dawlish grunted something that sounded suspiciously like, *keep these bloody kids on a tighter leash*, nodding for Tonks to follow him. She hesitated in the doorway, offering Harry and Hermione a miserable little wave, before ducking out of the office.

Dumbledore gestured with his withered hand and three armchairs with royal purple upholstery appeared wordlessly, each hitting a pair of their knees from behind, forcing the three sixth years to sit. With the three authority figures standing over her, she felt less like this was a disciplinary meeting, and more like she was attending a tribunal.

Dumbledore nodded at each of them in grave acknowledgement.

"I fear that among the many responsibilities that lie with the role of headmaster, I find this to be the most unpleasant. It brings no joy to pass judgment on a student's acts of violence against their own peers, but as there are no undoings of curses that have already been cast, I will require your accounts of the events of this afternoon. You have all been through a shock, but please endeavor to include everything you remember." Dumbledore fixed his gaze, the bright blue of a cloudless summer sky, on her. "Miss Granger, will you begin?"

Hermione cleared her throat, nervously, starting her explanation with the prefect's patrol, Ron's departure and her use of the shortcut. She spoke more quickly as she relayed the fight with Pansy, stopping to catch her breath when she landed on the girl's cruel accusation, before barrelling through Malfoy's sudden appearance and Harry's use of the curse.

"It all happened so quickly," Hermione said, of the aftermath. "I tried *episkey*, but he kept bleeding and..." She shuddered with resurgent fear, remembering how he'd looked under her, when she thought that he'd been asking her to allow him to die.

"Albus, surely the girl has been through enough?" McGonagall interrupted, beseeching. "She should be in the hospital wing being treated for shock, not giving a formal statement!"

Snape, on the other hand, had no such qualms at her questioning.

"What I struggle to grasp," her former potions master drawled. "Is that if Miss Granger failed at rudimentary healing spells, how *exactly* did she manage to close cursed wounds?"

Hermione knew that she lied terribly. Her explanations were overly detailed and far-fetched, invented in sheer panic. Carefully, she based her answer in as much honesty as she could manage.

"*Vulnera sanentur*," she explained, making contact with Snape's dark gaze, his black irises offering nothing besides suspicion. "I'd never heard of it before, but Malfoy knew. He managed to tell me before he passed out."

She didn't disclose her use of legilimency, nor Malfoy's reasoning for bolting to the Shack in the first place, although she had the sense that Dumbledore suspected there was more to the story. But she wasn't the one in trouble, so her explanation went down smoothly, raising no eyebrows.

She slumped in her armchair drifting in and out of listening as Nott followed, relaying the story from his perspective. Someone had blessedly conjured him a shirt, the sleeves hiding any blood that may have transferred onto his bare skin. Irritatingly, he looked more presentable than either of them.

She only perked up in alertness when Nott admitted that he'd been about to curse Harry in retaliation, when the Aurors arrived. He phrased his explanation of his actions carefully, lingering on his rush of emotion at seeing his housemate in a state of mortal peril, and leaving out the fact that he'd been about to use an Unforgivable.

*Clever*, Hermione thought. *After all, no one could prove the intent of a spell that wasn't cast.* If she or Harry accused him of trying to use the Cruciatus, it would be their word against his, hardly an acceptable admission according to the standards of any court of law.

"What were you and Miss Parkinson doing out of the bounds of the village?" McGonagall asked sharply, causing Nott to flush convincingly from his neck to his hairline.

"Er, we were looking for somewhere a bit more private." He tugged at his collar, a gesture of nervousness. "It's Valentine's Day and we're...involved. Romantically."

McGonagall tutted at Nott's implication of what exactly *somewhere more private* might constitute; Snape just rolled his eyes in mild disgust.

It reminded Hermione that Nott was an excellent liar. She'd never seen him and Pansy so much as hold hands, and it had been established that whenever Pansy was dating someone, she favored public displays of affection heavy enough to ensure the entire castle would know. And they hadn't even been near each other when Hermione found them at the Shack; Pansy had been stationed at the dilapidated house's gate, as if standing guard.

When Dumbledore nodded encouragingly at Harry, her friend took on a bloodless pallor.

“Well, I was supposed to meet Ron and Hermione at the Broomsticks, so I took the long way to the village. The path by the forest? Needed a bit of, er, fresh air—”

“I'm familiar enough with your essays to know you struggle with being succinct, Potter,” Snape cut in. “But I'd like to return to my chambers before midnight.”

“Well, when I got there, I saw Malfoy running from the village,” Harry continued. “He looked nervous, and I figured that was a bit suspicious, wasn't it? He's been acting weird all term, everyone's noticed. And then when I followed him to the Shack, I heard Pansy say...” Hermione could tell he was looking at her, but chose not to meet his eyes. She wouldn't be helping Harry out of this scrape, not when it was borne entirely out of his dangerous reactivity.

“She said Malfoy murdered Hermione's parents. That Voldemort ordered him to kill them. I didn't think, I just saw him and cast *sectumsempra*.”

The office was quiet besides a collective wince at Harry's use of the name. Hermione held her breath. One wrong step, and her biggest secret would be discovered. A single misstep could result in catastrophic consequences, for both her and Malfoy.

“But *why* did you immediately believe Miss Parkinson?” McGonagall blessedly gave Hermione a plausible explanation, scolding Harry, who shrank into his chair in an attempt to make himself smaller. “A girl who—and surely all will forgive me for casting aspersions—has a reputation throughout the castle as a malicious gossip?”

McGonagall turned to Hermione, far softer, a hint of sympathy playing on her severe lips.



“Miss Granger, do *you* believe that Draco Malfoy had any hand in the tragic passing of your parents?”

“No,” she replied, truthfully. She kept her eyes on her stained hands, folded in her lap. “I don’t.”

“Forgive me my interruption, Minerva, but I am more concerned about the use of a dark curse by a Hogwarts student,” Snape spat, dark eyes glinting like a pair of scarab beetles. “Where did you learn that spell, Potter?”

“I found it,” Harry stammered. “I was in the library with—”

With *her*, Hermione realized. Harry had been in the library with her all week, looking through her books out of boredom as she worked. He’d known of the textbook’s existence; he’d had it in his possession ever before she did. He must have looked through the Prince’s edits when she was unaware, noting the spell without doing any sort of research into its origins or capacities.

“Turn out your bookbag,” Snape interrupted, savagely. He looked to Dumbledore, insistent. “I want to see Potter’s potions textbook.”

Harry looked confused, eyes darting to Dumbledore, and then to her, questioning. She tried her best not to react, knowing Snape would pounce upon any hint of an admission.

“His potions textbook?” McGonagall questioned, bemused. “Certainly it is more likely this was discovered in one of the volumes from the restricted section, Severus?”

“Now, Potter!” Snape insisted and Harry dumped out his bag, sending scrap parchment and used quills flying, before pulling out his barely used copy of *Advanced Potion Making*.

Snape flipped through the pages furiously, searching for some unknown evidence, before prodding it with his wand.

“Revelio!” He cried, jabbing at the spine. But nothing happened; after all, Harry's copy was simply a textbook.

But how did he know to look in *Advanced Potion Making* ? Hermione wondered. He wasn't even teaching the subject this year, how could he possibly—

Hermione, infinitely glad that she was sitting down, realized several, dizzying things at once.

It had been Snape, in Malfoy's memory, inscribing the countercurse on the chalkboard. It had been Snape, who'd tutored Malfoy during the summers, teaching him the modified brewing instructions that had been written in the margins— that's how Malfoy always seemed to know to crush not slice, to stir in the opposite direction. It was Snape, who'd invented the spell.

Severus Snape was the Half-Blood Prince.

The occupants of the office continued speaking, unaware of Hermione's revelation. She looked at Snape through new, furious eyes. The spell he had invented had almost killed someone— worse, it was *intended* to be used for that very purpose. She'd always known of his rumored fascination with the Dark Arts, but this...

“Severus,” Hermione heard McGonagall say. “I know Draco is your godson, but this is past inquisition—”

“Don't tell me what is *past inquisition*, Minerva! Potter has proven time and time again that, like his father before him, he is a foolish and arrogant boy, prone to dangerous reactions and violent outbursts—”

“*Silence.* ” Dumbledore's voice rang out, quieting them both. “This has been an emotionally taxing afternoon for all, but I must insist that my faculty keep their composure.”

McGonagall stiffened at the rebuke; Snape looked very much like he wanted to hit the Headmaster.

“Where is Pansy?” Nott asked, suddenly. “And Draco?”

“Mister Malfoy is resting, but I’ve been assured that he will make a complete recovery. I believe Miss Parkinson was given a calming draught,” McGonagall explained. “Understandably, she arrived in a high state of distress.”

“Thank you for your actions, Miss Granger,” Dumbledore addressed her seriously, and her stomach turned in discomfort. She didn’t want to be seen as remotely heroic; she felt far too guilty for that. “Your impressive response to a crisis is evidence of a gifted future healer. I award your house fifty points, on your behalf.”

Hermione nodded at the compliment in an attempt to be gracious; privately, she hoped to never see blood again. She’d have felt guilty over receiving house points, if she wasn’t absolutely certain that Harry was about to lose at least triple of whatever she’d been awarded.

“You may go,” Dumbledore dismissed. “Please report straight to the Hospital Wing, so that Madam Pomfrey can assess any injuries and if necessary, treat you for shock.”

Nott and Harry stood with her, but Dumbledore raised a hand in warning, gesturing for them to remain seated. “Mister Nott, Mister Potter. I will need to have additional words with you both. Individually.”

Hermione fled the office, needing no further prompting. She understood her friend was being kept behind to receive his punishment. But why, she wondered as she made her way to the Hospital Wing, did Dumbledore need to speak privately with Nott?

---

Hermione entered the Hospital Wing to the matron's exclamations of disapproval, and was immediately sequestered to one of the examining bays, where a number of complicated diagnostic charms hovered over her until it was decided that, despite the evidence that might indicate otherwise, Hermione was almost entirely uninjured. Pomfrey cleared the stinging in her cheek—the lingering effects of Pansy's slap—with an immediate wave of her wand, a pleasant cooling sensation taking its place.

Once Pomfrey had fussed over her, siphoning away dried blood from her clothes until she was sure that none of it was Hermione's, she was finally allowed to see Malfoy.

His was the only cot in use, right in the middle of the empty room. Hermione moved to stand awkwardly at his bedside, unsure of what her position should be.

To her surprise, Malfoy was awake. At least, mostly. He lay propped up on a number of pillows. Shirtless, although one could barely tell, with his torso wrapped so fully in bandages. The only true exposure was his arms, the smooth expanse of pale skin rippling over taught muscle.

Hermione looked away. A bottle sat half-drained at his bedside, with a peeling gold label that read, *Merlin's Miraculous Medeorée*. She picked up the potion, giving its contents a tentative sniff to find the not entirely unpleasant aroma of sharp pine sap. The label was dotted with poppies, indicating that like most muggle painkillers, it was derived from opiates.

That explained the absence of the ever-present worry line between Malfoy's brows. His glassy eyes, looking up at her under dangerously hooded lids.

Hermione was surprised at how warm she felt, seeing him like that.

*It's a trauma response*, she told herself in explanation. *You're just relieved he's alive.*

Malfoy blinked at her heavily, as if making sure she was real, before speaking.

"You always get to be the hero, don't you?" He said, unappreciative as ever.

Hermione snorted. Clearly, the potion hadn't tempered his arrogance.

"That was all you," she responded. "You remembered the countercurse."

"You retrieved the memory."

"You taught me how to use legilimency."

"You swore the vow."

"You saved my parents."

Malfoy fell silent, but his face was more expressive than she'd ever seen it. It was like being in his memories again; she could see every emotion, flitting across his face, more blatant than he'd ever allow if he weren't under the influence of mood-altering potions. It made Hermione want to press harder, see more.

"No," he said, so softly she barely heard it. "You did that, too. You're rather good at it, aren't you? Saving people."

He looked at her like he had when she was healing him. She feared if he kept looking at her like that, she'd never want him to stop.

"I could be better, evidently." She looked pointedly at his wounds, busying herself with examining his bandages. She knew from her experience with Dolohov how difficult it was for cursed wounds to heal completely. Malfoy would undoubtedly carry these marks for the rest of his life, an unpleasant thought that turned her stomach. She didn't like the idea of his skin, marred on her behalf. "These will scar, won't they?"

“What’s another one?” Malfoy seemed unbothered. He caught her arm, pulling her to sit on the edge of his hospital bed. She huffed with feigned annoyance at his manhandling, but he ignored it, more interested in examining her from up close.

He reached up and touched the ends of her curls, still coated in the remnants of his blood. Catching a strand, he watched in fascination as the rust color transferred onto his fingers.

“They didn’t let you have a bath, first?”

“I came straight here.” *To see if you were all right* , she thought, but did not add.

He seemed to hear it anyway. His silver gaze melted into something so soft and delicate she didn’t dare name it, not even in her own thoughts. To name it would be to pour water over spun sugar, dissolving its sweetness.

“We had to give statements to the Headmaster,” she blurted, desperate to derail her treacherous train of thought. “Dumbledore said I’d make a good healer.”

Malfoy snorted in response, releasing the lock of her hair.

“Oh please, you’re far too useful for that,” he said. “Dumbledore never saw a weapon he wouldn’t use, no matter the cost, and you’ve proven yourself to be a whole artillery.” He gestured at himself, grimacing. “I’m proof enough of that.”

“What does that mean?”

“What do you think it means?” Malfoy answered, adjusting his blankets so that he could better sit up. “He’s already had me barter my mother’s safety for my allegiance. It’s like I said in the bath.” His cheeks took on a tinge of pink, evidence that at least he still had some blood left in him. “You don’t think that what has happened with

us isn't the least bit *convenient*? A death eater who is uniquely attuned to Potter's right hand?"

He swept his gaze over the other beds, ensuring they were alone, before lowering his voice.

"When I was in the village, I *felt* you. This...insistence that you were in trouble. That you were hurt."

There was a question of her well being buried in his statement, and she answered it instinctively.

"Pansy hit me," Hermione confessed, touching her cheek where she'd been slapped. "I caught her and Nott outside of the Shrieking Shack. We had a fight."

"I nearly died...because of a muggle brawl between you and Parkinson?"

"She slapped me," Hermione related, unsure of how much he had seen or remembered. "And announced that you killed my parents... that's what Harry overheard. That's why he cursed you."

Malfoy swept his hair back, rubbing at his forehead as her words had given him a headache.

"Fucking Pansy," he sighed. "Just what I needed, to have to do more damage control."

"No one believed it," she offered. "They think she was lying, to hurt me. Small miracles, and all that."

The torches between beds flickered on as the light filtering in through the windows of the Hospital Wing grew weaker, dusk sliding seamlessly into night. The other students would be at dinner now, surely spreading word of their absence. She wondered just how many of them had witnessed her blood-soaked march to the headmaster's office, trepidation swelling in her gut.

"Do you really think Dumbledore knows? About this—" Hermione gestured between them weakly, struggling to find a word that would fully encompass their situation. "That he'd...use it?"

"Do you really think Dumbledore *doesn't* know?" Malfoy snorted, disbelieving. "I'd bet my last bloody Galleon that he at least *suspects* ."

"He couldn't know," she maintained, although Malfoy's word had struck a match of doubt, igniting an uncertainty in her. "About your mark, and the ritual..."

But hadn't Dumbledore asked her about his Dark Mark all those months ago in the Weasley's broom shed? Hadn't he asked her then, how she felt about Malfoy? If she thought him redeemable?

"Listen," Malfoy asserted, unaware of her spiraling thoughts. "I was raised to size up my enemy accordingly, and that includes assuming the worst of anyone in a position of power over me. Including our saintly headmaster, who has proven himself perfectly comfortable using children to fight his wars. Dumbledore is far too involved in *this*, as you so eloquently put it, to chalk up his interest as just concern for students' well being."

His words reignited familiar doubts; was there no one she could trust? Hermione rubbed her face, overwhelmed.

"I'm sorry." And she was; she'd been so careless with the ritual, so trusting of an ancient tomb of dark magic and the writings of a budding sociopath in a textbook. She has tried to help him, only to further tangle them together. "This is all my fault."

"Don't be stupid," Malfoy replied. "I'd take this over having that Mark slowly poison me to death any day."

"It's my fault you were cursed too," she maintained miserably. "Harry only knew about the curse because—"



"Oh, don't martyr yourself on Potter's behalf. He cast the spell; he'll reap the consequences." Some of his usual bitterness flickered back into his expression, a warning. She wanted it gone. She wanted—god help her—she wanted him to touch her hair again, to use his nails against her scalp, to wrap her curls around his fist.

She wondered if she was going insane. If the events of the day—the year, really—had caused her final thread of sanity to snap. If it had been too much blood, too much loss, too much *fucking* proximity to Malfoy and his...his...

"I should go," Hermione finally said, before she did something dangerous. She needed a wash and a private cry in her four poster bed, in that order. "As you mentioned, I'm in desperate need of a bath."

"You should," Malfoy agreed, his voice dropping in temperature. He sounded like himself again, something that cause a little pang of disappointment to echo through her. "I've got half a pain potion left and would prefer to enjoy its effects in peace."

He reached for the bottle of *Medeorée* on his bedside table, downing its remnants in a single gulp. She watched as the stiffness slipped from his shoulders and his lips parted in an audible exhale of relief. He melted into the hospital bed with a luxurious stretch, exposing a sliver of unwrapped stomach.

"Better?" she asked, mouth suddenly bone-dry.

"Fuck." He shuddered a little, lashes fluttering. His voice relaxed back into his prior lowered cadence, words like dripping wax. "*Much* better."

She stood from her perch on the edge of his bed, giving him a much needed berth.

"I'm glad you're okay," she admitted, feeling a bit silly. It was just well wishes, she told herself. It wasn't anything she wouldn't say to an

acquaintance. Then why did it feel so different, admitting that she cared about his general wellbeing?

“Yeah.” One side of his mouth turned up, the barest ghost of a smile. “Me too, Granger.”

“I don’t even know if I’ll make it back to the tower,” she admitted lightly, stifling a yawn. “Healing spells take an awful lot out of you.”

“Maybe you should stay.”

Both Hermione and Malfoy looked surprised, as if his words had slipped out without his permission. She expected him to retract the statement immediately, but Malfoy only swallowed, the pale column of his throat constricting. His pupils were dilated, darkening his eyes to the point of distraction.

To her shock, he furthered his efforts, drawing back the blankets and moving gingerly to the edge of the bed— *making room for her*.

“Malfoy, we’re in the *hospital wing*.”

“Who cares?” Malfoy dug his teeth into his bottom lip, like he was attempting to stop himself before adding: “it would feel good.”

“You’re on a lot of potions.” Hermione’s voice sounded far too high. “Go to sleep,” she insisted.

“Sure Granger,” he mumbled sleepily. “But you know it would be...” He trailed off, fully succumbing to the lull of exhaustion and analgesics, leaving her unsure of what exactly he thought her lying down with him would be.

She drew the curtain around his bay, so that she didn’t have to look at him anymore.

The strangest thing was that she didn’t *want* to leave. She could blame Stockholm Syndrome, or pure exhaustion, or the tenuous connection they created during the ritual— it didn’t negate that she

wanted nothing more than to pretend she wasn't Hermione Granger and he wasn't Draco Malfoy. That she wanted to press too close in the hospital cot and have him run his fingers through her hair until she fell asleep.

*Don't you want to feel good?* A traitorous part of her asked coyly, the whole way back to the Gryffindor tower. Already knowing the answer.

What was *happening* to her?

---

Some notes:

- Hermione is having some new! feelings! thanks to soft, sleepy injured Draco
- "but you know it would be..." I don't think he's talking about sleeping anymore ;)
- Merlin's Miraculous Medeorée is something I invented, kind of like the Wizarding equivalent to morphine-- medeor means "heal" in Latin. Don't worry about Malfoy forming an addiction, this is a one time use for extenuating circumstances (being disemboweled)
- Time to gaslight Harry! Thank god everyone believes Pansy was lying (for now)
- There's a tiny little call back to Chapter 7 hidden in here (100 points to Ravenclaw if you can find it)
- Lots of questions still need to be answered re: Nott, "the connection," Dumbledore...all in due time

Can't WAIT to hear your thoughts and theories. See you next week, my beloved readers!!

---

# The Room of Requirement

## Chapter 20: The Room of Requirement

---

Harry has some questions. Pansy makes an announcement. Draco and Hermione hit a boiling point.

---

---

OOH BOY HERE WE GO. This is a long chapter. But the pay off...I assure you, the pay off will be sweet.

Rating has changed, be aware of tags, etc.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

For the following month, all anyone in the castle seemed to be discussing was *the incident*.

The faculty had kept the details hushed, which combined with Malfoy's conspicuous absence from classes, sent the Hogwarts rumor mill into overdrive. There were a number of theories: that Nott and Malfoy were violently competing for a betrothal agreement with Pansy; that Nott declared his love for Hermione and Malfoy cursed him in an attempt to preserve the reputation of an ancient pureblood house; that Malfoy and Harry attempted a wizard's duel with Hermione and Nott as their respective seconds. Blessedly, none of the increasingly outlandish rumors came remotely close to the truth, and so Hermione happily confirmed every single one.

Only a select few knew what had actually occurred. Harry and Hermione finally told the story to Ginny and Ron out by the Black Lake, where they were in no danger of being overheard.

Winter was slipping away, loosening its grasp on the castle's grounds. Suddenly there were shoots peeking timidly out of the muddy slush, the final remnants of a once robust blanket of snow. Small pockets of green promised spring at the lakeside, with eager wild primroses and snowdrops dappling the grass like wisps of cotton. But the scenery wasn't the reason for the visit; more importantly, the isolation of the lake would ensure total privacy.

Hermione watched as Ron and Ginny listened to Harry's account; anxious to hear what exactly he'd concluded of her and Malfoy's damning behavior. But he glossed over the healing, focusing more on the arrival of the Aurors and the standoff that followed in Dumbledore's office.

"...anyway," Harry finished explaining, with a heavy sigh. "I'm banned from Quidditch for the rest of the year. And I've got detentions until the end of term with Snape, organizing Filch's disciplinary records."

"Does this mean you can't play in the final?" Ron gaped, clearly stuck on the only aspect that affected him directly. "But it's against Ravenclaw! We don't stand a chance without you, mate!"

"No," Harry confirmed. "Gin, you'll have to fly Seeker...I'll need to apologize to the team..."

"I can do it. We'll have to move our Chasers around, but—"

"Could you lot think about something other than Quidditch for once?" Hermione snapped. "A student almost *died*. And if I'm being honest, I'm alarmed by the general apathy you're expressing at the fact that Harry cast a Dark spell, completely unprovoked."

"Well, to be fair, it sounds like Parkinson provoked him," Ron added, ever Harry's advocate. She knew Ron's loyalty was one of his best qualities, but sometimes it prevented him from really seeing his best friend's actions with any degree of impartiality.

“She was lying,” Hermione cried, exasperated. “She made up a stupid lie implicating Malfoy to provoke *me*. That’s not exactly an invitation to respond with lethal force, Ron!”

“Hermione’s right,” Harry admitted, as he looked down, scuffing his shoe into the pebbles at the lakeside. When he raised his head again, he was blinking rapidly, as if fending off tears. “Malfoy didn’t deserve it. I just...listen, I’m not making excuses. I know it was fucking horrible. But I go a bit funny over taunts about someone’s parents dying on Voldemort’s orders. I remember how you were, after it happened last summer,” he directed this at Hermione, pleading. “And maybe I lost my head a little bit, at the thought of Malfoy being the cause of that.”

Something in Hermione softened when she realized: Harry’s reaction hadn’t been just a fit of his volatile temper. Pansy’s words had triggered his first and deepest emotional wound. It didn’t make it okay. But at least, it made sense.

“You really hurt him, Harry. You should apologize.”

“What?” Ron raised his eyebrows. “You want Harry to apologize to *Malfoy*?”

“You weren’t there,” Hermione spat. She knew it looked incriminating, her reacting so violently in the Slytherin’s defense, but she couldn’t help herself. “You weren’t covered to your elbows in blood, trying your hardest to keep someone breathing, so that your best friend didn’t accidentally become a murderer.”

“Alright, alright,” Ron raised his hands defensively. “I’m just saying, I don’t think Malfoy is going to be particularly receptive to a bouquet of daisies from his long standing nemesis. Why was he even there, anyway?”

“Probably to see Nott and Parkinson,” Hermione shrugged. “Maybe they *were* fighting over a betrothal agreement.”

Ron let out a snort of amusement, placated, but Harry shot her a look that said: *I know you're lying.*

She shook her head infinitesimally: *we'll talk about it later.*

"Where'd you learn that spell?" Ginny asked Harry, who looked directly at Hermione in response.

"It was written in the margins of my Potions textbook," Hermione admitted. "But there's loads of helpful stuff written in there, I even—"

"Hang on," Ginny questioned, a fire in her eyes that fiercely resembled her mother. She turned to Harry, disapproving. "You're meant to tell me you found a dark curse written in a dodgy book, and you *used* it? Hadn't we learned our lesson about taking handwritten instructions from questionable sources? Or should we wait for another Basilisk?"

Harry hung his head, chastened.

"Promise me you'll get rid of it," Ginny said quietly, turning to Hermione.

"Of course," Hermione said. "I'll make sure no one else ever gets their hands on it."

Hermione wasn't lying. She was just...carefully omitting information. Ginny didn't need to know that yes, she planned to keep Snape's book under lock and key, but she wouldn't be destroying it any time soon. After all, the book had provided her with the *sanitatum* recipe that had helped heal Malfoy's arm. And now that she had deduced that it once belonged to Snape, it seemed all the more essential to understand their slippery Professor's motivations for his espionage on behalf of the Order. What other spells had he invented using Dark magic? Why did Dumbledore trust him, if he was capable of such violence?

The four walked back to the castle together until they reached the entrance hall, where Ron and Ginny headed off to call an emergency meeting of the Gryffindor Quidditch team. Hermione quickly made an excuse about needing some books for an Arithmancy project, eager to evade Harry's prying gaze, but the git was faster, pulling her into a secluded alcove with bay windows before she could even say *library*.

"Harry, what are you doing? I really do have to check on—"

"Sit," Harry said, pointing at the window ledge. "Malfoy wasn't there for Parkinson." He crossed his arms, eyeing her sternly. "He was calling your name."

"What?" She knew this confrontation would happen eventually; Harry was bound to have questions about what he saw. Her heart began to pick up speed, kicking insistently behind her ribs. Christ, her and Malfoy should have gotten their story straight right away, pain potions be damned.

"I saw Malfoy in Hogsmeade," Harry said. "One moment he was fine and the next, it was like he could hear this screaming that no one else could, and he took off running. And when he got to the Shack, he asked if *you* were hurt."

"You're being paranoid, Harry. Maybe he just saw Parkinson take a swing at me, and didn't want her to get in trouble?"

"But how did he know you were there?" Harry countered. "Why did he run to find you? And the way you were with him...you were *staring*. Like you were in some sort of trance."

"I told you, I'd help anyone in his situation."

"I think you'd try to *heal* anyone," Harry partially confirmed. "I don't doubt that. I just don't think you'd go about it like you did with Malfoy. It was like you really knew him, Hermione. Like you...cared."

"I was in shock," Hermione defended. "I was panicking."



“I know what I saw. There’s something between the two of you and I can’t for the life of me understand why you’re lying about it. Is it blackmail? Is he threatening you?”

“Don’t create this narrative that I’ve been carrying on some sort of criminal association with the crown prince of Slytherin— you sound like Rita Skeeter.”

“Then what is it?” Harry cried. “What’s going on with you?”

Maybe it was the persistence in his inquisition, or the exhaustion she felt at having to conceal everything regarding Draco Malfoy from everyone she cared about, but *something* broke through the last of her defenses, and the truth slipped from her lips before she could stop it.

“I can’t tell you!”

Hermione slapped a hand over her mouth. She could feel the Unbreakable Vow they’d taken in Dumbledore’s office like a jolt of electricity humming through her. A warning: *tread carefully*.

“Why not?” Harry asked, placing his hands on her shoulders bracingly. “Hermione, what’s wrong? You can tell me—”

“Harry,” she interrupted. “I can’t say anything.” She stressed the word, hoping he’d clue in without her stretching the bindings of the Vow too far.

“Yes, you can,” Harry insisted, missing her emphasis. “Just *trust* me. I won’t tell anyone, I swear.”

Hermione racked her thoughts. What was it exactly that Malfoy had made her promise? She’d sworn never to speak of the full nature of his involvement with her parents and any of his involvement with the Order of the Phoenix, the extent to which she was still unsure of herself. This meant she couldn’t tell Harry about the occlumency lessons, as they’d been at Dumbledore’s bequest, or her healing of

his Mark, as that would undoubtedly lead to Malfoy's mission from Voldemort. What did that leave?

Like steam from a cauldron, Ginny's words from weeks prior rose to the forefront of her mind. *He's either a Death Eater, plotting the world's least subtle attack. Or, he's a teenage boy, who's realized the girl he liked to torment is rather pretty.*

Hermione suddenly had a very bad idea.

"Okay. Something happened," she admitted with false reluctance, eyes downcast. "During our shared detention." She wasn't as smooth a liar as Nott, and Harry would surely see the dishonesty in her words if she met his gaze. She drew her bottom lip between her teeth, and the thought of Malfoy sleepily asking her to share his bed flew across her mind unbidden. Her cheeks flushed convincingly.

"Did he hurt you?" Harry pressed. He cast his eyes wildly over Hermione, like he might have missed an injury.

Hermione suspected that there was one thing that would distract Harry enough to drop his entire line of questioning. That would wipe any suspicion from his mind, and replace it with disgust.

"No," she lied. "He kissed me."

"What the *fuck*?" Harry exclaimed, eyes bugging out of his head. Whatever he had been expecting her to confess, it certainly wasn't this. "Are you serious?! Is this why you wanted me to apologize to him!?"

"It's not a big deal! I think that's why he was trying to find me in Hogsmeade, to stop me from telling people, or—"

"*Not a big deal* ? Hermione, His father is a Death Eater. He's called you the foulest, most repulsive...I shouldn't have to remind you what he's called you!"

“I remember, thanks,” she answered testily. “It was a mistake, Harry. He had some sort of mental break or maybe he was taking a stab at teenage rebellion, I don’t know. *Don’t* tell Ron, we’ve just barely started to get back to normal.”

“I won’t tell Ron —I won’t tell *anyone* — because I don’t want to be responsible for the fallout of a fucking nuclear meltdown. Which is exactly how everyone sane would react to this, by the way. Kissing *Malfoy* ?” He screwed up his face, gagging.

“It’s still better than almost murdering him,” Hermione responded coldly.

“Stay away from him, Hermione,” Harry warned. “I know you like saving...well, I know you are prone to taking up lost causes.”

“You’re one to talk, Harry Potter.”

“Very funny. I’m serious, though. Malfoy isn’t a defenseless House-Elf. He’s a bloody parasite.”

---

Malfoy was released from the Hospital Wing after three weeks of supervision and his behavior was the complete opposite of his usual circus, post injury. Merlin, he used to play up a mere paper cut for attention; now, he was like a ghost. She only caught glimpses of him in class, where he was taciturn and reserved, only speaking when called upon. As soon as the bells chimed indicating it was time to move to the next lesson, he bolted for the door. She couldn’t catch him in the corridors either; he was somehow making his way to classes while managing to evade hallways all together.

He refused to look at Hermione. Not a sideways glance, or a backhanded taunt, a nod of acknowledgement— nothing. At mealtimes, he moved from his usual seat facing the other House tables to one on the opposite side, so that Hermione could only see the back of his head.

She told herself she was overthinking it. That now that Harry knew about their supposed *moment*, it was probably better that he was refusing to acknowledge her presence. She didn't care. She didn't.

She had more important things to attend to anyway. Revenge, for one, which came to sweet fruition during Defense class with the Slytherins, when Snape finally called on Pansy Parkinson during their lesson.

"The six telltale signs of the Imperius, if you please, Miss Parkinson."

"Of course, sir." Pansy straightened and cleared her throat, scanning her notes. She opened her mouth, ready to recite the answer. "Well, first, I am a liar."

Lavender giggled, going silent at Snape's severe look in her direction. Pansy blanched and tried again.

"I tell dangerous, venomous lies."

Half the class swiveled their heads in her direction, interested. Hermione kept her eyes on her own parchment innocently.

"I'm not looking for an evaluation of your truthfulness, Miss Parkinson." Snape said, amongst the giggling of the class. "Please relegate your answers to *course* material."

"I'm trying, Professor!" Pansy grit her teeth, before attempting the answer for a third time. "The first sign is that I— I lie for attention, because I was never given any at home!"

She gaped, opening and closing her mouth several times.

The class began to react in earnest, with Crabbe and Goyle giving each other befuddled looks and Lavender and Parvati dissolving into full on giggles. Only Nott turned to Hermione, a small frown on his face. She shrugged, like, *what could I have to do with it?*

“Hospital Wing, Parkinson,” Snape grimaced, catching on that someone had hexed the girl. “Quickly, before you further derail my lesson.”

“I spread baseless gossip!” Pansy gasped, trying to cover her mouth with her hands as she fled. “I have no credibility!”

As Pansy commanded the attention of the class, Hermione allowed herself a peek at Malfoy. He was staring straight ahead, as if Snape had never stopped the lecture.

“That was brilliant, Hermione,” Ron said to her, after lessons were over. “How’d you get it so that she said all that stuff?”

“It’s a modified Question and Answer Jinx,” Hermione admitted, biting her lip. “I crossed it with a tongue-tie hex so that anytime she’s called on to give an answer, it triggers the response. It wasn’t too cruel, was it?”

“Are you kidding? It made my week. And it serves her right, for what she said about your parents. Now, everyone knows Parkinson talks pure thestral shit.”

“Yes,” Hermione grinned. “That was the idea.”

---

On Friday, she hurried to the dungeons to meet Malfoy for their first occlumency lesson since his injury. Harry was with Dumbledore, searching for confirmation that Voldemort had split his soul into something called a *horcrux*. Ginny and Ron were spending every spare moment in emergency Quidditch practice, training their new Chaser. It was the first time she’d be alone with the Slytherin since their charged interaction in the Hospital Wing, and her stomach was attempting a strange flipping action at the idea.

A posh voice interrupted her thoughts, emanating from the space beside her in the hallway.

*"Psst...Granger!"*

She screamed, a hand flying to her heart.

"Merlin, it's just me! I'm disillusioned, you twit," Malfoy's voice hissed. "Don't bloody blow out my eardrums."

"Maybe don't sneak up on people when you're invisible, then," Hermione sniped back. If she focused her eyes she could see a bit of shimmer, the tell tale sign of a Disillusionment Charm. It probably looked to any bystanders like she was talking to the wall.

"Come on. We can't use the dungeons anymore. Too dangerous." A hand she could not see grasped at the sleeve of her robes, yanking her in the opposite direction. "Hurry up," the voice insisted and she scowled at the approximate place she thought him to be.

He dragged her through the corridors, earning her a few strange looks at her jerky movements, until they reached the fifth floor.

"Make it open," his voice urged, and she realized where Malfoy was leading her: The Room of Requirement.

"You make it open, you're the one who dragged me here."

There was a beat of silence, when Hermione began to wonder if he'd simply slipped away under the cover of invisibility.

"I don't know how." His voice finally revealed, heavy with irritation. "Just do it, Granger, I know this is where you ran your little defense club." Great, Malfoy was in a mood. What else was new.

"Okay, fine." She closed her eyes and focused. *I need a place to study occlumency with Draco Malfoy*, she thought, and on the third time, an oak door appeared. She felt a pull at her wrist, and the door slammed shut behind her.

"Must you always yank me into rooms?" she exclaimed, wriggling free from Malfoy's surprisingly powerful grip. It was funny, she'd

always pegged him as weak wristed, with an aristocrat's piano fingers. But the way he'd grabbed her was anything but feeble, and she had to rub her wrist after he let it free.

The room had organized itself to resemble a cozy study, complete with a plush red-velvet sofa and a crackling fire. A thick Persian style rug lined the wooden floor, and Hermione fought the urge to remove her shoes and step, barefoot, into the carpet. The room was smaller than she'd ever seen it before, barely half the size of the Gryffindor common room, but capable of the same comforting warmth.

She was suddenly aware that she'd never been in such a soft, domestic setting with him. When they'd come together it was to argue in broom closets and bleed out in the snow and burn down houses. Not...sit on the couch.

Malfoy finally undid his charm, sliding into her line of vision. He was dressed neatly, as always: starched shirt topped with a cashmere sweater, green tie knotted right up against his throat, school slacks ironed with precision. It made her self-conscious: the top buttons of her oxford had come undone, and one of her socks sagged slightly under her knee.

There was a deep frown on his face, etched into his cheeks like he'd been making the expression for hours. What was his *problem*?

"Is this where Dumbledore's Army practiced? It's a bit small." He grimaced at the couch, as if the piece of furniture had personally offended him. "What, are there no *chairs* in the secret room? Seems like an oversight."

"I don't control it," Hermione said, cross. She'd have thought a recent brush with death would have humbled Malfoy. Apparently not. "I just asked for a place to practice occlumency, and this is what the room chose to provide."

"Will it really shift into anything you need?" Malfoy asked, as he skeptically settled on one end of the sofa, putting as much space

between them as possible.

“I’m sure there are limitations. Gamp’s Law would mandate that—”

“I shouldn’t have asked,” Malfoy grumbled, before she could explain her hypothesis of exactly how the Laws of Matter translated into Magical Theory. *His loss*, Hermione thought petulantly.

She sat opposite him on the sofa, adjusting her school skirt when it rode up as she tucked her legs under her. She could feel the heat of his gaze, but when she looked up at him, Malfoy had fixated on the floor, like there was something fascinating written in the carpet fibers.

“How are you feeling?” She tried, attempting a softer tactic. “How are your scars?”

His eyes snapped to her in surprise. She had the strange feeling that maybe, she was the first person to ask him that.

“I hope you’ve been practicing,” Malfoy said, ignoring her question. He directed his wand across the couch, aiming at her temple. “Shall we?”

The spell was cast before Hermione could brace herself.

*“Legilimens!”*

She was more prepared this time, having indeed practiced sorting her memories every night before she fell asleep. She’d gotten fairly decent at it, so she thought. She didn’t have Malfoy’s sprawling occlumency garden, but she’d found a system she thought suited her even better: she’d started organizing her memories like books in a library. Paperbacks for the harmless ones, the mundane thoughts. For the more dangerous—*Malfoy apparating at the pond, the four blazing candles of the ritual*—she chose heavy, leather-covered tombs, equipped with key-locks.



Malfoy was vicious in his onslaught, shredding her primary defenses as if they were paper thin. Before she could so much as quiet her mind, he was tearing through her shelves.

*— her mother, singing her to sleep after a nightmare, stroking her hand through her curls —*

She attempted to redirect him like he'd taught her to, throw him something that would ruin his concentration, so that she could exile him from her mind.

*— watching a ferret fly upwards, at the mercy of Moody's wand —*

He bristled, exuding annoyance even through his legilimency, and moved to a different shelf.

*— looking down at his bloodied chest, horror rising in her throat as he made pained noises beneath her —*

She could feel his curiosity in the way he lingered on her concern, watching the scene of his maiming through her, a new perspective. She used it to her advantage, throwing him a different memory before he could react.

*— standing at his bedside in the Hospital Wing, his heavily lidded eyes trained on her with an intensity that almost resembled hunger, his lips moving around an offer for her to stay, to lay down and —*

He withdrew from her mind sharply. She would have felt satisfied over finally expelling him, but the disturbed look on his face ruined her triumph.

For once, Malfoy said nothing. He angled his body away from her on his side of the couch and raked his hand through his hair, something she was beginning to identify as a nervous tick for him.

"Aren't you going to congratulate me?" She prodded, looking for a response. Wanting him to fly off the handle, to sneer and jab,

anything besides this horrid ambivalence. She needed him to react; if he reacted, she'd know that they were back to normal, that the lingering strangeness from the Hospital Wing had resolved itself.

“Congratulations.”

They sat in silence for several excruciating minutes. She fought down the urge to say something terrible and revealing like: *why won't you look at me?* Or worse, *why do I want you to look so badly?* She was afraid to answer those questions, even tentatively, even for herself. Hermione had built many walls over the years, necessary to protect herself from a world that sought to expel her. She knew the danger in being seen, being vulnerable. So why did she want him to look, even when she knew his gaze made her feel raw and unarmoured? Even when she knew it was dangerous?

“You’ve been ignoring me,” Hermione finally said, when she couldn’t bear it any longer. “Again.”

“Do you really require so much attention that when I simply go about my life without centering you, it's considered shunning?” He scoffed, but his expression was tight with something Hermione couldn’t place.

“I thought we’d have some pertinent things to discuss,” she responded hotly. Gone were the days that she’d allow Malfoy to skirt important conversations because he couldn’t be bothered. “And it’s rather difficult to have those discussions when *someone* is pretending you don’t exist.”

“Go on then, Granger.” He gestured, carelessly. “Stop whining and discuss.”

“Why aren’t we in the Potions classroom?”

Malfoy sighed, sweeping through his hair once more.

“Nott is suspicious,” he admitted. “He saw you heal me. He knows that something is going on, and if he figures out I’m teaching you

occlumency, he'll know it's because we have something to hide, and at that point I might as well carve 'blood traitor' on my forehead and leap from the astronomy tower."

"Harry asked me about it, too," she admitted. She wasn't sure if she should tell Malfoy how she'd haphazardly gotten out of *that*, certain she couldn't relay the information without blushing. "He said we seemed far too familiar to not suspect something. I just told him... well, I lied."

"You fibbed to The Boy Who's Never Had An Original Thought? I didn't think you had it in you."

She had the urge to destabilize him, to knock the condescending smirk straight from his stupid, angular face. Who cared if she blushed— she wanted to see him *squirm*.

"I told him you were acting weird because we kissed."

Malfoy made a choking noise, eyes going wide and horrified. Her lips curled up with satisfaction. It served him right

"Well, actually, I told him *you* kissed *me* ."

"*What?!* "

"Funny, that's exactly what he said."

Malfoy glared at her, and his hand flexed, opening and closing into a fist.

"Are you *mad*, Granger? I know you're not stupid, which means you must be certifiably insane to say something so...so..." A rebellious lock of blonde hair fell onto his forehead and he blew upwards, attempting to remove it. "I might as well compose my last will and testament now. We're trying not to draw attention to the fact that I'm *associating* with you, not scream it from the rooftops."

“It’s actually rather clever, when you think about it,” Hermione defended. “No one would ever label you a traitor for...that sort of thing. What, you think your Pureblooded forefathers never had a fool around in the broom closet with a mudblood?”

“They did not,” Malfoy insisted, but the heat crept up his neck told Hermione a different story. “They’d never sully themselves with—”

“Oh please, I’ll even bet your father had his fair share of dirty—”

Malfoy was across the couch before she could finish. She drew her wand on instinct, and he took hold of her wrist just as quickly, forcing her to lower it.

“Don’t put your wand in my face,” he whispered, deadly. “And don’t say another fucking word about my father.” He pressed until her pulse hammered under his touch, before finally letting her go.

Perhaps Hermione had a death wish. Perhaps, two weeks of being ignored had rankled her a little bit more than she thought it would, reminding her of far too many instances of Ron’s and Harry’s weaponizing of the silent treatment.

“Are you scared Malfoy?” She said softly, meeting his eyes. His gaze held an entire thunderstorm, just waiting for the first crack of lightning in order to be unleashed. “Are you scared it will get back to your precious father that you’ve sullied yourself with someone like me? Does he still have that much power over you, all the way from Azkaban?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed in his throat. She could feel his rage building, threatening to wrest from his control.

“You’re a terrible liar, Granger. Let me give you some advice for the next time you have something to hide: don’t make your lie so far-fetched.”

Hermione's bravado suddenly fell away, replaced by a wave of anger that knocked all of her good sense aside mercilessly. She wanted him to admit it for once. She knew how he looked at her— in Fleur's gold dress, in the Prefect's bath, in the Hospital Wing— an expression no one would ever confuse with disgust.

She closed the distance between them until their noses were almost touching. His lips parted, a pained look sliding onto his face. She could see him swallow, his throat bobbing invitingly. She wanted to sink her teeth into it.

"It didn't seem so far-fetched when you were inviting me into your bed. Telling me how *good* it would feel."

Malfoy winced as if she'd hit him. He pushed himself off the couch, and strode across the room, putting as much space between them as the small room would allow. The fire crackled, as if reflecting his mood.

"What the fuck is your *problem*? " He spat, both hands in his hair. There was a fury building in him that threatened to crack the final remnants of his controlled, uncaring veneer. "You can't leave anything alone can you? It's like you pathologically have to have the last word. You just push and push, until—"

She was on her feet before he could finish.

"My problem?" She shrieked, moving towards him. He backed up as she approached, until he was nearly in the doorway. "You're the one who couldn't even *look* at me, you pathetic, hypocritical—"

"Do you really want to know why I was avoiding you, Granger?" His eyes slipped from overcast slate to something even darker. The final moment of dusk, before it was swallowed by night. Blonde hair fell into his eyes, his tie gone askew during their argument.

"So now you admit it! You *were* ignoring me!"

He crowded her against the oak door, placing his hands on either side. Bracketing her, like he had done in the Prefect's bath. She couldn't identify the feeling that curled, hot and insistent, in her gut: was it fear? Tenser than anticipation, more perilous than affection...

"I couldn't fucking stand it anymore," he said in a low, rough tone that made her entire body go taut, tightening like a instrument's string. "I couldn't take another second of your voice and your face and your stupid hair getting everywhere—"

"You seemed to stand me just fine when I healed you," she breathed, craning her neck so that she could meet his eyes. "Both times, I should add. You seemed to want me around then."

"Don't be stupid." Malfoy's jaw tightened, muscles of his cheeks twitching. "No one would even *believe* I'd want *you* ."

She grabbed his collar and pulled him down hard, until his face was level with hers. He froze as her fingers brushed the nape of his neck, before pressing her lips firmly to his.

It was barely a kiss— stiff and unyielding and closed mouthed, only lasting a mere moment. She pulled away.

"Was that *believable* enough?" Hermione spat, having proved her point.

Malfoy looked down at her in ragged disbelief.

"Was that supposed to be a kiss, Granger? *That's* your big move?"

She dropped his collar. The horror of what she had done began to settle around her like dust in an attic. He'd not moved away. Why hadn't he moved away? She could feel his stomach muscles expanding and contracting against hers as she took labored breaths. She felt like her brain wasn't getting enough oxygen, like she was drowning, like—

She moved to put some space between them, only for his hands to grip her shoulders, forcing her to go still. He wedged a thigh between her own, effectively trapping her in place.

She felt like a butterfly, pinned to a museum corkboard.

His fingers dragged up her shoulders to her neck, slowly, oh so very slowly, until they scraped her jaw, framing her face in a firm hold. She fluttered her eyes shut, overwhelmed, certain she was pulled too tightly, that any second her body would snap.

Every spinning axis of Hermione Granger's mind came to a sudden halt as Draco Malfoy pressed his lips to hers. Not firm and brief, like she'd attempted. When he kissed her, it was furious and hungry. Hard enough to bruise. His lips were deft and unyielding and he kissed her like she was *his*.

Greedy, he nipped at her lips until she parted them, so that his wicked, clever tongue could taste her. He groaned at the slide of her tongue against his, the reverberations acting as a new torment. She gasped at the sensation, and could feel his responding smile, his rush of satisfaction at her response.

He tasted like honey, floral and smokey and intoxicatingly sweet. She chased the sweetness into his mouth, tilted her head for better access as she surged up towards him.

He took this as an invitation to touch her, anywhere and everywhere he could access. With shaking hands, he wove his fingers into her hair, pulling her as close to him as he could manage. His lips fell to her jaw and neck, doing things that left her panting. They moved against her throat in what she thought was a senseless pattern until she realize he was murmuring: *fuck*, barely a rasp, over and over again. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

He nosed aside her shirt collar, before dragging his tongue reverently down her collarbone. Grasping blindly at her waist, he hitched her up against the door so that they were level, so that she

could take whatever she wanted from him. His thigh pressed between her skirts, supporting her, and her hips flexed against it unconsciously. The movement dragged a broken sound from him, so she did it again.

She felt as if she finally understood what her body—always so cumbersome and awkward— was for. Like it had been waiting for this, for him, to spark a current of pure *want*, a live wire that ran directly through her core.

He made an impatient noise, and then his hands were touching the back of her thighs, lifting her. Wrapping her around him. The movement closed any space between them, pressing their hips flush. She could feel him, thick and hard, and she felt delirious as she realized— he wanted her. Oh, how he wanted her.

Her teeth dug into her bottom lip so that she wouldn't moan. He bucked his hips uncontrollably against her center and it was too much for her oversensitive body, causing her to lean back in reaction, shifting slightly away from him.

He winced as she drew back from him, and then froze.

*No*, she thought deliriously, *not yet*.

For a moment, neither of them moved. The hearth crackled merrily, unaware of the discomfort of the room's inhabitants. And then, all too gently, he lifted her by the waist, touching her for only as long as it took to return her to her feet.

"No," she tried to correct, still breathless. "I didn't mean for you to..." At the look on his face, she trailed off before she could manage the word *stop*.

Draco Malfoy looked ruined, his blond hair ravaged. Eyes wild, pupils blown wide. Lips swollen and wet. *She* did that to him, Hermione realized, and her heart clenched in vicious pride.



He blushed furiously as she watched him straighten his clothes, taking special care to adjust his pants. The rosy flush gave his pale skin a sinful, indecent quality.

He opened his mouth and then shut it again. It was the first time she'd ever seen him incapable of speech.

She stepped away from the door, pulse thudding uncertainty. She felt the chill of reality brush against her skin, before settling, cold, into her bones. God, what had they done?

Malfoy summoned his things, his bag zooming across the room into his waiting hands. The hands that had just been...Hermione's stomach clenched at the thought, fighting off a full body shiver.

He looked at her—too heated, too charged, to everything— and clenched his jaw furiously, before reaching for the door.

“Malfoy—” she started, but her voice was sandpaper, so unfamiliar that it startled her, chasing away whatever she'd wanted to say. His hands tightened at the sound, knuckles paling on the door's handle.

“Just so you know.” He said, clipped and quiet. “That? *That* was a kiss.”

---

---

\*mic drop\*

---

# Collateral Damage

## Chapter 21: Collateral Damage

---

Hermione has regrets. Parvati and Lavender offer their expertise. Malfoy tries a new tactic. Theo tests a theory.

---

---

Thank you so much for all the love you've given my little story, I can't believe there are 1,000 people reading along! I am so grateful for your generous kudos, comments, subscriptions, shares, and recommendations!

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

After Malfoy's hasty exit, Hermione went straight from the Room of Requirement to the Gryffindor tower as if she were in a trance.

Had she really kissed *Malfoy* ? Had he really kissed her in return? Was she entirely sure the events of the night actually took place and weren't just a side effect of hitting her head very hard?

Back in the girls' dormitory, Lavender and Parvati were sitting cross-legged on Lavender's bed, attempting to complete a complicated looking star chart. Parvati was periodically gesturing out the window, explaining the properties of some planet or another, as Lavender sketched out its placement on the parchment. Distantly, Hermione hoped that her entrance would go unnoticed, and she could simply draw the curtains of her four poster bed and down a vial of Dreamless Sleep.

Her plan was foiled immediately when Lavender looked directly at her and *gasped* .

“What?” Parvati asked, gazing at the chart worriedly. “Is his Venus in Gemini?”

“Hermione Granger,” Lavender breathed, a look crossing her face that could only be described as deranged joy. “Have you just come from *meeting* someone? Broom closet meeting someone? Alcove on the fourth floor behind the barmy witch tapestry meeting someone?”

“Of course not.” Hermione attempted to scoff at the implication that she was occupying the best known spots in the castle for a fool around. “I was just—”

“Then what’s that on your neck?”

“Huh?” Hermione made a noise of utter confusion, abandoning all eloquence. She touched her throat, concerned. “What are you talking about?”

Lavender scrambled from her bed, leaving Parvati gaping in her wake. She took Hermione by the shoulders and for a wild moment, Hermione thought Lavender might hit her. But then her roommate marched her directly in front of the full-length mirror in the corner, the one that liked to scold Hermione about her hair.

Hermione’s jaw fell open at the sight of her reflection.

She looked *wrecked* . A distinctive flush lingered on the slopes of her cheeks, and her hair was half out of its elastic, curls hanging into her unbuttoned collar. Her lips were swollen and dusky pink.

Worst of all, there were bruises blooming like wildflowers all up and down her neck. Had she walked through the castle looking like this?

“Thoroughly debauched!” The mirror exclaimed, sounding scandalized.

“Oh,” Hermione managed. “Oh no.”

Lavender squealed, leaping back onto her bed. She kicked her feet eagerly, as if she'd been waiting for this moment her whole life.

"Calm down," Parvati told her friend, but her eyes were also lit up, intrigued by Hermione's state of disarray.

"I fell?" Hermione offered, unconvincingly.

Parvati laughed and inclined her head, patting the foot of the bed in invitation.

"Come sit. You can tell us all about your *fall*. "

Hermione was so out of sorts that if Parvati had told her to jump off a cliff, she'd probably have leaped over the precipice unquestioningly.

Gingerly, she sat at the end of the bed. She didn't normally do this with her roommates, although she'd watched them share the experience many times over many boys throughout the years. Embarrassingly, she'd once thought herself too serious for such things. Oh, how the universe loved proving her wrong.

"Okay, okay." Lavender fluttered her hands in an attempt to calm herself. "When did this happen? And with who?" She narrowed her eyes. "Not, Ron, right?"

"No," Hermione confirmed, lucid enough to pull a face at the thought. Lavender visibly relaxed. "No offense. Are you two still...?"

"They broke up for a little while, but got back together last weekend," Parvati said dryly, relating the latest in the Ron-and-Lavender saga that had half of Gryffindor regularly dosing headache potions.

"Who cares about *Ron* !" Lavender insisted, obviously caring very much. "I need to know who got into your knickers. Is he older? Younger? Is it Seamus? Is it Neville—oh my God Hermione, is it Neville?" She took in Hermione's exasperated expression. "No, no you're right, you two don't have that kind of chemistry."

“None of the above,” Hermione insisted weakly, overwhelmed by the velocity of Lavender’s questions. She bit her lip, unsure of how much to reveal to the two infamous gossips, before remembering its current tender state post-Malfoy. “I can’t say who.”

“I’ll swear an Unbreakable Vow!” Lavender offered dramatically, blissfully unaware of the fact that such a vow was exactly what had gotten Hermione into this mess in the first place. “I won’t tell a soul!”

“You don’t know how to make an Unbreakable Vow,” Parvati corrected, rolling her eyes.

“Did he ask you not to say anything?” Lavender asked, ignoring her friend. “Classic bloke move. You can bet he’s telling all his mates.”

Hermione thought of Draco Malfoy sitting down Crabbe and Goyle to tell them he’d swapped saliva with their sworn enemy. She imagined the fall out of him confessing to Parkinson. Pansy’s rage alone would surely decimate half the castle.

“He didn’t say not to tell anyone,” she considered. “But it was certainly, er, implied. I certainly don’t think I have to worry about him saying anything.”

“Did you just have a snog?” Parvati asked, grinning suggestively. “Or did you...” She wiggled her eyebrows.

Lavender perked up at the possibility. She put her hands closely together, slowly widening them. “Okay stop me when it’s his size... really? Bigger?”

“No!” Hermione insisted, flushing at the thought of Malfoy’s endowment. “It didn’t go that far. Honestly, it was an accident.”

“So, his tongue fell into your mouth?” Parvati asked, coyly. “How does that work exactly?”

“Parvati,” Hermione groaned. “Please. Have mercy.”

“Was it good?” Lavender asked. Hermione felt the blood rush to her cheeks at the thought.

Was it good? Good didn’t seem like the sort of word one could associate with Malfoy’s lips on her neck, the sounds he made, like she was causing him physical pain just by existing in his proximity.

“I know that look.” Lavender leaned in, clasping her hands. “Did he give you fanny flutters?”

“What in God’s name,” Hermione asked. “Are *fanny flutters*?”

“You know,” Parvati explained conspiratorially. “When you get properly kissed and your body just goes all...” She clenched her fist in demonstration.

Hermione covered her face with her hands. She wanted a lobotomy. She wanted to die. She wanted a black hole to open beneath her feet and send her flying into oblivion.

“That means yes!” Lavender squealed. “Wow, he must have done some really good work to get you like this. You’re practically nonverbal. I’m jealous.”

Hermione muttered something ungracious from behind her palms which sounded a lot like, *I wish you were practically nonverbal*.

“Play nice,” the blonde girl warned, wagging a finger at the marks on Hermione’s neck. “Or I won’t teach you how to glamor those love bites.”

“You know how to get rid of them?” Hermione breathed, almost reverent, hands dropping to reveal wide, desperate eyes. She hadn’t even thought of how she’d camouflage the bruises Malfoy had sucked down her throat, but she knew no one else could see them, especially not Harry. Why had she gone and told him that stupid lie about kissing Malfoy? And when did she gain the divinatory powers to manifest it into fruition?

“It’s easy,” Lavender said, taking out her wand. Her mouth twisted into a devious little grin. “I’ve had the spell down since, like, third year.”

Lavender camouflaged each bruise, casting the charm using smooth, circular motions. Hermione felt a sudden coolness, but after it dissipated, her skin was left completely unblemished.

Once the marks were gone and Hermione had taken a long, punishingly hot shower, she sat in her bed with the curtains silenced, replaying the events of the evening.

Okay, yes. She’d started it. She’d kissed him first. But only because he’d wound her up past the point of rationality. She hadn’t even been thinking when she’d forced their lips together, her brief and brutal attempt to teach him a lesson. There was no way she could have known that he’d rise to her challenge.

She couldn’t stop thinking about the sensation of his body pressed flush against hers, his hands seemingly everywhere. His tongue, hot and slick and filthy against her skin. The way he looked at her. She’d never seen him so undone.

After some internal debate, she slipped a hand under the waistband of her pajamas.

It was normal to fantasize about terrible things, she assured herself, picturing the look on his face when he’d grabbed fistfuls of her hair. The way his eyes had gone dark and wild as she’d wantonly rubbed herself against his leg. She brushed the pads of her fingers against her own breast, wishing they were his. It was very normal, she thought as her breath hitched, to desire things you know you shouldn’t.

She came with two fingers buried inside herself and his name on her lips. It was just this once. It didn’t mean anything.

---

Hermione didn't know exactly what she expected from Malfoy in the following days. Maybe for him to revert back into his recent avoidance, or his signature icy disdain. She could even imagine him growing cruel towards her, punishing her for their shared mistake.

She could not have predicted that he would choose a different, far more nefarious, route: Malfoy was being *nice* to her.

It started during their next potions lesson, when he sauntered up to her desk like he'd done it a million times before.

"Tosser incoming," Ron alerted, eyeing the Slytherin with undisguised hatred.

She kept her gaze firmly over Malfoy's shoulder, not daring to look him in the eye. Certain that if she did, he'd instantly know what she'd done under the cover of her bed's curtains and a silencing charm.

"Afternoon, Granger," Malfoy said breezily. "You look well."

Hermione almost fell into her cauldron in shock. Ron startled, regarding Malfoy like he'd grown a second head. Around them, other students continued their chopping and stirring, not cognizant that the world had tilted on its axis, because Draco Malfoy was speaking to Hermione Granger *politely*.

"What do you want?" Hermione asked. She finally looked at him properly and fought the urge to gasp. Where she'd wiped herself clean of any evidence of their encounter, courtesy of Lavender's skilled hand at glamor charms, he had decidedly *not* .

He looked like he'd just emerged from a few, acrobatic hours in a broom cupboard, and he was completely unabashed about it. A noticeable smudge of purple stood out against the porcelain skin under his jaw. His lower lip was still slightly swollen.

*She'd* done that to him. Some fierce and terrible thing purred in her chest.



“Such a spitfire,” he responded, flashing his canines. Unbidden, she remembered the feel of them capturing her lip. She swallowed, mouth suddenly parched. “I do wonder if that feral attitude of yours would translate to...other activities.”

“Ah yes, sexual innuendos. Very creative of you, Malfoy.” She rolled her eyes, as if nothing could have bored her more, ignoring the clench of her insides. “Go bother someone else.”

“Whatever you want,” Malfoy said, mercifully returning to his own table before she could burst into flames. On their worktable, he’d left a pile of neatly extracted lionfish spines, a required ingredient in the day’s brew. She put off her own extractions, something she tended to do whenever an assignment required extensive butchering, her least favorite aspect of brewing. It wasn’t that she was *squeamish*. She was just reluctant to divy up the remnants of what had once been a living, breathing thing. But Malfoy had absolutely no way of knowing that.

“You forgot your ingredients,” Hermione called. He waved her off.

She stared at the lionfish spines like they’d personally offended her. Was this supposed to be some sort of *gift*?

“What’s that pointy bastard playing at,” Ron muttered, voicing her exact thoughts. “Don’t touch those, Hermione. They’re probably cursed or something.” He prodded the lionfish spines with the tip of his wand as if they could explode at any moment.

“I doubt he’s executing a terrorist attack via potions ingredients, Ron,” Hermione said, trying to project an air of indifference. “Maybe he’s got it in his head he owes me a life debt for not letting him bleed out.”

“Bit of a shit way to get even, innit? A pile of fish bones?” Ron said. “And why do you think he looks like he wrestled the wrong end of the giant squid?”

“What do you reckon is the right end of the giant squid then?” She responded, laughing. They devolved into friendly bickering.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched Harry’s hands, clenched into fists.

Harry had been especially prickly since their conversation, prone to sending her pinched, worried looks when he thought she couldn’t see. His dilemma was that no matter how furious he became, he couldn’t confront Malfoy about the supposed kiss . After casting *sectumsempra*, Harry was on ice so thin that even a nasty look in Malfoy’s direction could practically get him expelled. He was forced to silently tolerate the Slytherin’s questionable actions, including his new baffling behavior towards Hermione. Malfoy, ever the tosser, seemed to know and relish this.

Malfoy’s change in behavior continued all week. Sometimes, it was obnoxious: like in Transfiguration, when he sent Harry and Ron into a tizzy by launching paper cranes her way when McGonagall’s back was turned.

“Could you maybe *not* set a flock of origami on me?” She hissed in his direction, while they packed up after class. “Believe it or not, there are simpler ways to get my attention.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Granger. You’re the one who decided to inform Potter of your ridiculous ruse,” he muttered back, out of the corner of his mouth. “I’m just making sure Scarhead believes it.”

Other times, it was peculiarly subtle and seemingly not about Harry at all. During Herbology, she’d been blowing curls out of her face while attempting to prune a particularly vicious Venomous Tentacula, internally cursing her lack of a hair elastic. She’d resigned herself to the discomfort, when an emerald green hair ribbon appeared from thin air, looping itself around her wrist. Startled, she looked around for the source, only to catch eyes with Malfoy, who sneered and immediately busied himself with his own plant.

Things between them came to a head in Defense with the Slytherins, when Snape had them practicing nonverbal stunners in pairs. Hermione moved automatically to work with Neville, assuming Harry and Ron would partner up as usual.

Neville was a good partner, but not a challenging one. She found herself offering him instruction more than practicing her own abilities, but he was a grateful and humble learner. He never got never upset with her for besting him. Unlike some people, she thought uncharitably. Ron had never quite gotten over how badly she'd beat him in their practice duel during a D.A. meeting, and refused to partner with her in Defense ever since.

"I just barely got a hang of the nonverbal shields." Neville offered her a sheepish smile. "And half the time I was just whispering the spell so Snape wouldn't hear."

"We'll take it slow," Hermione said reassuringly, privately resigning herself to another class period of glorified tutoring.

Within a few minutes of practicing, there was already a disruption: Goyle hadn't been fast enough with his shield and was hit by one of Malfoy's stunners, gashing open his head on a desk in the process. Snape sent him to the Hospital Wing without a second glance.

"Sir," Malfoy had his hand raised lazily, as if he hadn't just injured one of his supposed friends. "Now that Goyle's knocked himself out, I don't have a partner."

"Miss Greengrass, Mr. Zabini — take turns practicing with Mr. Malfoy."

That should have been the end of it, but Malfoy continued, looking like a fox in a chicken coop.

"Sorry Professor, I was just hoping for a bit more of a challenge. No offense to Blaise or Daphne." He cast his eyes around the room,

until they fell on her. She quickly turned back to Neville, but it was too late. “May I work with Granger?”

Snape regarded Malfoy carefully, eyes like shards of onyx.

“I’ll work with Malfoy,” Harry blurted, no doubt a result of his pathological savior complex. She shot him a look that she hoped would communicate her desire for him to shut up.

“Mr. Potter has proven himself prone to uncontrolled violent outbursts,” Snape drawled, speaking as if Harry wasn’t there. “Since I’ve no wish to see Mr. Malfoy disemboweled in my classroom, please switch partners, Miss Granger.”

“Longbottom!” Snape barked, and Neville jumped at the sound of his surname. “Practice with Weasley. Given his complete incompetence, you can at least be certain you’ll avoid injury.”

Neville mouthed a silent apology to her, scurrying towards Ron and Harry, who were both respectively glaring at Malfoy. She steeled herself before walking across the room to where Malfoy was smirking, pleased to have gotten his way. She wanted to slap his arrogance straight off his face— on second thought, maybe a duel with the perpetual thorn in her side would be *just* what she needed.

Malfoy took her in with a lazy sweep of his eyes. They were pale gray today, like the feathers of a dove.

The *feathers* of a *dove*? She begged herself to get a grip.

“All right, Granger?” Malfoy asked, a cheeky lilt to his voice.

“Better, now that I get to do this.” She swished her wand in a jagged motion, shooting a nonverbal stunner his way. His shield was faster, sending her spell ricocheting into the rafters.

“Bit slow on the uptake,” he teased, but his voice was missing its usual cruelty, evidence that the mental game he’d been playing all

week was still on.

*Fine*, she thought. She could play dirty too.

They shot and parried spells so quickly that Hermione's mind went entirely blank, an empty slate punctuated only by *cast, deflect, cast, deflect*. Malfoy was more nimble than she was, wielding his quick reflexes as a complement to his fluid dueling style. What Hermione lost in agility, she gained in brute force: her stunners, even when deflected, bludgeoned Malfoy's shields, forcing him to grit his teeth in determination.

She felt him, pressing lightly with his legilimency, and shuttered her occlumency walls instinctively. The sensation was incredibly strange, like he was knocking his clenched fist against her mind's door. A battle on multiple fronts. She felt a prickle of sweat bead at the nape of her neck, evidence of her own exertion.

Soon, they abandoned stunners completely, fighting with every nonverbal weapon in their arsenal. She parried his *impedimenta* by silently conjuring a mirror, shooting the burst of red light back and forcing him to duck out of the way. It shattered the window behind him, and like a lunatic, he *grinned*.

At his command, the shards of the window condensed into glass marbles, hurtling at her with bullet-like velocity. She caught them in a conjured net woven of gilded light, silently casting an *avis* in order to transfigure them into a dozen yellow canaries. Because the spell took tremendous focus, her occlumency walls slipped. Just enough for her to hear his voice, light and amused, in her head.

*Songbirds? Going to serenade me to death, Granger?*

*Oppugo*, she thought, shooting the canaries at Malfoy in vicious succession, forcing him to duck and roll towards her in order to avoid being pierced by their sharp beaks. Taking advantage of his distraction, she summoned the hair pins from her curls and sent

them flying. The force of her spell drove them through his robes and into the wooden floor, like little metal stakes.

Pinned in place, she placed a foot on his chest, her wand pointed down at his head.

“Any last words?” Hermione asked mockingly, her voice rough from disuse.

She watched his eyes darken as they traced the seam of her socks past her knee. From his vantage point, he could probably see right up her skirt.

She quickly stepped off him, flustered.

It was all the advantage he needed. Quicker than she thought possible, he slipped out of his school robes, leaving them pinned to the floor, and disarmed her. His wand dug under her chin, forcing her head to tilt up.

“Last words?” He prodded harder. “Hm, how about— don’t discount your enemy until he’s unconscious.”

She swallowed and he watched in dark fascination as her throat moved against his wand. Her traitorous body lit up at the proximity, mind unconsciously flashing to the last time they’d been in such a position. She struggled for breath and he made a low, pleased noise in the back of his throat, like he knew exactly what she was remembering.

“Let me go, before I—”

Before Hermione could finish her rather crude train of thought, she was interrupted.

“Mr. Malfoy, lower your wand.” Snape’s voice was low and vicious. “*Now* .”

Both her and Malfoy slowly turned to their professor, an expression on his sallow face that could only be described as a murderous disbelief. She realized to her horror that their end of the practice space was half-destroyed, collateral damage from their duel.

The rest of the class stared at them with a mixture of interest and horror, having completely abandoned their own practice duels in favor of their spectacle. Theodore Nott let out a low whistle.

Malfoy took several steps away from her. Someone tittered, letting loose some poorly muffled nervous giggles. It snapped the tension in the room, sending the other students' gazes skittering elsewhere. Hermione could tell they were all still listening, eager to hear how they'd be admonished for such a display.

She felt herself turning pink, then red, certain all the blood in her body had rushed to her cheeks. She'd gotten so carried away that she'd forgotten they were even in a *classroom*.

"Draco, I believe I instructed you to use stunning spells." Snape's silky voice held a violent reprimand.

Malfoy stared at his shoes, seemingly chastened. She watched him carefully, noting how the corner of his mouth twitched slightly up. Did he think this was bloody *funny*?

"Are you having trouble comprehending the parameters of this exercise, Miss Granger?" Snape snapped at her, drawing her attention from Malfoy. "Were my directions too complex for you, or did you simply deem yourself above instruction?"

"He started it!" She protested, a wave of anger towards Snape annihilating any lingering shreds of her good sense. At that moment she didn't care that he was her professor— how dare he lecture her on dueling safety? At least *her* choice of spells wouldn't leave anyone dismembered.

“Oh please,” Malfoy piped up, rolling his eyes. “You tried to murder me, *twice*. ”

“What, death by canary? Hair accessory?” She scoffed. “You’re so overdramatic—”

“Fifty points from Gryffindor for willful ignorance,” Snape interrupted, a dangerous lilt to his words. “Open your mouth again, Miss Granger, and I’ll make it a hundred.

From a few paces away, Harry let out a strangled sound, like it physically pained him to not protest. Ron muttered something in his ear, shaking his head fervently.

“Class dismissed,” Snape announced. “And Mr. Malfoy? *A word*.”

---

“You should have seen it, Gin,” Ron said, over a game of gobstones in the common room that evening. Talk of her and Malfoy’s duel had only fueled the rumors surrounding her involvement in his injury, circulating a new narrative regarding a secret blood feud between them. The younger Gryffindors kept staring at her, offering little nods of respect when she caught them. It was incredibly unsettling.

“Hermione was ruthless,” Ron continued. “And it was all nonverbal, just bursts of light and things exploding around them. She had the ferret yielding, flat on his back. Malfoy only got the upper hand at the end because he cheated.”

Ron had easily accepted Hermione’s explanation of getting “carried away” in Defense, patting her on the back understandingly, as if he too had aspirations of one day cursing Malfoy in front of a professor. Harry, who was stuck in detention filing Filch’s stash of disciplinary records, hadn’t been as easily persuaded, and Hermione highly suspected she was in for an interrogation once he returned.

Lavender and Parvati joined them on the red velvet sofas, the latter giving her a small wave, while the former preoccupied herself with



Ron's tongue.

"I told you so, Hermione," Ginny said with quiet glee, once her brother was sufficiently distracted. "Malfoy's *flirting*. This is his twisted version of foreplay."

"It was not foreplay," she whispered furiously. "It was in class, for God's sake."

"Exactly," Ginny smirked. "What better place for two swots to get their blood pumping?"

"Malfoy's not a swot, he's a menace," Hermione muttered.

"Whatever you have to tell yourself. Maybe he's decided he'd like to compete for the highest marks on a different sort of test..."

"Ginny," Hermione warned, but the redhead was already cackling.

"A full body exam!"

"Keep it up and I'll practice some of my dueling spells on you," Hermione threatened. Ginny remained unphased, clutching her stomach as she laughed.

Disgruntled, Hermione stood and offered up her favorite excuse.

"If you're quite done having fun at my expense, I'm going to the library."

"Oi," Ginny called. "Isn't it nearly curfew?"

Hermione was already climbing out the portrait hole.

The library had been her safe place ever since she'd started Hogwarts as a lonely first year. Back when she was terrified of breaking the rules, lest she be sent back to the muggle world with her wand confiscated. The library was the only place where she didn't have to worry about how she was being perceived or judged.

Where she didn't have to carefully modulate her flaws or push down her outrage until she became the most palatable version of herself.

She favored a table by the window overlooking the courtyard, behind the least frequented stacks in the school's vast collection: the Muggle literature section. The books—mostly classic novels, with a respectable smattering of poetry—remained untouched, covered with a thick layer of undisturbed dust.

She'd never seen anyone else take her spot, which is why it was such an unpleasant surprise to see it already occupied by a slim, dark haired figure with his feet carelessly kicked up on the desk.

"Granger," Theodore Nott greeted. "Finally. I've been waiting ages."

"What do you want, Nott?" Already on edge, she was not in the mood to converse in Slytherin riddles. "A repeat performance of today's Defense lesson?"

"Heavens, no," Nott grinned, a twist of his lips that didn't quite reach his perpetually cool gaze. "I'd like to keep my limbs attached."

She realized that they were quite far from Madam Pince's reference desk and any of the other study nooks. It was why she preferred this spot, but now, the isolation was making her nervous. She hadn't seen any students lingering when she stomped in; in fact, the library was notably empty.

"I won't bite," Nott said, picking up on her discomfort. He leaned back, tilting his chair. "I just thought we were a bit overdue for a conversation. After all, I owe you my thanks for saving my best mate's life, don't I?"

"Gratitude received." She kicked the chair legs from under him. "Goodbye."

"Oh Granger," he laughed mirthlessly, catching himself on the desk. He flicked dust from his otherwise impeccable robes. "What a treat

you are. I nearly understand his...fascination.”

Hermione’s blood ran cold. She knew exactly who the *he* in question was. Granted, she should have expected this after Nott saw her heal Malfoy, an act too intense to write off as simply a good deed from a concerned bystander. She’d thought Malfoy would handle it as she’d handled Harry, but clearly whatever crock of shit he’d fed Nott hadn’t been convincing enough.

Subtly, she tried to slip her hand into her back pocket to grab her wand.

“Oh no, that won’t do. *Expelliarmus* !”

Her wand slipped from her jeans and flew into Nott’s waiting hand.

She narrowed her eyes at him, hoping her anger covered the insistent pulse of fear.

“Give me my wand, Nott.”

“And hand you the opportunity to curse me into next Tuesday?” Nott shook his head, nearly apologetic. “I’m not Draco, Granger. He’s been quite besotted, hasn’t he? I’ve heard all his flimsy excuses to be near you, to touch you, to talk to you. It’s almost like...*he can’t help it.*”

*Malfoy*, she thought as intently as possible. She wasn’t sure how the connection between them worked, but he’d felt her pain and fear at the Shrieking Shack, hadn’t he? *Malfoy!*

“It’s not like that,” Hermione scrambled to invent, once she realized she’d been silent a moment too long. “I genuinely don’t know what his problem is. He’s probably trying to rile me up, thinks it’s a funny new way to torment me—”

“I’ve been asking myself why Draco Malfoy would be openly showing interest in someone like you,” Nott interrupted, steepling his fingers

together. "Golden girl of Gryffindor, Potter's favorite mudblood."

"And what have you come up with?"

"Let's see," Nott mused. "Well, Draco is pathologically selfish. He wouldn't do this to put a target on your back, not if it meant endangering his own reputation and safety in the process. He also wouldn't attempt to woo you as a ploy or trick, not with your history of animosity, and you're too intelligent to fall for pretty falsities anyway."

"Such fascinating theories," Hermione said, trying to sound disaffected. "Clearly you spend every spare second thinking about either me or Malfoy. Have you considered picking up a hobby?"

"Shall we entertain the idea that maybe he is being genuine in his attentions?" Nott continued, ignoring her jibes. "If he cared for you or even just *wanted* you, he wouldn't be stupid enough to show such an obvious weakness in public. He's not *suicidal*. So why is he leaving you hair ribbons where everyone can see? If engaging with you is the *safer* option, one could deduce things have gotten quite bad, haven't they?"

"Maybe he's more dimwitted than you thought," Hermione managed. "He certainly manages to surpass my expectations regarding his lack of intelligence."

One by one, the library lamps extinguished themselves. *Curfew*, she realized miserably. The only light that lingered was from the moon streaming through the window, and the glow of the *lumos* emanating from the dark haired boy's wand.

"Do you know?" Nott asked, voice low enough to scrape the floor. "What would happen, should a Death Eater be caught...indulging with a mudblood? What do you think the Dark Lord would do to someone so foolishly defiant?"

"Are you asking me if Malfoy is a Death Eater?" Hermione feigned obliviousness. "Surely you'd be able to confirm that better than I

would.”

“Oh, Granger. I wasn’t talking about *him*. I was talking about what would happen to *you*.” Nott’s eyes hardened as he tapped his chin in false contemplation. “You see, I have a bit of a theory, regarding you and Draco. Would you like to hear it?”

“I have a feeling I’m going to regardless,” Hermione replied. Distantly, she thought she heard footsteps approaching from the dark rows of bookcases, although it could just be her heart, pounding in her ears.

“On second thought, I’m more of a visual learner.” His voice sliced through her attempts. “I’ll just show you.”

He raised his wand, and she looked wildly around for something, anything—

The last thing she saw before her vision went black was a flash of satisfaction across Theodore Nott’s face as he looked somewhere beyond her. The expression of a man who’d been proven right.

---

Notes:

- “Fanny flutters” is a term I picked up watching Love Island (I love writing girls’ dormitory scenes so much and based this off the girl chat I adored having while living in my college dorm)
- Practice duel ft. Hermione's signature canaries
- Ah yes, Draco “I’m Only Flirting Strategically” Malfoy
- \*adds Morally Grey Theodore Nott tag\*

This is lighter chapter (well, until the end). I wanted to give them these last months of sixth year spring, before things start to get quite dark...

A reader make an amazing mood/aesthetic board for this story (and many other wonderful fics), which I'll link here. Anyone is welcome to make art for/about this fic and if you do— please drop a link in the comments!

[Smoke Signals Pinterest Board](#)

I've also gotten a few requests asking if others can write stories based off the premise of this fic. As long as there is no plagiarism, I'm perfectly fine with it (and always appreciate when credit is given appropriately).

See you soon for Chapter 22: "The Many Misfortunes of Theodore Nott"

---

# The Many Misfortunes of Theodore Nott

## Chapter 22: The Many Misfortunes of Theodore Nott

---

Theo shows his cards. Hermione asks questions. Draco tells the truth.

---

---

I finished this chapter a little early as a Valentine's gift. Happy reading!

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The world came back to Hermione gradually. She felt the solid sensation of wood under her spine; she must be lying on a table. When she breathed in, she was filled with warm, dusty smell, like mothballs or old firewood. Pain spliced through her skull, like she'd attempted to ram herself head first through a brick wall. Voices, low and urgent, threw bits of sound around her. She could only hear some of what they were saying as she drifted:

“—if you return without obeying his orders, you know he'll kill you—” This sounded like Nott, his thin voice wild and uncontrolled.

“—focus on your own problem, or have you forgotten—” She recognized Malfoy's posh accent, dripping with fury.

“— don't need your help. Draco. It's already handled. You're the one wasting time, chasing—”

“—you're a fucking idiot, Theo. If she gets hurt, I swear—”

“—don't tell me you actually care? Just wait until Lucius knows about his heir and the mudblood—”

Blinking heavily, Hermione was just able to make out the two figures standing in the shadow of a nearby bookshelf, their body language radiating a palpable animosity. Carefully, she allowed herself another peek at her surroundings: she was still in the library, surrounded by familiar shelves filled with weathered scrolls and ancient looking books. When she tried to lift her head to get a better look, she was met with resistance, her limbs frozen stiff. Almost like she'd been hit by a Body-Bind Jinx—

The night's earlier events caught up to her as she tried to shake off the haze: Nott in the library, his dangerous theories, his raised wand. She exhaled, fighting for clarity as a new sense of trepidation trickled in. What had the bastard said before he knocked her out? *I have a bit of a theory, regarding you and Draco.*

Hermione closed her eyes tightly, terrified to be caught conscious without a concrete plan of escape in place. She forced her breaths to fall deep and even, ignoring how every fiber in her being insisted that she run. But with no wand and the lingering effects of Nott's spell clouding her mind and immobilizing her body, she knew the smartest thing to do would be to stay very, very still and hope he didn't realize that she was awake.

"What were you thinking?" This was Malfoy, sounding furious as he scolded Nott. "Going to throw down a gauntlet in the bloody library?"

"Oh please," Nott responded, sounding not the slightest bit apologetic. Hermione could hear the rustling of fabric, as if he'd crossed his arms. "I cast so many Notice-Me-Not charms that Pince couldn't find us even if we were right in front of her pointy beak. Slipped a vial of sleeping solution in her tea for good measure."

So, Nott had planned this ambush. The thought brought forth a prickle of fear, gooseflesh up and down her arms. Could she trust Malfoy to get them out of whatever plan Nott had concocted? Before she could decide, Malfoy spoke again.



"Give me a reason," Malfoy said, in a voice that could have frozen the Black Lake solid. She heard the distinctive sound of a wand being unsheathed from its holster. "I swear, I'll do it."

"Going to curse me, Draco?" Hermione heard a note of wistfulness in Nott's accusation. "Over a mudblood? What would your father say?"

"I'd refrain from speaking about fathers if I were you," Malfoy answered. If she chanced another look, she knew she'd see his eyes like bits of flint, preempting combustion. "Does yours finally want something to do with you, now that you can be of use to him?"

"Shut your mouth." Nott spat. Hermione had only the briefest interactions with Nott Sr., when he'd haphazardly thrown a Killing Curse at her that missed her by a foot. It was not a glowing first impression. "You have no idea what he's done," Nott continued, a desperation slipping into his voice. "He's doomed me."

"Of course I do," Malfoy scoffed. "Better than anyone. I've known about the many misfortunes of Theodore Nott since we were children. The cold, empty manor and the cruel father and the poor, dead mother—"

Nott swore violently. Hermione knew nothing of the fate of Nott's mother, but she suspected from the vicious string of curses the boy unleashed upon Malfoy's entire family line, that whatever had happened was something truly unspeakable.

"Sensitive topic?" Malfoy mocked. "Should I refrain from mentioning what happened to mummy?"

"What do you think is going to happen to your mother, if you don't complete your mission?" Nott taunted in return. "Do you think the Dark Lord will allow you another attempt? Does he truly strike you as merciful?"

*Another attempt?* Hermione thought, caught off guard. *What was Nott talking about?*

"Stay out of it. I told you, I'd handle Granger."

"Oh, I'm sure you've *handled* her. Do you really think I haven't realized that something is going on between you two?" Nott continued, audibly scoffing. "You're always staring at her. Then, there's the convenient *detentions*. The way she healed you in the fucking snow. How you two always seem to know exactly where the other is...I don't know what you're doing, but it certainly isn't what the Dark Lord instructed."

"My methods are none of your business," Malfoy responded. "You should be concentrating on your own mission. Going to try to gift a grown man another necklace? Or have you simply given up after your miserable attempt at a poisoning? "

" / know there's no giving up. You seem to forget that I was there last summer in Malfoy Manor," Nott revealed. She heard Malfoy's breath hitch. "When The Dark Lord disciplined you for your failure. I remember the sounds you made, when Dolohov dealt out your punishment."

Hermione's mind spun, cataloging the information she'd overheard. Dolohov, the same wizard that had almost split her open in the Department of Mysteries, was the Death Eater who'd left the terrible scar on Malfoy's jaw, the one that she'd first seen in Madam Malkins at the start of the year.

"I'm trying to help you avoid another reprimand, you stubborn bastard," Nott urged. Hermione got the sense that Theodore Nott had been nursing a seed of resentment for Malfoy. She also felt as though a part of Nott—the part that urged Malfoy to ensure his own survival—truly cared for his childhood friend. God, the Slytherins were twisted. "But I'm starting to think that maybe you won't do it. You *can't*."

“Help me?” Malfoy barked out a cruel laugh. “You've only lured me here to test my loyalties. Should I prove myself to you by committing murder in the middle of the fucking poetry section? Do you really think I'd escape the castle unscathed? I'd be locked in an adjoining cell with my father before you could even say *Azkaban*.”

The puzzle pieces fell together at once: Malfoy had been ordered by Voldemort to finish the job he'd started last summer. He'd been ordered to kill her. Nott seemed to be attempting to goad him into succeeding. Hermione felt a conflicting flood of emotions: fear, confusion, doubt. Would Malfoy dare attempt to return to the folds of the Dark Lord?

“Do you know your problem, Theo?” Malfoy said, his voice rising with every word. “You think so little of everyone around you. You've done it since we were children, always assuming someone was cheating or lying or trying to take advantage.”

“They usually were,” Nott spat. “You most of all.”

Malfoy laughed, a mirthless sound.

“After all these years, you've never stopped to consider that even the worst of us have a line we will not cross.” Malfoy lowered his voice so that she could hardly hear. “You don't want to be there when I reach mine.”

“Don't be a fool, Draco. It'll kill you to disobey a direct order. Look what happened to poor old Karkaroff.” Nott said bitterly. “We swore it when we were marked. *Loyalty, protection, absolute obedience. From this day until our last* .”

Hermione reeled, hoping she hadn't twitched in shock and alerted the two boys of her eavesdropping. These were the vows they'd taken in support of Voldemort. The vows she'd undone with the ritual, freeing Malfoy of his servitude. Were these the same terms of the binding that had blossomed between them? Was Malfoy now

bound to her, in loyalty and obedience, until he died? The thought sent a bolt of dread curling through her stomach.

“ *That’s* why you’re so worked up about this, isn’t it?” Malfoy questioned the other boy. “You hate the thought that maybe, I’ll make the choice you never *could*. That maybe, I’m willing to die for my freedom.”

“You’re a fool,” Nott said, and he sounded nearly saddened by it. “Once the Dark Lord knows you’re having *doubts*, you’ll be fed to the snake piece by piece.”

“And will you tell him, Theo?” Malfoy asked quietly. “Will you write Aunt Bella now, and inform on me? Don’t bother lying, I know you’ve been corresponding with her. I’m warning you, if you tell her, or anyone, of this conversation, I’ll happily use the killing curse . ”

“Never say I didn’t try,” Nott spat. “I basically served the Granger girl to you on a platter.”

“You caught her off guard in the library, Theo. Hardly a mastermind’s plan. And now, once again, I’m stuck cleaning up your mess.”

“I’ll oblivate her then, if you’re so concerned about getting caught. But everyone will eventually know what we are, Draco. Our loyalties won’t be a secret for much longer.”

“ *I’ll* take care of the mudblood when and how I see fit,” Draco hesitated slightly over the slur, and Hermione prayed Nott hadn’t picked up on it. “I’m sure you have plans to make. As you’ve so cleverly pointed out, we both know what will happen if you fail. *Again*. ”

“I won’t fail. I’ve seen to that.” Nott’s voice sounded further away now, like he was moving away. “Make the right choice, Draco. If you don’t, it’s your head.”

There were footsteps, fading against the library's oak floors. And then, a sinister silence filled the library. She tried to force her breathing from the hagged little gasps she'd begun emitting into something even.

"I know you're awake, Granger," Malfoy said. "*Finite* ."

Nott's body-bind curse dissipated instantly, and she snapped her eyes open to see his face much closer than she expected, blocking her view. His mouth was a tight line and his skin had taken on a rather ghostly pallor. He crouched next to her, a hand on her shoulder, warning her not to get up too quickly. It was a good call on his part, as any small motion made her feel stunningly lightheaded.

"Are you all right?"

"I think so," she answered, voice hoarse. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"It depends," Malfoy explained. "You'd just passed out when I got here." He offered her a hand and pulled her up to sit. Her vision swam from the change of position.

"I didn't pass out," Hermione said bitterly, rubbing her face. "I was cursed by a spineless coward who'd taken my wand. In *my* sections of the library, no less."

Her muscles were stiff, murmuring protests as she pulled her arms over her head and arched her back into a long stretch. When she looked at him expectantly, waiting for a response, she caught his eyes lingering on the exposed sliver of her stomach.

"How much did you hear?" Malfoy finally asked, tearing his gaze away from her to focus randomly on the bookshelves.

"All of it," Hermione admitted. "We should talk."

Malfoy sighed but nodded in agreement, jerking his head towards the library's entrance. "Not here." "Let's go to the uh—" He flushed, blood rushing to his cheeks, as if remembering something particularly humiliating. "The Come and Go Room." He started off before Hermione could so much as protest.

"Nott took my wand," she panted, as her stiff legs struggled to keep up.

Malfoy's lips twisted up in a satisfied little smile. He pulled her vinewood wand from his pocket and slid it into her hand, closing his fingers around it.

"I took it back," he said. Something in her warmed, a low burning glow that followed her as she crept through the corridors and all the way to the fifth floor, Malfoy by her side.

The Come and Go room, as Malfoy had taken to calling it, appeared much the same as the last time they'd entered: the velvet couch and plush rug and yes, the very close quarters. Given that it was the middle of the night, there was a smattering of charmed lanterns floating below the ceiling, instead of a roaring fire. The lanterns gave the room a diffused sort of warmth, lovely and familiar.

Hermione collapsed on the couch, rubbing her sore neck in irritation, but Malfoy stayed standing. She scooted over, making room, patting the cushion beside her.

"You can sit, you know," she told him, arching an eyebrow.

"I'd rather stand," he said hoarsely, taking in the lanterns instead of meeting her gaze. "I'm sure you have questions."

"You'd be correct in that assumption."

They were momentarily quiet, watching as soft shadows cast themselves around the room. Hermione stifled a yawn; it was past midnight now, but before she could return to the tower, she had a

series of increasingly insistent worries to address. She hesitated, before digging through her bag until she found her emergency potions kit and closed her hands around the vial she'd been looking for, that she'd swiped without a clear occasion in mind, only a certainty that one day she would need it.

In her hand, she held up a clear potion, odorless if one were to smell it. Tasteless if one were to imbibe it.

"Is that...?" Malfoy breathed, instantly defensive. "No. You're insane."

"Veritaserum," she confirmed, and before she could talk herself out of it, she opened her mouth and tipped a drop onto her tongue. "I stole a vial from Slughorn after the first class." She held it out to him insistently. "After what I've just overheard, I don't think it's ridiculous to require some assurance. I think it's high time we're honest with each other."

"I won't take truth serum just to prove myself to you—"

"Please," Hermione asked plainly. She held out the vial. "Please, Draco."

Upon hearing his name on her lips, Malfoy hesitated, eyeing her outstretched hand with trepidation. He examined her face, searching for any trace of trickery. Having apparently found whatever he'd been looking for, he tipped the vial onto his tongue.

"Ask me then, Granger." Draco told her quietly. His eyes were clear and insistent. "Ask me what you want to know."

"Voldemort's ordered you to kill me?" It wasn't quite a full question; Hermione winced at the sound of her own voice, imbedded with a vulnerability she wished wasn't audible. "That's why Nott ambushed me? To help you...succeed?"

Malfoy let out a large woosh of breath. He pushed his palms into his eyes hard, gathering his thoughts, or maybe, fighting the effect of the

potion. He didn't last long before he was compelled to answer.

"Yes," he admitted. "And no. That wasn't about you as much as it was about me. I don't think Nott actually expected anything to come of that little stunt in the library."

"Then why'd he do it?" She asked, dreading the answer.

"To test me," Malfoy admitted, lacing his fingers behind his neck. "To show me that he knows about my loyalties, or lack thereof. To remind me of what the Dark Lord will do if I desert his cause." He rubbed his thumbs deep into the base of his skull, relieving some invisible pressure. "I don't know if this is his way of helping me or having something to hold over my head."

"Would you?"

"Desert the Dark Lord?" She saw a glimpse of his pink tongue as Malfoy kissed his teeth absently in thought. "I suppose I already have."

"No," Hermione corrected, voice small. It was the question she'd dreaded asking the most. "Would you try to kill me?"

Malfoy's head snapped around, whip-like, to focus on her. There was something like shock and maybe disappointment in his gaze. He approached her slowly, sinking onto the couch beside her, every move tightly controlled, like he was afraid of spooking her.

"Granger," He said her surname as if it were both a curse and a blessing. Like it was the sweetest, ripest fruit he'd ever tasted, and simultaneously, pure bitterness, acrid on his tongue. "How can you ask me that?"

"That's not an answer."

"I didn't think you needed one," he replied. "I thought you knew, the second I showed up at your house last summer, when you were



wandless and wet and half-naked in that ridiculous Muggle swimming costume. If I couldn't do it then, how could I possibly do it now, after— after—” He clamped his mouth shut, but the words tore out anyway. “After what you’ve done for me. *To me.*”

She felt it, the thing between them. Coiling like a serpent around its prey, tightening and tightening until she could hardly breathe. She couldn't name it, too uncertain about its gravity, the way it could leave her raw and exposed.

“Nott said the Mark would compel you to obey Voldemort. That your vows would keep you from disobeying a direct order. Why didn't you tell me that?”

“I was a little preoccupied.” Malfoy gritted his teeth. “Trying not to actively die of dark magic poisoning. And I didn't trust you, Granger. I didn't want you to have that information. A fat lot of good withholding it did, as it seems I'm bound to you anyway. At least now, I know it wasn't something you did on purpose.” He tapped his fingers on the velvet, the soft fabric muffling the sound. “It wasn't on purpose, was it?”

“Of course not,” Hermione protested, thinking back to their ritual's after effects: Malfoy's urge for proximity, his sensitivity to her pain or fear. It didn't sound like the vow of absolute obedience he'd made to Voldemort. It was something else, born of their blood. “Whatever is happening now doesn't seem like the vows you made to Voldemort at all. I'm not even sure those were completed; I wouldn't have been able to cure the infection much less remove the binding mark if you'd already cemented your obedience. You've not been forced to obey me, or assume absolute loyalty. This magic only seems to want you to— er— protect me.”

“I suppose that's good to know,” Malfoy answered, a flush creeping up his neck. “At least without the mark, I won't croak on the spot for betraying the Dark Lord.”

"What will you do when the school year is up and I'm still alive?" She asked. "Nott said Voldemort would kill you if you failed again, and your family."

Malfoy trained his eyes on her fingers, which were twisted in her lap, picking mercilessly at her cuticles. He considered for a moment, before answering.

"I made a deal with Dumbledore," he confessed. "He approached me at the beginning of the year, told me he knew what happened with you and your parents last summer. He said that I was on a precipice, that whatever I did next would either preserve my soul or destroy it. Dramatic as always. He knew The Dark Lord wouldn't let me off with a slap on the wrist, so he offered me an out. I'd act as a spy for the Order of the Phoenix, and in return, he promised me amnesty at the end of the war and offered to hide my mother himself. He said I had to *earn* my redemption. I didn't have any other options. I knew I had to get her out of that house, before it killed her."

"You can't be a spy," Hermione protested, anger rising in her like a high tide. "You're a student! You're not even a proper adult! How can he expect you to risk your life in exchange for the safety of your family, especially when he knows you're desperate enough to accept — that's no *deal*, it's a death sentence."

"I know," Malfoy answered bitterly. "It seems he's not the hero your merry bunch of Gryffindors thought he was."

"So what, you're willing to just die? To wait until you're caught spying and then just accept it? I've thought you were many things, Malfoy, but never suicidal."

"It won't come to that," he assured. He braced himself, before continuing. "There's an expiration date in place."

"An expiration date? How do you know?"

“Because dead men don’t collect debts, and Theo was instructed by the Dark Lord to murder Dumbledore before the year is through.”

Hermione gasped, a million loose threads coming together to weave a disturbing portrait: it was Dumbledore, who Nott was after. The necklace, the poisoned mead. He hadn’t been trying to assassinate Slughorn, he’d been trying to get at the Headmaster. Like with his orders to Malfoy last summer, Voldemort couldn’t expect Nott to succeed. This was a punishment, for the failures of his father, just as Malfoy’s mission had been. She’d have felt more sympathetic if Nott hadn’t recently accosted her.

“We have to warn him!” Hermione cried. “I know Dumbledore has done some questionable things, but we need him, Malfoy. The Order won’t survive the war without him— we won’t survive without him.”

Malfoy laughed, a rich, lacquered sound. It sent something silky curling in the pit of her stomach.

“How many times do I have to tell you? There is nothing that happens in this castle that Dumbeldore doesn’t know. If you ask me, the old git’s not got long anyway, not with his rotting hand. I know a blood curse when I see one.” Malfoy swallowed grimly. “They’re infamously incurable.”

If she hadn’t taken the truth serum, the next questions she asked would have never left her tongue. But as she was severely lacking in foresight, it did.

“Why are you being nice to me?” Her face grew embarrassingly warm. “After we, er—”

“Kissed?” Draco asked, allowing her the small mercy of finishing her sentence. He seemed slightly amused by it, eyes dark, catching the lamplight. “It’s all about playing every side, Granger. Good spies find the angle most likely to suit every interest: Nott doesn’t know anything about my deal with Dumbledore, so it’s best he thinks I’m hesitating in my task because I’m infatuated with you. Potter won’t

get in my way if he thinks he'll hurt you in the process. And Weasley, well." A savage delight overtook his face. "I just like making Weasley squirm."

"Oh." Hermione wasn't foolish enough to think Malfoy was actually courting her. She knew it was a strategic choice: at least this was a strategy she could be on board with. She'd thought his reasons were far worse. "Actually, I'd figured it was something far more nefarious."

"Why do you always think the worst of me?" Malfoy asked. His arm twitched on the back of the couch, like he'd wanted to move it but thought better of the action. Even if he meant the question rhetorically, Hermione was compelled to answer.

"I have a terrible affinity for assuming everyone around me wants to be good, if only given the opportunity." Hermione blinked hard. She knew this was a deep flaw of hers, potentially a fatal one. It's not that she believed in inherent goodness, but she did believe in possibility. In circumstance. In the idea that people weren't inherently good or evil, but reflections of their society, and those reflections could be changed. "I'm scared that if I allow myself to think of you like that, you'll prove me wrong."

"I will," Malfoy admitted. "I'll prove you wrong every time. You should know that I don't care about being good, Granger. I've no interest in doing what's right."

"Then what do you care about?" She asked, irritation growing.

"Anything besides yourself?"

Malfoy leaned in, close enough that she could count his golden eyelashes. He pulled his lower lip between his teeth and she watched entranced as he pressed down, leaving little indents where his incisors had been. A tension filled the air between them, just as it had the previous time they'd occupied this room. It was as if any time they were alone with the other, in close proximity, an invisible thread pulled the closer, chafed them together.

"Oh, I care. I care about getting what I want." Malfoy reached for her chin, holding it firmly between his long pale fingers. Her eyes widened, stunned by his firm grip, his plush lips and cruel words. "And, gods help me— I don't think I've ever wanted anything as badly as I want you."

---

---

Things are heating UP!

Trying to pin down Nott's true motivations is a bit like attempting to hold a fistful of smoke. I have so loved reading your THEOries: hopefully some mysteries have been revealed, while others remain shrouded.

Until next time,

xx Blue

---

# The Puller of Strings

## Chapter 23: The Puller of Strings

---

Draco makes a confession. Hermione confronts the powers that be. The Prophet reports troubling news.

---

---

This chapter is very plot heavy, but hopefully worth it! In case it's been a while, here are some refreshers:

- Draco made a deal with Dumbledore to spy (specifically on Nott) in exchange for a pardon and his mother's safety (Chapter 22)
  - Hermione and Draco completed an unbinding ritual to free him of the Dark Mark which resulted in a one-sided bond between them (Chapter 14)
  - Before said ritual, Hermione used two drops of her Felix Felicis (won in Chapter 7)
  - Draco suspects Dumbledore orchestrated this whole thing (including the bond), Hermione is more uncertain about what the Headmaster does or does not know (Chapter 16)
- 

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

---

*"I don't care about being good, Granger. I care about getting what I want." Malfoy leaned in, close enough that she could count his golden eyelashes. She pulled his lower lip between his teeth and she watched entranced as he pressed down, leaving little indents where*

*his incisors had been. “And, Merlin, help me— lately, I don’t want anything as badly as I want you.”*

“W-what?”

Hermione’s heart stuttered over Malfoy’s confession, lungs contracting so that she felt like she’d been winded. The Room of Requirement dropped in oxygen as he gripped her chin with his fingers, holding her in place. His face was inches from hers.

“You can’t just say things like that, Malfoy.” She wrested herself from his grip, standing from the couch. “It’s not funny.”

Hermione put as much space as she could between them, striding to the opposite wall, where the drapes were drawn around a magically conjured window. Granted, it was only a stone’s throw from where Malfoy sat on the couch— was the room getting smaller? Trying to force her and Malfoy closer? Or was she just losing her mind?

“Do I look like I’m laughing?” Malfoy grit out, wincing as every word escaped him. He opened and closed his mouth several times, looking vexed. After a fair bit of resisting the pull of the *veritaserum* , he threw his hands up, abandoning all hope of self-control.

“You want the truth?”

She wasn’t entirely sure that she did. The *veritaserum* had been a dangerous idea indeed.

“Here’s the truth, Granger. Somewhere between burning down your house and weekly delves into the terrifying chasm of your mind, I started to want things with you that I know I’m not supposed to, and it’s fucking killing me.” His tone grew flat, as if he were repeating orders. “As my father’s Heir, I’m supposed to uphold the Malfoy name by marrying a respectably pedigreed pureblood witch, whose parents have offered mine the highest priced dowry during contract negotiations. Have at least two children, an heir and a spare. Bribe and threaten my way into political prominence, add to the already

obscene amounts in the Malfoy coffers, and support whoever preaches a return to conservative Wizarding values, no matter how violent or sociopathic.”

He leaned forward on the sofa, resting his forearms on his knees. She had the strangest feeling that she was watching Malfoy’s world crumble, brick by brick. When he raked his hands through his hair, she swore she could feel his nails scraping against his scalp.

“I am not supposed to turn against my traditions,” he continued, head still in his hands. “Or make questionable allegiances with muggle loving headmasters. I shouldn’t even think of you as a witch, much less...” He trailed off miserably, before scowling, drawing upon his bitterness to refocus himself. “But then you go around tossing your ridiculous curls and smelling like rain and looking at me like I’m not the Malfoy heir, like I’m someone who can do whatever he fancies, and it makes me *want* you.”

She felt an unpleasant swooping sensation, like she was falling from a great height.

“I want you in every sordid way that I shouldn’t,” Malfoy added in a low voice, looking across the room at her with dangerously hooded eyes. “In ways that would send you scurrying back to your tower, all pink and scandalized.”

*Oh.* The events of the night had already been dramatic enough to rattle her, but this last bit made Hermione think she genuinely might faint, like the heroine of an old movie, draped ridiculously over a chaise lounge. She leaned against the wall for purchase, trying to calm her racing heart. He slouched on the couch, his relaxed posture at odds with the tension of his body: shouldered tightened, jaw clenched. Like he was trying to hold still, lest any movement spur an unfavorable reaction.

Maybe he expected her to curse him. Maybe he had no idea that Hermione *understood*. She knew what it was like to be aware that someone was so very wrong for you. To hold deep resentments for



them and nurse unhealed wounds they were responsible for. To know all that, and to want them anyway.

“Sometimes I think you want it too,” Malfoy mused, touching his fingers to his lips. A gesture born of memory. “Sometimes I think you’re doing it on purpose. Trying to break me into pieces, until I’m ready to be built back in your image. That’s what you want, isn’t it Granger?” There was something dark and sumptuous about his words, like wine spilled on velvet. “You want me to be good?”

She didn’t respond. For once in her life, Hermione was completely speechless. She fought for words, but her overactive brain was stunned into submission, and for a long few minutes, all she could do was stare.

“Malfoy, I—” She tried. “I don’t think—” She shook her head, attempting to refocus. “I mean, it’s natural that with proximity—”

“Don’t.” Malfoy cut her off with a bitter laugh. “Don’t try to rationalize this. I’m not sure I could bear it.” He blessedly stood from the couch and crossed the room. “I’ll handle Nott,” he promised from the doorway with an uncharacteristic gravity, not meeting her eyes. “He won’t touch you again.”

She felt the *veritaserum*, insisting that she answer his question: yes, *please be good for me* . And also: *no, I like you as you are. Vindictive. Dangerous. Sharp. Everything that I am not.* That was the funny thing about honesty— it was never simple. It could exist as a contradiction.

“I don’t know what I want,” she finally whispered, although he was already gone. The *veritaserum* hummed pleasantly in her veins, content with her answer. It must have been the truth.

---

Hermione obsessed over Malfoy's words in the Room of Requirement almost constantly in the days and weeks that followed. *That's what you want, isn't it Granger?* lingered on the edges of her

consciousness as she stirred Calming Droughts and transfigured whistles into watches and avoided Pansy Parkinson's pointed glares. It was in the background of her mind, while celebrating with the Gryffindor team's Quidditch victory, whooping as Ginny finally kissed Harry and giggling at the look on Ron's face — honestly, how did he not see that coming? Even as she studied for their looming end of term exams at her favorite table in the library (where funnily enough, Theodore Nott had been found shortly after the night he'd ambushed her, frozen stiff under an invisibility cloak with his nose broken, as if someone had stomped on it).

Ironically, the only time she actively wasn't thinking of Malfoy was while she was in his presence, during their occlumency lessons. Her embarrassing, obsessive thoughts were excellent motivation for keeping him out of her head and she found herself improving substantially, adding gates to her mental library and fortifying the shelves that dealt with him particularly with locks and grates. *Honestly*, a snarky voice in her head that sounded an awful lot like the Slytherin in question said, *if this is the incentive you needed, maybe you should have kissed him earlier.*

Only begrudgingly acknowledging her improvement, Malfoy claimed she required more practice, insisting that she not get comfortable—he was not nearly as brutal in his approach as a Dark wizard would be. He refused to allow her to practice her own fledgling legilimency on him— even when she begged, insisting it felt more natural— shutting her firmly out of his mind at every attempt. It killed her that he was better at this, even if she knew it was because he had more practice.

There were no more admissions of desire between them: in fact, Malfoy had withdrawn, limiting his argumentative responses and eyerolls in favor of a controlled reservation. He wasn't ignoring her, nor giving her excessive attention. He was simply *polite*. It was incredibly eerie.

*That's what you want, isn't it Granger?*

Privately, she could be honest enough with herself to admit that yes, she wanted Malfoy in the same way he wanted her. An attraction born of low-simmering tension and bluntly forged intimacy. Fully corporeal. The body usurping the mind.

It was nothing like the soft, uncertain affection she'd held for Ron last year, or the delicate fondness that had blossomed between her and Viktor. With Malfoy, she didn't envision a cozy domestic partnership. She had no delusions of romance.

No, when she had kissed Malfoy, she didn't feel the affection or sweetness that she'd always expected would accompany attraction. She felt desperation. Under his touch, the gears of her mind slowed to a halt, plans and anxieties replaced by her body's insistence for *more*. She'd never been so aware of herself physically, the nerve endings on every square inch of her skin burning bright. Their collision had been seismic: an unstoppable force meets an immovable object.

She wasn't sure why she'd reacted to him in that way, or why her traitorous subconscious replayed their kiss whenever she allowed her thoughts to wander. She didn't fully want to understand, certain it spoke to a crossing of wires within her: what did it mean that instead of wanting gentleness and safety, she found herself coveting the exact opposite?

Harry was right about one thing, she considered. Malfoy was neither convert nor saint. He'd been horrible to her for years and never once apologized for it. He'd forsaken Voldemort's cause, but that was as self-serving an act as it was righteous. He showed signs of shedding some of his bigotry, even allowing her to treat him with Muggle medicine, but who was to say he didn't still support the less extreme factions of his family's ideology? There were plenty of less radical wizards, who didn't call for the extermination of muggleborns, but still maintained the importance of keeping them *separate* from those with pure Wizarding blood. Perhaps he was no longer the evil demagogue of school years past, but that didn't mean that

Hermione's pesky consciousness would simply allow her to jump into bed with him because she was feeling a bit randy.

There was also another issue to consider, she reminded herself crossly. Despite her attempts at research and her scouring of the restricted section, Hermione was painfully uncertain of the effects of the unbinding ritual and its potential ramifications. Did he mean it when he said he wanted her, or was it simply an effect of the bond? What if his newly founded desires for her were simply a product of an ancient magic, one she should have never dabbled with so carelessly in the first place?

Each factor made Hermione all the more certain that whatever had happened between them could never, ever happen again.

By Easter, she'd tamped down her feelings, made easier by Malfoy's temporary absence from the castle along with the majority of students boarding the Hogwarts Express, eager to return home for the short break and see their families amidst budding social unrest. Hermione was in the minority who'd stayed behind. Ron had dutifully invited her to the Burrow alongside Harry, but she'd insisted she required use of the school library to study for exams. He brushed her off, fondly calling her a swot. But for once, exams were not her most pressing concern. She sought answers from a source other than mere textbooks.

The climb to the Headmaster's office was steep as ever. She had tried the names of sixteen different Honeydukes sweets — the winning confection? *Ice Mice* — before the stone griffin guarding the staircase allowed her past. She knocked softly on the door, and heard Dumbledore's melodic voice in response, softer and frailer than she remembered it to be.

"Come in, Miss Granger." Despite her lack of appointment, he seemed unbothered by her sudden presence. "I've been expecting you."

Hermione entered cautiously. Dumbledore was at his desk, looking drawn and infirm. Fawkes perched protectively on his chair back, offering her a soft croak in greeting. There was a slight stoop to the Headmaster's posture, as if keeping himself upright required tremendous effort. The curse that marred his hand had spread up his wrist and into his robe sleeve. Nevertheless, there was a shrewdness to his expression, glinting up at her from under his spectacles, that put Hermione on edge.

"Professor," she said in greeting, perching on the edge of a squashy purple armchair and affording the Headmaster no preamble. "Theodore Nott is trying to kill you."

His serene composure did not shift, an indication that as Malfoy stated, this news came as no surprise. Wordlessly, he waved the door shut, ensuring that they would not be overheard.

"Ah," Dumbledore responded knowingly. "I see you've been in discussion with Mr. Malfoy."

Hermione felt her temper spark to life: how *dare* the Headmaster bring up Malfoy, after showing such clear disregard for his safety? After he'd used the information she gave him at the Burrow in good faith. It was a good thing that she was so angry. Anger made her brave.

"Yes," Hermione confirmed tersely, leaning forward. She placed her clasped hands on the far side of the desk, boldly presenting herself as his equal. "Mr. Malfoy has told me quite a few interesting things as of late."

"Are you angry with me, Hermione?" His voice was devastatingly gentle. It made her want to throw something.

"Did you withhold assistance from a student in order to gain intelligence, Professor?"

They locked gazes across the mahogany desk, clear blue meeting dappled shades of brown. She felt the slight pressure of legilimency — less discernible than Malfoy's own efforts when they practiced— like an ache behind her eyes. A clear test of her abilities. Willing herself not to blink, she felt for her occlumency walls and found them firmly in place, library gates bolted shut. She felt Dumbledore's efforts recede.

"You've improved greatly," Dumbledore noted, a small smile gracing his face. "My congratulations to your teacher." There was a hint of approval in his gaze that under different conditions, would have made her beam with pride.

"Miss Granger, I know you have questions." Dumbledore reached back to stroke his phoenix with his unblemished fingers. "I believe it is time that I offer you answers."

"Yes," Hermione agreed, her tone ice cold. "I believe it is." She took a fortifying breath and then voiced the uncertainty that had been plaguing her since the start of the school year.

"Did you know that Voldemort planned to target my parents? Did you know it would be Malfoy?" She couldn't bring herself to make her true accusation: *did you know this would happen to me, and do nothing?*

"If you're asking whether I suspected that there would be retaliation for Lucius' failure at the Ministry, then yes," the Headmaster admitted. "I did. I was made aware that Draco would be instructed to take his father's place, whether he was willing or not. I feared that attacks on muggleborn students and their families would increase once Voldemort's return was made public. But I was not aware that your parents would be targeted specifically, nor that it would be Draco who was tasked with carrying out the order."

Hermione regarded him carefully. She was not Harry. She would not underestimate this man, nor attribute his machinations to vague good intentions that she was merely too young to understand.

“After you spoke to me at the Burrow, you went to Malfoy with an *offer* .” She said the word offer with the same disgusted inflection one would afford to *horse dung* . “He’s *seventeen*, and you wanted him to spy in exchange for your help. You told him he had to *earn* it.”

“I must say, I’m surprised to hear you come to Mr. Malfoy’s defense,” Dumbledore responded, ignoring the fact that this was a set of accusations and not a question.

“Are you?” Hermione scoffed, not caring that she sounded unforgivably rude. “Not a part of your plan, then?” She was past politeness.

“Once, I offered another young man the same offer,” Dumbledore cleared his throat, a hazy distance entering his gaze. “A young servant of Lord Voldemort, who came to me concerned over the safety and wellbeing of his beloved, a muggleborn witch. This wizard had been instructed by his master to spy on the Order and he had done so dutifully, until his efforts implicated the very woman he sought to protect. I had no assurance that Draco Malfoy had not been told by the Dark Lord to do the very same. There is no danger quite like a spy without loyalties— unfortunately, to safeguard the lives of many innocents, I had to ensure Mr. Malfoy’s cooperation in a less than compassionate manner.” Dumbledore finished with a faint note of regret, bowing his silver head. “For that, I beg your forgiveness.”

“It’s not for me to forgive,” Hermione responded tersely. Even if Dumbledore’s actions were out of caution, or for the greater good, it did not absolve him. “Why did you ask Malfoy to teach me occlumency, if you already had secured his allegiance? And please don’t insult my intelligence by telling me it was because Professor Snape was too *busy*.”

Never had she ever been so candid in her disrespect of an authority figure— apparently, she could give Harry a run for his money. Dumbledore seemed to know this, eyes glinting at her cheek, and he chuckled good naturedly before answering.

“I would never insult your intelligence, Hermione. I fear you see an entrapment plot where there was simply a small, quiet hope. I thought that perhaps, it would do Draco some good to interact civilly with the very sort of witch he’d been taught to hate. You two had already cooperated beautifully together. Perhaps it was foolish of me, an old man’s folly, but I hoped that you’d become someone he could trust.” He smiled at her gently. “Someone he could ask for help. Was I correct?”

“You knew about the Dark Mark,” she accused. “I told you it was infected in the broom shed and you *knew* that I’d help him, if he asked. That I was the only one he *could* ask. You knew what would happen between us if I succeeded in undoing his vow, didn’t you?” She voiced Malfoy’s own suspicions, testing their veracity. “What I can’t discern is if you already have an agreement in place with Malfoy, why did you need him to be tied to me?”

“I knew Lord Voldemort cursed his Mark so as to ensure a vow of obedience, promising death to the disloyalty,” Dumbledore agreed, a hint of warning in his voice. “I knew Draco Malfoy was suffering from the results of disobeying his vow. But do you really think me so cruel as to withhold care to the injured?”

Yes, Hermione thought uncharitably, fighting the urge to curl her lip.

“Mr. Malfoy refused my help,” Dumbledore continued. “He was unwilling to risk the dangers that can accompany unraveling a mark of servitude. He planned, rather foolishly, to remove the Mark on his own or to die trying. He didn’t trust me, Miss Granger. But as I had hoped when pairing you together, he began to trust *you* .”

“Respectfully Professor, I’m a sixth-year student, not an accredited healer. He could have *died*. ” Hermione said, a tremulous note to her voice. “Or worse.”

“As I’m sure you know by now, Mr. Malfoy is quite stubborn. He refused to see any healer, no matter how discreet. In another life,



he'd have made a tremendous Gryffindor," the Headmaster responded, lips twitching upward at the thought.

Hermione stared. Malfoy, a *Gryffindor*?

"And in regard to your healing efforts," Dumblefore continued. "I ensured you would have the materials you needed and was quite ready to step in should it be necessary. Professor Snape was also quite adamant about standing by. Although Severus struggles to articulate such things, I suspect him to be quite fond of Draco."

"The materials...you sent *The Lost Art of Demonology*?" She wondered aloud, and he poured himself a cup of tea in response, eyes twinkling.

"I pointed Draco in its direction," the Headmaster admitted. He offered her a cup with a tilt of his tea pot. She shook her head in response.

"Did you know about the ritual?" She asked. "That it would create a bond between us?"

"Vows are unpredictable, Miss Granger. I had my suspicions, but could not have known with any certainty how Draco's would respond. It often pains me how little we attend to oath magic in the Hogwarts curriculum," Dumbledore expressed regretfully. His half-moon spectacles had grown foggy from the vapors of the steaming cup. "The school's Board of Governors has rightfully deemed such subjects too dangerous for instruction."

"As you know, in the Wizarding World, certain vows are not simply undone. They become a part of us, intertwining with our magic and thus, our life force. The older the vow, the more permanent it is. A mere century ago, divorce amongst wizards was exceedingly rare, because of how difficult marriage vows were to undo. Even if one was successful in severing the vow through ritual or blood magic—as you were with Mr. Malfoy—the vow itself could independently seek a new anchor, imprinting on the closest magical core. Magical

vows are highly resistant to tampering— any attempt with spells or potions could result in the accidental strengthening of the bonds, instead of the intended dissolution.”

Spells or...potions. Oh no. *Potions*.

“I won a vial of Felix Felicis in Potions,” Hermione confessed, thinking back at her rash decision. She’d only dosed them with a single drop each, but from what Dumbledore was saying, it sounded as if this could have unintended consequences. “I was terrified I was going to kill him, and so I used it for luck. I didn’t tell Malfoy.” She considered a moment, before adding: “I used Muggle antibiotics as well, although I can’t imagine that would have any negative interactions.”

“An innovative combination,” Dumbledore mused. “I’d have expected no less from a student of your caliber. A drop of Liquid Luck could certainly have an effect on such a ritual—”

“Did I—” Hermione interrupted, stumbling over her question, a sudden lump in her throat as she doubted herself. “Did I do this to him? Is this my fault?”

“Your *fault* ?” Dumbledore shook his head gently, as if she were missing an obvious point. “My dear girl, when you successfully released Draco Malfoy of his bindings to Lord Voldemort, you most certainly saved his life. Every breath he takes is because of you.”

“But now, he’s tied to me. He has this sense for when I’m upset or in peril and feels compelled to come help me,” Hermione explained, before she could stop herself. “I can tell how much it kills him to not be able to make his own decisions. After what he went through, I can’t exactly fault him for that.”

“Do you hold him in indenturement? Seek his unmitigated loyalty? Demand his sacrifice?” Dumbledore prodded. She shook her head tentatively. “No, what has transpired between you and Mr. Malfoy is not a bond of servitude. It is nothing like his connection to Lord

Voldemort. From your own description of Draco's experience, it sounds as if the vow has bound itself to you not through force, but through some sense of devotion."

*Devotion?* Hermione flushed at the thought, hoping Dumbledore wouldn't notice her change in aura.

"Draco Malfoy's magic seeks to protect you, Hermione. I am not a betting man, but I would wager that it chose you *because* you freed him from a forced oath and for that, it is grateful."

"He's not forced to protect me, is he?" Hermione frowned at the thought.

"Draco retains the entirety of his free will," Dumbledore explained, nodding approvingly at her concerns. "Although he may feel the urge to go to you when your magic calls, he will not be required to act on it. His will to do so anyway is what strengthens your bond. In an attempt to sever his follower's autonomy, Lord Voldemort created the Dark Mark, a vow that could be forced on another wizard, and thus, a vow that was inherently unstable. This instability—combined with Draco's disobedience of orders— is why the Dark Mark was rejected and why you were able to release him without killing him."

"Could the same be done for other Death Eaters, should they defect?" Hermione wondered aloud. How many others had been forced by Voldemort? Young sons and daughters, all terrified at the prospect. If they had the opportunity to reject the Mark— would they?

"I assume you are referring to young Master Nott," Dumbledore said with a heavy sigh. "I'm afraid Draco's case was unique— he disobeyed Voldemort's very first order. The vow fought its placement from the beginning, never fully binding him to the Dark Lord. Theodore Nott may have been unwilling when the Mark was created, but he has already cemented his place in the Dark Lord's ranks. Where Draco faltered, Theodore has obeyed, diligently working all

year to ensure my death, no matter how half-hearted his efforts seem.”

“There must be something you can do,” Hermione urged, bothered by the Headmaster’s passivity. “Nott wasn’t given a choice, if he had one, maybe—”

“We are all given choices, Miss Granger. I do not fault those who choose out of fear, in order to ensure their own survival. Even if I disagree with their methods.”

“So that’s it? You’ll just write him off as too far gone?” Hermione asked, worriedly. “What will you do when he raises a wand against you? Have him sent to Azkaban?”

“That is a question I cannot answer,” Dumbledore responded, infuriatingly mysterious. “Both for your safety and for Theodore’s.” She thought perhaps he’d say more on the subject, but instead, he drained his cup and leaned back in his chair, seemingly exhausted by the conversation.

“It is a rare trait, Hermione,” Dumbledore said, regarding her intently. “To seek freedom where others would consider using chains. An honorable trait. It is why I thought that out of all people Draco Malfoy could be bound to — myself included— you’d be the one to never use him as a weapon. But you must remember— not all who touch darkness wish to be free of it.”

---

On the day that students were due to return from break, the sparsely populated Great Hall was filled with the sounds of rustling newspapers, followed by mutterings and gasps. Hermione had to steel herself in preparation when her copy of the Prophet dropped in front of her isolated spot at the breakfast table. She wasn’t sure what she expected to see: death, uprising, destruction? An overthrow at the ministry? An act of terror on the Muggle population?

Whatever she had expected, it certainly hadn’t been the headline:

*LUCIUS MALFOY LEADS MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN:  
"EXPECT SWIFT RETRIBUTION," SAYS MINISTER*

---

Thank you so much for your love and support of this story! It truly means the world to me.

Notes:

- Draco is coming to terms with the fact that he cannot be the man he's "supposed" to be and have his feelings for Hermione, too. A reckoning is coming...

- The broken nose under the invisibility cloak (which Draco gives Harry in the canon) comes into play!

- Chapter title is a reference to how Dumbledore plays puppet master (he is not a straight up villain; however, absolute power corrupts and he has a considerable amount)

- Dumbledore sees Theodore Nott in the same way he saw a young Tom Riddle (gauged to be 'too far gone' or 'not wanting to be saved')

See you soon for Chapter 24: "The Best Laid Plans." Only a few more chapters left in Part I (Sixth Year). I've planned for this story to have three distinct parts, and Part II will have a big, but definitely welcome, surprise...

---

# The Elegy of Aragog

## Chapter 24: The Elegy of Aragog

---

Draco returns, notably changed. Hagrid suffers a loss. Hermione has a drink.

---

---

We're back! Some important refreshers, if its been a while since you read:

- Hermione won the Felix Felicis in Potions (Chapter 7), not Harry, so the Aragog and Slughorn scene doesn't happen in this timeline. (Harry presumably guilt trips Slughorn about his mom "off screen" in this story, mentioned offhandedly in Chapter 20-- but more on that later)
  - Hermione has sworn an Unbreakable Vow with Draco (Chapter 8), promising amongst other things, to help Draco protect his mother.
  - Dumbledore and Draco made their own arrangement, with Draco spying on Nott for the Order while Dumbledore would ensure Narcissa's safety in return / Lucius has escaped from Azkaban, just as Easter Break came to a close (Chapter 23)
  - Pansy and Hermione had an altercation near the Shrieking Shack, where she threw some wild accusations at Hermione regarding her relationship with Draco and her suspicions regarding their interactions (Chapter 16)
- 

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

When Hermione was young, she used to idolize her father. Maybe a part of it was that he looked like her. Warm brown eyes and skin like burnt honey. Hair, a bird's nest of dark curls. Her mother had always maintained that her daughter was an old chip off of her husband's block. Hermione was always secretly pleased when her mother would make the comparison, unable to consider it as anything but a compliment— after all, her father was quick-witted and kind-hearted, known as a good man to friends and strangers alike.

It made her wonder what Draco Malfoy must have felt, after the news of Lucius' escape was released.

He was compared to his father in every whisper and comment— and physically, the resemblance was undeniable. Ice blond hair, severe cheekbones running parallel to a sharpened jaw. He even had his father's eyes, overcast gray until they hit the right light, which could turn them molten silver.

And the comparisons didn't stop with his looks: growing up, Draco had been a perfect miniature of Lucius, down to the expert sneer and casual tossing around of his family name. Unquestionably his father's son.

But the Malfoy who returned after the break was different. There was no pompousness. Instead, a darkness seemed to radiate off him in waves, sending students scuttling and sealing curious onlookers' lips. For someone who'd idolized his father his entire life, he seemed far from celebrating the Malfoy patriarch's new freedom.

Naturally, the Aurors were brought in to question Draco on Lucius' whereabouts. Scrimgeour was desperate to seem like a real authority, a law and order type leader, and the public outcry of such a public breakout was too pressing for the Department of Magical Law Enforcement to ignore.

But because they couldn't actually find and punish Lucius, they zeroed in on the next best thing: his teenage son. And so, Aurors in scarlet robes interrupted classes, pulling Malfoy the Younger into the

hallway for questioning under the guise of due diligence. Hermione could hear snippets of Malfoy's exasperated shouting, his voice floating into the classroom.

*How many times do I have to say that I don't know where he is?*

After the third time it happened, during a particularly tricky Transfiguration lecture, McGonagall pursed her lips, clearly having had enough disruption to her students' learning.

"Is Mr. Malfoy under arrest?" The Transfiguration professor asked, her tone cold and clipped.

"Er, no ma'am," one of the Aurors responded gruffly, his eyes darting between McGonagall and his apparent superior, as if unsure of whose authority to obey.

"This is an ongoing investigation, Minerva, and we have the right to —" the other Auror started, but McGonagall cut him off as if his protests hadn't even been audible.

"Then I'd kindly ask you to stop treating my students like criminals, before they miss important information that will most certainly be on their N.E.W.T.s." She peered over her rounded spectacles, inspecting the second Auror with an unimpressed glare. "Baker, was it? Gryffindor, class of '84? I suppose this wouldn't be of any importance to someone who barely received three O.W.L.s"

Hermione looked at McGonagall with admiration, thinking back fondly of her treatment of Umbridge: somehow the Transfiguration professor always knew how to question authority while still maintaining plausible diplomacy. She could have sworn she saw McGonagall give Malfoy the smallest dip of her chin as the class sniggered as the Auror reddened in embarrassment, gruffly leading the smirking Slytherin out the door.

She wanted to speak to him. About the newest developments with his father, about her conversation with Dumbledore. *It didn't matter*, a



terribly honest part of her insisted, *so long as she heard his posh accent and his low, ever-charged voice.*

But after their charged moments in the Room of Requirement, she felt strangely embarrassed by the concept of pulling him into a broom closet for a chat. Things were different, how that they'd kissed. Hermione was more aware, more afraid of what any small moment could mean.

And on top of that, Lucius Malfoy's escape wasn't the only bad news she received that week. While on her way to class with Harry and Ron, she was delivered a note by an eager to please third year, who was marked with the telltale scorch marks of a rowdy Care of Magical Creatures lesson. The envelope was marked with her name, written in a familiar messy scrawl, and covered in water stains.

"Who's that from?" Ron looked over her shoulder, nosy as ever.

Hermione scanned the note, her face falling in response to its contents. She realized the water stains must be from fallen tears.

"Hagrid," she responded, frowning. "He's written that Aragog has... passed away. He wants us to attend the, er, funeral."

"A *funeral*? For that bloody thing?" Ron winced, having clearly never quite gotten over his fear of spiders. "Bit much, given that it threatened to feed Harry and I to its spawn, isn't it?"

"We have to go, don't we?" She looked between Ron and Harry, who flanked her as they walked.

"I've got detention with Filch," Harry reminded her, a little too quickly. "And I'm not allowed on the grounds after dark as part of my punishment, remember?"

"How convenient." Hermione sniffed, turning to Ron, who didn't even bother with an excuse.

“No way,” he said, catching her beseeching look and shaking his head furiously, like a wet dog. “No offense, but I’d rather clean the barnacles off the Giant Squid.”

“Be nice,” Hermione chastised, privately agreeing with Ron’s sentiment. Honestly, did she want to perform burial rights for a creature that would have sucked her brain out without a second thought? No. But did she love Hagrid enough to support him through such lunacy? Of course she did.

Hagrid had been there for Hermione through everything. He’d comforted her after Malfoy called her *that word* in second year, and when Harry and Ron had iced her out in third. He’d made her endless pots of watery tea and listened to her cry after Rita Skeeter had printed libelous trash about her and Viktor. It was the least she could do, to help him send the giant arachnid into whatever afterlife existed for venomous, eight-legged beasts.

That evening, she dressed hastily in order to go down to Hagrid’s hut before the sun set, donning a black skirt that was shorter than she remembered—had she grown or had bloody Lavender borrowed her clothes again and forgotten to put them right?—and a dark gray sweater. She pulled her black school cloak over her clothing, so as to look a bit more like she was in mourning.

While crossing the Entrance Hall, her pulse jumped upon sighting a lone figure, lingering at the hall’s oak doors. Draco Malfoy, tall and lean and scowl inch. Checking his watch, almost as if he’d been kept waiting by her.

How had he known where she— right, the bond.

The possibility delighted and disturbed her in equal measure: there was a part of her, hidden in the shadows of her pride, that *liked* that when her magic called to him, he’d come running. It was a heady sensation: almost like power, but darker and sweeter, the bitterest of chocolate.

“Granger,” Malfoy greeted, the first words he’d spoken to her since his return from break. “Fancy a walk?”

“A...walk?” Hermione asked, as if this was the first time she’d heard these two words used together. “Why?”

“Don’t you want to interrogate me yourself? Ask me if I’ve stashed my escaped convict father in my school trunk?” Malfoy drawled, his voice charged with anticipatory animosity. “They’ve already had half the D.M.L.E do it, but I’m sure your methods would be far more *effective*.”

Hermione flushed, and his lips drew up into a lazy smirk, as if pleased to pull such a reaction from her. She spent a second too long lingering them. He shook his head at her expectantly, like *are you slow?*

“Well?” He prodded, growing uncertain at her silence.

“I’m going to a funeral,” she answered instead, shouldering past him in order to haul one of the oak doors open.

A cool breeze escaped, lifting her hair from her shoulders momentarily, and she sighed at the sensation. Malfoy made a little noise behind her, and she looked over her shoulder to find him wincing in her direction.

“What?” She asked, raising her eyebrows.

“Nothing,” he gritted out, looking perturbed. “Who died?”

How should one explain the death of a giant, sentient arachnid? She imagined Malfoy’s look of disgust, and chose a more diplomatic avenue. Surely he’d be better behaved, if he was reeling with shock.

“It’s better that I show you,” she answered, as she set out on the path, not bothering to look over her shoulder. “You coming?”

Would it be insane to bring Malfoy, who'd always derided Hagrid at best and undermined him at worst? Yes.

Would he react the way he would have in third year, which was to say: even though things had admittedly changed between *them*, was he still his father's son at heart? She didn't know.

*You love to test people, don't you Hermione?* A subconscious voice, not unlike her mother's, slipped into her head. *Maybe you're more like me after all.*

He caught up to her quickly. His shadow stretched out alongside hers, lengthening under the last of the day's sun.

"To your mystery funeral?" Malfoy snorted. "Is everything you do always so ominous?"

"You're one to talk. Have a good break, then?" She tried to keep her voice clipped, but a hint of worry slipped through— despite herself, she wanted to really ask if he was all right. He stiffened, ready to bark out a harsh response, before catching the softness on her face.

"I'm not even dressed in mourning robes," he responded, ignoring her question, which meant *no, he wasn't*. "But I suppose if you're wearing *that*—"

"What's wrong with this?" Hermione bristled, turning to him as they walked. His side profile was striking in the last of the light, the shadows exaggerating his regal cheekbones and strong chin. "My skirt and cloak are black, isn't that what wizards wear to funerals?"

"You're calling that a skirt?"

"What would you call it?" Hermione asked, fighting the urge to pull down the fabric as she walked. As if this was an invitation to look, Malfoy gave her a long once over, eyes warm and unfocused and lingering on the line where her skirt ended, the generous inches above her knee covered only by the sheer black of her tights.

“A testament to my self control,” he murmured.

In the near distance, Hagrid’s hut emitted a steady wafting of smoke, stained glass windows sparkling merrily against stone exterior walls. Malfoy seemed to catch sight of it at the same time as her, emitting a groan of displeasure.

“Please tell me it’s the big oaf who kicked it and that we’re not going to bless a mass grave of flobberworms—”

Hermione whirled on him, ready to address the inevitable.

“If you want to speak to me tonight, you will consider yourself my guest,” she said. “You will be polite and cordial. You will refrain from using derogatory language. You will treat Hagrid with respect.”

He emitted a little sound of disbelief at being ordered about by her, and the burning look of disgust on his face was so obnoxious that she reached up to grab his chin, holding him delicately in place so that she could look him directly in the eyes.

“Do you understand?” She watched as his gaze darkened, darting momentarily to her lips and back up again. Well, that wouldn’t do. She dug her fingers in harder, flexing her hold in an effort to keep his attention and maintain her authority. It sparked something to life in his eyes. Dazed and soft and unmistakably, desperately hungry.

“Fuck,” he muttered, frozen in place. She knew he was stronger than her—larger, with the lean body of a Quidditch player—and yet, she had the uncanny sensation of being the one who was physically in control. “Fine, I’ll play nicely with the half-breed— *ouch!* ”

She dug her nails into his jaw. He pulled away, rubbing at the skin.

“What did I just say?” Hermione warned. “Don’t do it again. You don’t want to see me disappointed, not tonight.”

He turned, flushing, and muttered something into the wind that sounded a lot like, *want to bet?*

They passed the paddock and approached the pumpkin patch where Hagrid was waiting, dressed in dark robes that were visibly covered in what looked like moss and lichen.

"Thanks fer coming, Hermione," Hagrid sniffed, looking up with watery eyes. He rubbed his face on his sleeve, wiping away tear tracks. "And Malfoy, it's really—" He stopped abruptly, the shock momentarily staunching his grief. "*Malfoy?* What're you—?" His befuddlement shifted into admonishment, and he narrowed his eyes at the Slytherin beside her. "Now, don't you be bothering, Hermione —"

"I invited Malfoy to join me in paying Aragog my respects," Hermione explained, interrupting before Malfoy could respond. She gave him a look that said, please be good. He rolled his eyes, but gave Hagrid a slight, pained nod.

"My condolences," he drawled, not sounding particularly sorry. *Close enough*, Hermione thought.

Hagrid gaped as he looked back and forth between them.

"But—it's Malfoy, innit?" Hagrid attempted to lower his booming voice, turning to her with marginal discretion. "You alright? He's not made you bring him, has he?"

*He is standing right here,*" Malfoy drawled, still haughty. After some hesitation, he addressed Hagrid directly. "Professor."

Hermione and Hagrid both swiveled their heads in his direction, stunned. She didn't think Malfoy had ever used the designation of *professor* in relation to Hagrid, who squinted his reddened eyes suspiciously in the blond boy's direction.

“I don’t like this. I don’t want no trouble,” Hagrid insisted roughly, still unconvinced. “None of your usual—” He gestured widely, in reference to Malfoy’s signature antics. “And no running to your ruddy father, trying to get me or Hermione here in trouble.”

“Respectfully, sir,” Malfoy responded, his tone bitter. “I doubt anyone could be in more *trouble* than my father, himself.”

They locked gazes, and Hermione nibbled at her lower lip uncertainty, until something seemed to ease in Hagrid’s face, as if he were too tired—and given the fumes coming off of him, likely drunk—to continue his animosity. After a long moment, Hagrid gave a little jerk of his head to Malfoy, like, *if you must* .

Hagrid led them to where he’d dug a pit large enough to bury about twenty wizards and change. Next to it, in the thick grass, was the body— *exoskeleton?* — covered in an enormous white shroud, roughly the size of an event tent.

“What’s an *aragog?*” Malfoy craned his neck, muttering his question into her hair, as Hagrid lifted the enormous cloth. Hermione gasped.

Harry and Ron had explained their encounter with the creature to her, but even Ron’s traumatized description couldn’t have done the sight in front of her justice. Eight spindly legs, bigger than oars, curled in from where the deceased spider lay on its back, its countless eyes now unseeing. It was the size of a small car, formidable pincers flashing.

“Is that—?” Malfoy started, disbelief radiating from his expression. Hagrid sniffled into a handkerchief, seemingly overcome with the sight of the corpse.

“An acromantula,” Hermione finished for him. “Hagrid’s...friend.”

“My oldest friend,” Hagrid cried, before breaking down completely. Hermione moved to place a comforting hand on his forearm, patting gentle. Malfoy looked at her as if she’d sprouted a second head,

mouthed *what the fuck?* She couldn't help but delight in his shock—finally, it was her throwing him into the deep end, daring him to swim.

“He's gone on to a better place, Hagrid,” she reassured him, wandlessly casting a *tergeo* on the hanky. Hagrid blew his nose into it, and Malfoy grimaced at the sound.

“I was going to say a few words,” Hagrid managed. “But every time I look at him, I jus' remember when he was a baby, back when he could fit righ' there in my hand—” He mopped under his eyes. “Could you do it, Hermione? You're awfully good with words.”

Hermione nodded, unable to refuse her friend in this situation, while also wondering how one was supposed to give a eulogy for a Class XXXX Dangerous Creature.

Malfoy, still wearing a look of complete disbelief, knelt by Aragog's head.

“I've never seen anything like it,” Malfoy murmured, correcting himself when Hermione cleared her throat pointedly. “Er, anything like *him*.”

“Magnificent, wasn't he?” Hagrid agreed sadly, taking the comment as the utmost compliment.

Malfoy ignored him, leaning in to examine the beast's pincers. A subtle note of interest sparked in his gaze. “Acromantula venom is virtually priceless,” he mused, seemingly to himself. “Generally impossible to harvest while alive.”

“Don't get any ideas,” Hermione muttered out of the corner of her mouth. He glared in her direction, but moved back from the giant spider, so that Hagrid could gently lower the creature into the pit. Hermione cleared her throat.

“Um,” she started awkwardly, refusing to meet Malfoy's eyes, which were guaranteed to be reflecting pure, undiluted mockery. She



racked her brain for the words used at the few funerals she'd attended while in primary school, commemorations for distant family members. "Today, we gather to commemorate Hagrid's dear friend, Aragog. A loyal companion, and an exemplary... arachnid. Now, we commit his spirit to the afterlife, where he will rejoin his predecessors in peace and harmony."

Hermione chanced a glance up. Hagrid's head was bowed, teardrops the size of marbles splashing onto his robes, seemingly touched by her words. She looked in Malfoy's direction, unsure of what to say next— should they bury him? Was there anything she was glaringly omitting? Granted, she'd never been to an acromantula funeral before— she was surely in the majority on that front— but maybe there were wizarding funerary customs that Hagrid would appreciate.

Malfoy only shook his head, inclining his chin for her to continue. She shrugged, uncertain of what to do next. Finally, he released a long-suffering exhale, before raising his wand and lighting it, a soft white flame dancing at the tip. He gestured at her to lift her own, to join him in casting. *Right*, she remembered. Wizarding funerary customs required magically sourced fire.

"Hagrid," Hermione asked gently. "Did you want to cremate him?"

"Got to," Hagrid responded gruffly in explanation. "Otherwise his kind will dig 'im up and eat 'im. It's their way o' saying goodbye, see?"

"Charming," Malfoy muttered, and Hermione shot him another warning look.

She lit her wand, and after some consideration, conjured a torch so that Hagrid could cast a flame into the pit himself. He reached for it gratefully, ignoring the errant sparks that brushed his skin.

"I'm not ready to say goodbye," Hagrid admitted, his voice splintering. "We been together since the beginning, really. For a long time, I didn't have nobody but Aragog."

"I know," Hermione soothed, and she did. She *knew*. "That's why he'd want it to be you, who helps him move forward. It's like setting him free. You're not just saying goodbye. You're paying tribute."

She looked up at Malfoy, the only other person who knew exactly how she'd set her own parents free. Across the pit, he regarded her with an unreadable expression, his brow furrowed as if she'd said something he couldn't fathom.

Sometimes, he looked at her like this. Like there were certain unanswerable questions central to understanding existence, and she was the answer to at least one of them. She couldn't hardly stand it, nor bring herself to look away.

*What?* She mouthed at him, growing self-conscious under his gaze. Still wearing the strange look, Malfoy cast a white flame into the pit, and Hermione followed, shooting her bluebell flames in a graceful arc. Hagrid, hands shaking, tossed in the torch.

"We return your magic to the earth," Malfoy said automatically, as if he had delivered such rites countless times before. "The earth restores your magic to your brethren. From the first of your line to the last. May they carry your power. May they carry your name."

Aragog's body was consumed by the fire, the smoke swirling ethereally into familiar forms and shapes. Birds and bark and whispering leaves. The air filled with the smell of damp wood, reminiscent of the forest after it rained.

When the flames finally burned out and the smoke lifted, the earth was smoothed flat over the grave, patted firmly into a neat mound.

"Those are wizarding rites, ain't they?" Hagrid considered Malfoy as if he were a particularly disconcerting stranger. Hermione swallowed her shock, disbelieving that Malfoy would afford such dignity to a species that he and his like-minded ilk undoubtedly deemed subhuman.

Malfoy squirmed under their scrutiny. “So?” He answered defensively, his hands clenched visibly in his pockets.

“That was very kind,” Hermione said, moving to lay a reassuring hand on his arm. He stilled under her touch. “Thank you, Draco.”

Malfoy eyes darkened upon hearing his first name, and there it was again, flecked in his irises. Hunger.

Hermione had suspected that it didn't matter if she scolded him or complimented him, as both ensured him the sort of attention he'd come to expect from her. But here, as he behaved at her insistence, as he reacted so palpably to her smile, preened under her thanks—she considered that perhaps, she'd been completely wrong. Perhaps, a demented part of Malfoy *enjoyed* pleasing her. Perhaps, he'd even begun to favor her praise, preferring it over her ire.

“Well come on then,” Hagrid said, resolutely gesturing for them both to follow him. “Suppose I can offer you a drink fer your trouble? Some tea or, er—”

“We're of age,” Malfoy swept past him, shedding his cloak as he prepared to enter the hut. “Something stronger would be greatly appreciated.”

---

By the time night truly fell and most of the other students were in bed, Malfoy and Hermione sat on the steps outside the back door of the hut, listening to Hagrid's earth-shaking snores.

He had passed out after several flagons of mead and a tippie of firewhiskey, a bottle of which he offered rather irresponsibly to Hermione “just the once, just for yeh to taste.” More eager to curb the grieving man's drinking than to try to beverage herself, Hermione accepted it.

Now, the bottle sat between her and Malfoy, who took periodic drinks from it, grimacing with every swallow.

A strange placidity had settled over the night, both of them hardly speaking lest they disturb the rare moment of peace under the stars. If they were caught breaking curfew on the grounds, they'd be given eternal detention, probably scrubbing toilets, but Hermione couldn't bring herself to care.

She wasn't sure why Malfoy had stayed. As she gave up on levitating Hagrid into bed from his armchair, conjuring him a pillow and blanket instead, she kept expecting to look up and find him poking fun at Hagrid's humble quarters, or whining about returning to the castle in time for dinner, of which he did neither.

It was incredibly disconcerting to see him, here. Sitting—on the ground, like a peasant—with his head tilted back as he swigged whiskey. Maybe she should have confiscated it from him as well.

She reached for the bottle, but he dangled it out of her reach, forcing her to lean into him.

"Feeling a little rebellious, are we?" Malfoy rasped, his voice rough from disuse. The effect did something terrible and exhilarating to Hermione's poor, stupid heart.

"Something like that," she managed weakly, pulling the liquor from his grasp and drinking before she could think too much about what she was doing, or the fact that his lips had just been where hers were now.

The whiskey was much stronger than any muggle alcohol she'd tried, scorching her as it slid down her esophagus. She gasped through the feeling, and Malfoy laughed, clearly delighted at her reaction. She so rarely heard him laugh—and never so freely, without a hint of his usual cruelty.

"First time, Saint Granger?"

"Oh, piss off," Hermione croaked, but there was no heat behind her words. The liquor's burn had settled into something warm and

sumptuous, a heat that flooded her chest and throat and cheeks. She took another sip, this time more prepared for the sensation.

"Muggle liquor isn't nearly this intense. Same general effects, though."

"And what are those?" Malfoy asked.

"Foolishness." She grinned. "Headaches. Nausea. A sense of general regret."

"Maybe from this swill," he replied, but continued passing the spirit back and forth between them anyway. "You should have tried something good first. Father keeps his whiskey aged at three hundred years at a minimum in our cellars and—" Malfoy's voice cut up abruptly, mouth snapping shut at mention of Lucius.

Hermione's head swam pleasantly from the whiskey, which is what she'd blame for her inclination to reach for his hand. Just barely, a quick clasp and then release, before he could react.

He looked down at the place she'd touched him for a long time, before turning to her. Unguarded. She could see it now, the heaviness. Malfoy's eyes were shrouded, as if a dark veil had been cast over their usual brightness. The despondency he'd been emitting ever since Easter. Ever since his father's escape.

"Tell me what to do." Her words were instinctive, flowing from her tongue without her usual second guessing. "Tell me how to help."

"You can't always help, Granger." He rubbed his face with both hands, a gesture of clear exhaustion. "Not with this. With family."

"I took a vow," Hermione reminded him quietly. Somewhere, an owl hooted, the sound reverberating sweetly in the dark. "I swore, amongst other things, to protect your mother." She swallowed her mouth suddenly bone dry. "Like you protected mine."

It was explicit now, the thing that had only been understood between them. The reason she'd agreed to the vow. A mercy for a mercy.

"Say what you like about Gryffindors, but we always settle our debts."

"That's what they say about Slytherins. You lot always run out on your tabs," he quipped flatly, his voice having lost its previous lightness. Any teasing having dissipated into the night air. He hesitated, before continuing in a much more somber tone.

"We were supposed to get her out, over break. That's why I went home, risked being caught by the Dark Lord."

"Your mother."

"Yes. I'd set up blood wards on a safehouse in France. Dumbledore cast the Fidelius Charm on it, even made himself the Secret Keeper in order to uphold his end of our bargain. I was going to fake her death, set it up as a suicide. She's on so many potions, she hardly realized when I had her write the note in her own hand."

"Potions?"

"Exposure to the *cruciatus* has weakened her magic," Malfoy explained miserably. "It's caused her to flinch away from using it. She tampers it down now, so that she doesn't have any accidental outbursts. Some of the potions help with that. She was getting better, really, able to use little spells again. But then, my father showed up. They say a month in Azkaban makes you stark, raving mad. My aunt's like that, you know. Certifiable. But Father—it was past madness, the way he was acting. Like nothing had ever happened. Like we could regain the Dark Lord's favor, like I was the key to do so, if only I could buck up and cast a Killing Curse. Like as soon as we regained our rightful place in society, my mother would be just fine, no mind healers needed. Like nothing he'd done to us had any bloody effect at all."

Hermione was quiet, eyes fixed on her knees, reeling with the new information. Lucius was back, and in Malfoy Manor. Hiding, biding his time.

"The funny thing is, I think I could cast it now." His voice was so soft she could barely make it out. "I've felt that kind of hate. I understand it, thanks to him."

They were quiet for a long time, sitting with his admission and it rose over them, like a plume of acrid smoke.

"I don't," Malfoy started, his voice wavering. He cleared his throat and began again. "I don't think I could actually kill my own—"

"The rites you recited, earlier," Hermione prompted, attempting rather transparently to change the subject. Malfoy raised the bottle to her in a mock toast, clearly relieved to be talking about anything other than his ability to commit patricide. "Those are typical, for wizards?"

"Variations of them," he answered, scrambling uncoordinatedly from the steps—the effects of the whiskey robbing him of his usual grace — until he landed and sprawled out on the ground behind the hut. "That's how I learned to do it."

"Learned?"

"Yes," he sighed. "Father taught me." It became clear that no matter where she brought their conversation, there was no avoiding it: the signet ring on his finger, the Malfoy of it all.

She slid herself off the steps, so that the two of them were side by side in the grass. Draco turned his head towards her, and she was certain he was going to tell her to fuck off and mind her own business, but then he began to speak.

"He was the one who gave the final rites for any Malfoy relatives," he continued. "What with being the head of the family and all. It was supposed to be my duty one day. Another role I was supposed to fill."

“I reckon you’re better off deciding your own roles.” Her voice blazed with certainty, and she lifted her head so that she could look at him as she said it, knowing it was something he needed to hear. “I reckon you’ve earned that choice.”

“You would say that,” Malfoy responded, with a palpable bitterness. “But it’s not just something I can walk away from. It’s like the funeral rites, isn’t it? My magic isn’t just mine. It’s theirs, too. From my first ancestor until my last. There’s no choice in that.”

“By that reasoning,” Hermione countered. “I shouldn’t have any magic at all. Maybe it does return to the earth, but the earth certainly doesn’t discriminate on where magic is redeposited. There is more than one kind of ancestor, Malfoy. You can be descended from a tradition as much as you can a family line.”

He rolled onto his stomach beside her, pulling himself up onto his elbows. She wondered if he minded the dirt, the grass stains. If he’d regret this shared moment tomorrow, when the day cast its light onto the detritus that remained on his clothing. When whatever spell that had been cast to allow this calm between them would undoubtedly be broken.

“Merlin,” Malfoy said. Absently, he reached up to pick some debris out of her hair, as if this was something he just did— touch her, casually and without objection. “You really do have a way with words. You could talk me off a tower. Sometimes I almost believe you.”

“If only you listened more often.”

Malfoy shook the bottle about in response, as if gauging how much whiskey was left. It made a weak swishing sound, mostly empty. Had they really drunk the whole thing? The heady lilt to her thoughts and the pleasant buzz under her skin, seemed evidence that yes, they had.



“Last sip.” He held the bottle to her, a question in the gesture. Pushing away her uncertainty, she closed her eyes and parted her lips. With a sharp inhale, he poured the remaining trickle of firewhiskey into her mouth, igniting as it travelled down her throat.

She felt a touch—not the glass of the bottle, but something softer—catching a drop that had dribbled to her chin. Her eyes flew open to see him, drawing his thumb away from her face, before bringing it to his own tongue.

“Last drink always goes to the witch.” His eyes were like tar, like pitch. In their fathomless opacity, they put the night sky to shame. “But the last drop goes to the wizard.”

“Rather sexist, isn’t it?” She breathed, hardly aware of what she was saying. There was a whiskey-induced coyness to her tone, she’d never heard herself use before. “What if the witch wants the last drop?”

Oh, he was so close, leaning over her. Her body arched up towards him almost instinctively, like a flower in search of the sun. Inches away, he stopped himself, wetting his lips.

“Take it back then,” he whispered.

It was all she needed to close the distance, and all he needed to abandon all hesitation. Her lips parted against his, pliant and soft. When he tasted her, he made a low noise in his throat. Deeper than a whine, but no different in its desperation.

She smiled at the sound, unable to help repress it.

“Stop doing that,” Draco muttered against her mouth. “It drives me half mad—” He kissed her hard and hungry, as if to demonstrate.

“What, *smile*?” There it was again, the coyness, lifting its magnificent head. Causing her to trail her fingers down his clothed stomach,

brush at his belt buckle and come away stinging, like she'd touched an electrical socket.

"As it turns out," Malfoy lifted his lips from the skin of her throat, pausing every so often to nip at just the right spots. "I rather enjoy when you're angry. Annoyed. Peeved." He punctuated each descriptor with his teeth. "But..." He drew back to trace the edges of her lips as they pulled up into a grin, an automatic reaction. "I like when you do this too."

Then it was frantic, all fingers and tongue and unyielding heat. Trying to get closer, and even closer after that. He swore roughly into her clavicle, harsh words she'd never considered in combination with *need you* and *so good*, their pairing both jarring and intoxicating.

She grasped at his collar, loosening and pulling, desperate for access to more skin. His fingers skimmed the edge of her sweater, and when she gasped in approval, his hands spanned her rib cage, digging into the softness of her stomach. Impatient, she lifted the knitted wool up and up over her head herself.

He looked at her as if she were the sun. She did not shrink under his gaze; she blossomed.

"Please," he growled, rapturous. "Please, let me—"

It occurred to her then, that he could take whatever he wanted from her and she would give it freely, but here he was asking her, *begging* her.

"Touch me then, if you're so desperate," she whispered, and without hesitating, he did.

He ducked his head and ran his tongue down her scar, the remnants the dark curse she's been hit with in the Department of Mysteries. Didn't ask where she'd gotten it, just laved attention on the sensitive area until she swore and he smirked into her skin. When she pulled at his hair insistently, he supplicated. Allowing her to maneuver him

however she saw fit. Mouth so eager to please, biting and licking at the swell of her breast.

Even their magic hummed effervescently around them, insisted that this was natural, this was what they were supposed to be doing all the time—

“I fucking *knew* it! I told Theo, but he wouldn’t listen! Oh Draco, how could you?!”

The world came to a startling halt.

Hermione drew back, hoping it was the whiskey, an apparition. Anything but *that voice*, high and mean and undoubtedly —

Pansy *Bloody* Parkinson. Fully dressed despite being out on the grounds long past curfew. Pointing at them in accusation, her face screwed up in horror. Standing, unbeknownst to her, on a freshly tilled grave.

---

---

Never say I didn't feed you anything TASTY!

(Okay, it's just a second kiss and a fool around. But their build up? Unmatched.)

In all seriousness, thank you, thank you, thank you! For your patience and understanding, for your encouragement and never-ending kindness. I had an overwhelming couple weeks of school, and your comments really were what pushed me to finish this chapter. I owe every word to you all. (That being said, my apologies for typos/errors).

Some notes:

- You just know McGonagall doesn’t play when it comes to HER students

- Draco's treatment of Hagrid was always so damning in the canon. He acts marginally kinder this chapter, but know that he's no angel in this story. His sense of cruelty is not magically gone. It is and has always been his weapon of choice; Hermione is just showing him the correct direction in which to point it
- "A testament to my self control" poor Draco, knocked out by a whiff of shampoo and a short skirt
- I LOVE a tipsy drinking scene. I wanted this one to feel both tender and highly charged. They really can't help themselves
- What has happened to Narcissa Malfoy's magic is, somewhat ironically, very similar to what happened to Dumbledore's sister.
- How did Pansy know where they were? The hint is in there (and it's a nod to a throwaway comment made in Chapter 21, let me have my fun, okay!)

See you in two weeks for the continuation!

---

# At the Edge of the Forest

## Chapter 25: At the Edge of the Forest

---

Pansy presents an uncertain threat. Draco pulls rank. Hermione digs deeper than she should.

---

---

Thank you, thank you for your patience! I got sick, which derailed me a little bit, but here it is: the continuation of Pansy's intrusion.

In case it's been a while, here is where we left off, with Hermione and Draco caught red-handed by Pansy during a firewhiskey induced hook up, post-acromantula burial.

From Chapter 24:

"I fucking knew it! I told Theo, but he wouldn't listen! Oh Draco, how could you?!"

The world came to a startling halt. Hermione drew back, hoping it was the whiskey, an apparition. Anything but that voice, high and mean and undoubtedly —

Pansy Bloody Parkinson. Fully dressed despite being out on the grounds long past curfew. Pointing at them in accusation, her face screwed up in horror. Standing, unbeknownst to her, on a freshly tilled grave.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Hermione had experienced many terrifying places in her short life. Pits of Devil's Snare and an assuredly haunted Pureblood townhouse. The bottom of the Black Lake. The Veil Room in the

Department of Mysteries. But nothing, she thought, was more terrifying than being inside of Pansy Parkinson's head.

---

Moments earlier:

"Pansy?" Malfoy cried as Hermione scrambled to pull her sweater back on. He stepped in front of her, a useless act of chivalry, or possibly a safety precaution, as she made herself decent. His body shielded her from the majority of Pansy's ire, but she could still feel it, burning through his form. "For fuck's sake!"

Hermione's head swam as she tugged on her clothing, a sensation that suggested the ground had switched places with the sky. Dizzy from the whiskey, but also because the all encompassing pressure of his body against hers had been unceremoniously yanked away.

Pansy Parkinson stood with her arms crossed in Hagrid's pumpkin patch, her eyes like a pair of onyx daggers. Her cheeks were pink from exertion, as if she'd run to them, and her aura swirled with such a palpable darkness that Hermione was nearly unsure where the Slytherin girl ended and the night began.

She would have rather been caught by anyone else, Hermione thought darkly, even *Snape*. Pansy should have been in the castle, fast asleep like the other students. How had she found them? What was she doing, already out on the grounds at night?

"Giving it up in the dirt, Granger?" Pansy taunted, from around Malfoy's barrier. "How predictably *muddy*. "

The dark-haired girl's lips twisted into an ugly sneer as Hermione stood, clothed once more. A blush on her cheeks, something vicious on her tongue.

"Able to speak in full sentences again, Parkinson?" She asked coolly in response, and Pansy coloured in rage, clearly recollecting the tongue-tie spell Hermione had most recently used on the girl in

Defense class to enact vengeance. “Maybe I should have sealed your mouth permanently.”

“How did you know where we—where I was?” Malfoy spat at Pansy. He loomed over her, positioning himself as the threat most urgently in need of addressing. This may have had a more ominous effect, had he not looked an absolute sight: mussed and marked by her lips, his collar rumpled, top buttons undone. His eyes, which were just liquid mercury, had turned flat and cold as they trained on Pansy.

As an answer, the Slytherin girl simply smirked back, as if to say *isn't it obvious*. The two had a silent conversation made up purely of microexpressions and raised brows, the sort of unspoken communication that only two people that had known each other their whole lives could manage, speaking entirely through everything that wasn't said. The intimacy of it made Hermione feel a bit sick, or maybe that was just the lingering effects of the firewhiskey.

With a sinking in her stomach, she remembered seeing them *together*, while dating on and off throughout fourth and fifth year. Even when fighting—which was public and often—the pair of Slytherins had a magnetism that made their union seem almost inevitable. Hermione couldn't remember why they ended things—who had stepped out on who—nor if they'd ever rekindled.

The recollections made her flush with embarrassment: were Malfoy and Pansy still involved? And was Pansy right—would Hermione have let it go that far and slept with Malfoy? Right there in the grass on the edge of the forest, as the stars burned coldly above them, questioning her decisions from universes away? It wasn't like her to act so recklessly, to rationalize dangerous behavior later or not at all. It wasn't like her, to ask herself a question, and come up empty with an answer.

Hermione—caught in her own inner turmoil—barely noticed the break in the Slytherin's *détente*, as Pansy twitched her eyes down to below Malfoy's waist and back up again, but Draco seemed to find an answer in the movement, his eyes narrowing in accusation.

“*Again?*” Malfoy fumed, nearly vibrating with outrage, his tensely set on shoulders framed menacingly by the shadowed forest. Pansy, sensing the escalation in his ire, took several steps back, preemptively. “Merlin, Pansy. I told you to stop cursing my clothing—”

To Hermione’s confusion, he began unbuckling his belt, yanking it from his trousers in a whiplike motion, before hurling it furiously into the distance. Although it was too dark to see it, she heard the metal of the buckle, as it smashed into a tree.

A memory floated to the surface of her occlumency library, a delirious late night in the dormitory, not so long ago. Lavender, giggling as she adeptly glamoured the love bites on Hermione’s neck; Parvati, leaning over conspiratorially— *she can also do a nasty one on a bloke's belt buckle ...tracking charm... burns when anyone besides her tries to touch it.*

And Hermione had felt a shock when she’d brushed the belt, hadn’t she? While running her fingers down Malfoy’s.... *Christ.* She hadn’t thought twice about it, so caught up in the moment. There could have been an earthquake, and she and Malfoy might not have even noticed, just rolled into a tectonic fissure and fallen to the molten center of the earth, still intertwined.

“We’re not even dating, you lunatic—” Malfoy started furiously, but Pansy cut him off.

“Don’t flatter yourself, Draco.” Pansy crossed her arms across her chest in a manner that made her look incredibly bossy. With her high, defiant chin, and slightly upturned nose, she looked almost inherently haughty, an imperious affect that simply couldn’t be taught. “It’s not because I care about who or *what* you stick your prick into. I’ve moved on from that, several times over. But did you really think after the disappearing acts you’ve pulled this year—all the questionable company you’ve so obviously been keeping—that I wouldn’t make sure to know exactly where you were, should you get into trouble?”



The strange thing was, behind her sneering veneer, Pansy looked genuinely worried. Like if she let Malfoy out of her sight for a moment, gave him an inch of slack on his lead, something awful would happen to him. Like Pansy had seen the same change in him that Hermione had this year, and she was bloody terrified of it. Hermione would have felt for her, if she weren't so awful.

"And what kind of trouble would require me to undress?" Malfoy replied, voice dripping with sarcasm. "What protection would I require from you, against the female population of Hogwarts? Or are you saving me from the elves in the laundry?"

"I think that mark on Granger's neck speaks to exactly what kind," she sniped back.

Hermione slapped a hand to the offending spot, and Malfoy bristled in indignation.

"It's not your place, Pansy. I've told you to stay out of my way this year, for your own safety." Malfoy ran his hand through his hair, his telltale sign of exasperation. "Why can't you ever manage to do what you're told?"

The girl took another step back, this time in irritation. It occurred to Hermione that Malfoy was subtly moving Pansy further from Hagrid's hut as they spoke, her back to the forest as they moved closer and closer to the woods. It was exactly the approach she would have taken, that she had taken last year with Umbridge: move the threat to the treeline, where it can be neutralized under the cover of the forest.

"You've spent your whole life doing what you're told," Pansy shot back, unimpressed by the dig. "And look where that's gotten you. You and Theodore, running around like you don't have nooses around your necks."

"You boys are terribly predictable," she continued, ignoring the dangerous expression on Malfoy's face, evidence that the damn

containing his rage was threatening to break. “And yet, when I caught you watching her, I thought— surely Draco wouldn’t do anything so *stupid*. Surely he’s just playing with his food. Theo insisted it was some sort of ploy, that you’d hatched a little plot to serve the Dark Lord, and that I should be grateful that I didn’t know the particulars of your servitude. But then...” Pansy trailed off in recollection, refocusing her gaze around Malfoy and squarely on Hermione before continuing, “then, *she* healed you after that awful curse, and I saw you look at her like she was—like she was *someone* to you. And I realized. Tonight was just confirmation. The charm wouldn’t have gone off if you weren’t shagging the mudbl—”

“Shut your mouth,” Malfoy snarled, at the same time that Hermione cried, “we weren’t *shagging*.”

Malfoy whipped his head around at her, meeting her eyes as their simultaneous outbursts rang out. Both of them seemed visibly caught off guard by which of Pansy’s insults the other had taken issue with. In the moment of eye contact, Hermione felt his familiar presence requesting entrance to her mind. She gave it, swinging open her library’s gates.

*She can’t remember seeing this*, his voice spilled across her occlumency shields, pitched rough and low.

Hermione’s mouth went dry with the realization of what he was asking. Although they were hidden by the sleeve of her robes, she felt her hands begin to shake.

“Don’t look at each other like that in my presence, it’s disgusting,” Pansy interjected, snapping the connection. She rolled her perfectly kohl rimmed eyes—still unsmudged despite the late hour and emotive conversation— in abject distaste. “Merlin, Draco. You look like you want to mount her here and now. You’re lucky I’m the only one who noticed. That I care enough to keep an eye on you.”

*“Keep an eye on me — is that what you think you’re doing? Cut the bullshit. We both know you’re checking to make sure that my chains*

are still fastened. Going to report that the Malfoy heir has gone rogue to your father, so he can tell the Dark Lord and gain some marginal favor?" Malfoy said, his voice dipping into a bottomless foreboding. "That would put me in a very difficult position, Pansy. I don't do well when I'm backed into corners."

Pansy shrunk slightly from him, her sleek black hair ruffling in the wind. Hermione wondered, not for the first time that year, how involved Pansy was with the Death Eaters. Her father had been at the graveyard, when Voldemort rose for the second time, but would she be forced to take the mark, like Draco had been? Would she take it willingly?

"I wouldn't—" Pansy attempted, withering under the glittering contempt of Malfoy's gaze. "I was trying to help you, but you're as stubborn as a Gryffindor, and just as stupid when it comes to wetting your cock—"

"You'd be wise to hold your tongue, Parkinson."

Here, backlit by the moon and surrounded by shadowed foliage, Malfoy struck a vicious figure. He loomed over Pansy, looking down at her with the icy authority of an officer pulling rank. Everything from his menacingly formal posture to his tightened jaw screamed that despite the many dangers that lurked in the Forbidden Forest, Draco was the real threat.

It occurred to Hermione in that moment that perhaps Malfoy was more dangerous than she gave him credit for. That despite his inability to cast a Killing Curse, there had to have been other ways he'd managed to demonstrate his strength in order to survive the murderous political cesspool that was the Death Eaters without the threat of his father extending his protection.

Regrettably, the thought disturbed and thrilled her in equal measure.

"What are you going to do, Draco? Threaten me? Curse me?" Pansy looked genuinely wounded at the prospect, but quickly replaced any

hurt she may have been feeling with a feral looking sneer. “ *Me?* All over a mudblood?”

“Would you like to find out?” Malfoy asked Pansy softly, a gentleness to his tone that contradicted the tightly wound promise of volatility in his stance, threatening to burst forth at any moment. “You know everything, don’t you Pansy? Are you quite certain about what I’d do, when pushed?”

Pansy laughed in cold mockery, as if this was the most ridiculous question he could have asked. As if it were the wrong question all together.

“Maybe not. But I do know that when your father finds out you’ve sullied your family name with her, he’ll make sure she’s six feet deep before you can say—”

Before she could finish her suggestion, there was a bolt of red light. Pansy looked both furious and forlorn as she lost consciousness and toppled over, evidently having misjudged Malfoy’s tolerance for threats.

Hermione’s breath caught as Pansy hit the forest floor softly, evidence of a cushioning charm. Malfoy extended his pale hand at her in explanation, gripped around the wand he’d kept hidden in his sleeve. He’d cast non-verbally.

They stood together in the forest for a moment, their silence punctuated by the sharp sounds of insects, brushing wings against each other in the dark. She looked down at the betrayal, frozen on Pansy’s face, and felt a twinge of something— recognition, she thought uncomfortably. After all, wouldn’t she have done the same, if it were Harry? If it were Ron? Perhaps she’d have gone about it differently—probably with a heated lecture, if she were being honest—but concern for one’s loved ones was not rational, nor was it stagnant. It was hot and urgent and insistent that it must be acted upon, in a manner that often got the best of her.

“You said she can’t remember,” Hermione whispered. “Does that mean...?” She trailed off, allowing the implication to hover between them.

“I would obliviate her myself,” Malfoy said hoarsely, jerking his head towards Pansy. “But given my inexperience, she’d probably wake up permanently affected, and we’d have to explain why Pansy’s forgotten the past six years after a late night stroll.”

Hermione’s hands were unsteady as she drew her wand. To her embarrassment, Malfoy noticed, his mouth tightening into a sharp line. Maybe he didn’t think she could do it. Above them, the wind rustled through the trees, whispering into the outskirts of the forest.

“Suppose it’s lucky I’ve had practice,” Hermione said quietly, remembering the traumatic circumstances under which she’d cast the spell in question for the first time. She closed her eyes, hoping her occlumency was enough to keep memories of her parents under her wand at bay, shelved carefully in the furthest shelf of her mental library.

“Obliviate.” Her hands might have shaken, but her words were soft and certain.

It should have, for all intents and purposes, been simple this time. There were no occlumency barriers to get through in Pansy’s head. Casting the charm wasn’t foreign feeling, like the first time with her parents. Hermione knew that she was a natural legilimens now, and had practiced enough that using any offensive mind magic felt like stretching in the sun, after having spent ages huddled in the cold.

But she had not expected the difference, in obviating a magical mind as opposed to a muggle one. Even without occlumency, Pansy’s magic was inherently resistant to the intrusion, and her memories seemed more intense because of it. They had a horrible searing quality to them, like they were too hot to touch. Her thoughts were jumbled and viciously intense, ruled by one emotion over all others: *fear*.

Some of it was commonplace: fear of rejection, of what others thought of her. Fear of her parents—her mother's judgment, in particular—and of failing her family name. But also: fear of the changing political climate that threatened both her way of life and the certainty of loss. Of pain and death and the possibility of even worse punishments.

The sheer veracity of Pansy's emotions made it difficult for Hermione not to get caught in her current, and she struggled, losing grip on the memory she should be extracting, of herself and Malfoy being caught on the grounds.

When she tried to grasp for it by focusing her efforts on thoughts of him, she was overcome with Pansy's worry, leaching into each benign memory. Malfoy, hair catching the sun from classroom windows, leaning over to borrow a quill. Spilling a cup of tea in the Slytherin common room, a string of curses falling from his lips as their friends laughed. Grinning while hanging aloft from his broom, as Pansy hollered half-heartedly for him to stop showing off.

Draco at all ages: four, ten, sixteen. Draco with all manner of company: squabbling over homework with Blaise and Theodore, teasing Crabbe and Goyle with merciless glee. Draco in all states: smirking and stony, head thrown back with laughter or pleasure or dismay. Pansy had cataloged them all and kept them close to her heart, so close that she'd unintentionally caught Hermione in them like a fly in a web.

Pansy's memories of Draco were so closely tied to Theodore Nott that it was impossible for Hermione to ignore the blazing affection and murderous frustration Pansy simultaneously felt towards the pair of boys. She saw that it had always been the three of them, even as children. Even at Hogwarts, when they'd broken off into more heavily gendered groups of classmates, Pansy maintained troves of dizzying memories of zipping through pink-stained summer skies on Nimbus 2001's. Elaborate afternoon teas taken on sprawling verandas, served to them by eager, chattering house elves. Children, Hermione

realized, more than slightly unsettled, playing at being lords and ladies.

In an effort to stem her discomfort, Hermione pushed away from thoughts of Pansy's childhood, fighting towards the present. Pansy's memories of the night in question were wrapped up tightly in thoughts of Theodore: embedded with an inexplicable sensation of dampness, as if underground. Hermione saw fuzzy flashes of a decrepit room, littered from the remnants of half-rotted furniture. There was something reminiscent about the location, an old melody from a song Hermione couldn't quite remember, but she couldn't place it before the memory shifted and she was whisked away—

And there it was: Pansy, running through the grounds towards Hagrid's cabin. Draco's hair, like a signal flare in the grass. A witch—her—lifting her sweater, bare skin catching the moonlight. The sensation of being winded with dismay, a stone hurled into a once placid lake. Draco, taking in the offering before him, with a stark hunger on his face. Touching her with the urgency of a dead man, served a final meal. Fear, fear, fear—

*No*, Hermione thought forcefully, snatching the silver threads that trailed from the memory, pulling them taught. *That's not what you did tonight*. She gritted her teeth as she reknit Pansy's thoughts, an effort like slogging through a river upstream, until finally she had it—

*A memory of a stomach ache, drawing green velvet curtains. Gone to bed early. Uneventful. Any other night.*

With the last of her mental fortitude, Hermione ripped herself free.

She was no longer suffocating under the opaque smother of the other girl's memories. She was back in the forest, sucking in night air, trying to desperately staunch the vertigo and nausea that accompanied the transition back into her own consciousness.

"Granger. *Granger*." A rather attractive voice insisted, grounding her in the present. "Did you get it?"

Malfoy's face bisected her vision as he touched her shoulder, concern marring his sharp features. She turned away, busying herself with replenishing her oxygen levels. Even if she could eventually catch her breath, a look like that might make her lose it again.

"Gods, her mind is a nightmare," Hermione gasped in response, extending her fist.

In it, she held a silver strand: Pansy's memory, curled neatly in her palm. Draco siphoned the strand into a conjured vial, moving to pocket it as Hermione gave a little noise of protest. He glanced at her curiously, a single brow raised.

"Don't watch it," Hermione blurted. She felt herself coloring, her cheeks going warm in the cool night. If Malfoy watched the memory as she had, would he be disgusted? Horrified? He wanted her, he'd admitted that much. But he'd never seemed particularly accepting of that admission. In fact, he'd usually been horrified by the fact, acting like it caused him great pain. In the cold light of a sober morning, would he wince at the sight of them together?

"Believe it or not, I didn't bring a pensieve to Hogwarts in my trunk," Malfoy assured with an exaggerated dryness, before she could spiral further. "They're a bit inconvenient for travel."

He pocketed the memory, slipping the vial into his robes. He wasn't visibly frazzled like she was; instead, he infuriatingly exuded a rakish sort of confidence, cool and bemused, like he spent all his nights traipsing through the forest with witches whose throats he'd kissed.

She found it a bit difficult to look at him again.

Moments ago, she'd been pressed up against his chest, as he'd sworn delicate strings of filthy words into her skin. The reality of what they had done hadn't fully set in yet, leaving her swimming in a palpable uncertainty, still slightly drunk. She didn't want to think about what it meant. She didn't know if she could stand to, without



entertaining the possibility of having him again. It would force her to wade into the syrupy, fathomless depths of *what if*. Hermione didn't have the luxury of being a fool. She knew how anything between them, even a stolen moment like this, would end.

There was something so very doomed about them. It was evident in the urgency of both times they'd come together—first in the Room of Requirement, and then again, in the memory she'd seen in Pansy's head. The desperation in their touches and caresses, born of the understanding that they were stealing bits of something that could never be theirs. The Slytherin prince and the Gryffindor prefect. The Death Eater and the muggleborn. Friction itself, opposition born into motion.

"I'll go first," Hermione finally said, breaking the spell as she nodded up towards the castle, eager to remove himself from the debris of their disastrous—*lovely*, the traitorous part of her insisted—night. She turned to leave him in the clearing before she could do or say anything stupid.

"I'm sorry," Malfoy blurted, interrupting her exit, chagrin burning across his cheeks. "About Pansy. I won't make that mistake again. No one else will ever find out— I mean, not that—"

"It's alright," Hermione interrupted. She didn't want to hear Malfoy's regrets. She was sure to fill in those blanks herself later, while lying awake in solitude, trying not to think of him.

He looked as if he wanted to say more, but sealed his soft lips into a tight line, before carefully levitated the unconscious girl before him and cloaking her body in a disillusionment charm. She couldn't help but notice how he regarded Pansy with an irritated sort of tenderness, a look that she'd undoubtedly given Ron on numerous occasions. A look bred of familiarity, of loyalty. It compelled Hermione to assuage Malfoy's concerns regarding Pansy's motivations.

"She didn't want to inform on you," Hermione told him. "Not to her father or anyone. She just wanted to keep you alive." She gave him

the barest of smiles— *he liked when he could feel her smile against his mouth, he revealed earlier* —in parting. “There are worse things than being worried about.”

She turned and made her way out of the forest, and despite the fact that she couldn't be seen under her own disillusionment charm, she felt Malfoy's eyes on her as she made her way quietly towards the stone path, leaving the forest and its many dangers behind her.

It was only once she was in the castle, making her way back to the Gryffindor tower, that she allowed herself to run the events of the night over the hot coals of her mind. The burial, the firewhiskey. Her mouth opening for Malfoy's frantic, heated kisses. So ready, as if she'd been waiting for him to touch her ever since the last time. Pansy's intrusion and the excruciating disarray of her mind, so caught up in Draco and Theodore and—

Hermione stopped midstep, tripping on air. A dimly illuminated portrait of a pair of lambs in a field looked on curiously for the source of the sound, of which they could find none. But Hermione wasn't paying attention to her surroundings, because the location that had been blurred into Pansy's memory of this night had suddenly become abundantly clear. She hadn't noticed in the moment, so focused upon retrieving the memory of herself. But the memory had felt familiar for a reason: the dampness of a tunnel, the ruins of a sitting room. A room she'd once trembled in alongside Harry and Ron, while the latter nursed a broken leg. As Peter Pettigrew revealed his deception under the threat of Sirius Black's wand.

Pansy had not been in bed as she was supposed to have been. She'd found Hermione and Malfoy so quickly because she'd been out after curfew, lurking in the crumbling innards of the Shrieking Shack.

And Theodore Nott had been with her.

---

---

## Notes:

- Big props if you recognized Pansy's ex-boyfriend tracking curse, that Lavender is noted to use in Chapter 21. In my head, the spell is a time honored tradition passed on by the older witches of Hogwarts to the younger set.

- In a way, I see Pansy-Theo-Draco in this story as a bit of a foil to Hermione-Harry-Ron. It's important for Hermione to realize her enemies are both 1. dangerous threats to her life and others 2. a lot more similar to her than she would like

- While Draco and Pansy aren't "a thing" anymore, they have a similar intimacy to that which Hermione shares with Ron, but not Harry

- You know our girl gets in her own head about these things. Give her some grace: her mortal enemy is suddenly the person she fantasizes about. It won't be a smooth transition. (Draco's will be even worse- he's got a lot more hurdles to get over. But more on that soon)

- This chapter offers up the cornerstone of our big mystery i.e. "What Is Going on With Theo Nott?" Do with that information what you will.

Nearly at the big event now. This chapter means we've hit 100k words (can you believe?!)...and almost done with Book I. Here we go...

---

# Breached Defenses

## Chapter 26: Breached Defenses

---

Harry leaves the castle. Draco picks a side. Bottoms up, Hermione!

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

There came a time at the end of the school year, when the library's population suddenly tripled, filling with hoards of students hounding Madam Pince for reference texts. Claims on the desks and tables, packed by territorial study groups deep in their revising, became worth their weight in galleons. Students with dark smudges under their eyes started to publicly unravel, prone to fits of nerves that often exploded under the merest of pressures: precocious fifth-years preparing for their O.W.L.s burst into stress-induced tears left and right, only rivaled by the near-feral seventh years, who had begun cursing anyone who interrupted N.E.W.T. revision by so much as whispering.

In other words, exams were upon them.

A part of Hermione had—while admittedly not always keeping her head regarding exam stress—at least, always welcomed the pressure: she was not immune to the intoxication of the praise that followed a good performance.

But this year was different because ever since the disastrous night with Malfoy in the woods, Hermione couldn't focus on anything besides the *bloody* Slytherins.

She'd taken to studying in empty classrooms, claiming it was to avoid the crowded library; in actuality, she wanted to avoid running into a recently obliviated Pansy and lest she shake loose buried

memories. Harry and Ron—and depending on their relationship status any given day, occasionally Lavender—had been accompanying her; that afternoon, Harry was absent, meaning that Hermione was stuck playing third broomstick with Ron and Lavender, who at the moment, were very much *on*.

Hermione sat at a long desk with her study materials laid out, her glazed stare focusing on her stacks of class notes, which Ron had already descended on like an academically unprepared vulture. For once, even *he* seemed to be more focused on exams than she was; perhaps because the silence that accompanied revision took her worries and exacerbated them, the lack of distractions proving very distracting indeed.

Instead of preparing for Snape's indubitably nasty Defense exam—which the slippery Professor had threatened could contain a practical section, where they'd have to silently deflect Unforgivables—all she could do was run the facts of the current predicament over and over in her head:

Theodore Nott had been tasked by Voldemort to kill the Headmaster, who seemed not only aware of this but bizarrely calm regarding the situation. Dumbledore likely had a reason for his complacency that she was not privy to, but how could Hermione simply ignore the fact that Nott was lurking around the Shrieking Shack during Hogsmeade visits and in the dead of night, with Pansy as his accomplice? And then there was Malfoy...

Where did Malfoy fall? Dumbledore's spy. Voldemort's failed assassin. Desperate to remove his mother from the Dark Lord's reach. Free of the servitude of the Dark Mark. Bound to her out of some misplaced sense of —she blushed at the thought—*devotion*.

And then, there was the other concern: the way she had twice now succumbed to the part of herself that insisted it breathed best when sharing air with Draco Malfoy. He made her feel so wretchedly out of control, took her good sense and put a stake through its heart. Turned her body to kindling, and then set it alight. She hated him for

it, and she inexplicably wanted him anyway: under her hands, and on her lips, and in her bed.

“—Hermione? Are you listening?” Ron had packed up his materials, and he and Lavender were standing over the desk where she sat, watching her with faint concern. She’d been staring off into the distance with her chin in her palm, a grave look in her eyes and an incriminating flush on her face. “We’re heading to dinner, you coming?”

“In a moment,” Hermione responded, sounding a bit strained. She cleared her throat, reaching to organize her parchment before returning it to her bag. “Go on ahead, I’ll catch up.”

“Are you alright?” Ron asked, cocking his head to one side. “You seem a bit off.”

“It’s probably just exam stress,” she offered, voice pitched slightly higher than normal. “I’m fine.”

“If you’re sure,” Ron hesitated, and Lavender cleared her throat, nudging him along.

“She’s sure, Ronald,” her roommate shot her a commiserating eye roll as if to say, *boys*. “Weren’t you going to show me that thing on the way to dinner anyway?”

“Huh?” Ron said in a demonstration of unparalleled eloquence, turning to his girlfriend in confusion. “What are you on about?”

Lavender lifted her brows pointedly.

“That *thing*, behind the celestial tapestry in the West Tower?” Lavender insinuated heavily, and Hermione rolled her eyes, picking up what she was so obviously putting down. “You were dying to show me it last night, *remember?* ”

Understanding dawned on Ron's face and he flushed at the thought of whatever he and Lavender had been up to the previous evening, knowledge that Hermione would pay good galleons to never, ever be privy to.

"Oh, right—yeah, last night. The tapestry." He grabbed Lavender's hand, nearly yanking her out of the classroom in his eagerness. "Ta, Hermione!"

"Eugh," Hermione offered in response, waving them off. "Animals, the both of you." As she packed up her belongings, Hermione couldn't help but imagine what it would feel like, to have Malfoy *someone* to yank into alcoves, to dishevel as often and freely as she wanted. *What did Malfoy even want from her?* She wondered. He looked at Hermione like he hated her (and had told her as much, on multiple occasions). But also, like he wanted to swallow her whole. Like she was a salvation that he would never deserve.

Would he come, if she beckoned? Would she claim him, if he offered himself to her? And if they acted on it, would they only be guaranteeing certain pain, the cost for a brief taste of pleasure? There was a plethora of cautionary tales noting the dangers of caving to such desires. She'd be a fool to ignore their warnings: look at Paris and Helen, willing to doom entire nations for the uncertain promise of something that, in the right light, looked like love?

Her esoteric preoccupations were no match to the realistic ones: should they ever attempt to be together, in whatever capacity that could entail, in what world would they ever be accepted by both his echelons of society and hers? How could they ever be anything but a temporary secret, a loss she might quietly lament years down the road, but never dare vocalize?

The classroom door swung on its hinges, banging into the castle wall with tremendous force. Immediately, all thoughts of Malfoy dissipated in favor of sheer adrenaline; she had her wand in her hand, pointed to cast before she realized it was just Harry.

"Hello you," she greeted. "Where have you been?"

Harry looked highly distressed, his usually messy hair notably askew. His brow and mouth were drawn tight in fury, and there was a light in his eyes she recognized from seeing him duel.

"It was Snape," Harry spat, his eyes narrowed into slivers of bright green. He was panting for breath, clearly having run there. "He's the one who overheard the prophecy. He's the one who told Voldemort. He's the one who led him to them, who killed my parents."

"What?" Hermione asked, gaping. "How do you—"

"Trelawney told me," Harry paced the length of the room, his fists balled up. "I bumped into her out on the grounds. She kept talking about how she heard the ghosts in the Shrieking *laughing*, and that she went down to offer them their ascent or something, but it seemed like an excuse to get pissed at the Three Broomsticks to me. I reckon she didn't mean to tell me about Snape, she just mentioned that he was listening at the door when she interviewed for the job with Dumbledore in the inn above the Broomsticks. The night she made the prophecy."

*All roads, Hermione thought, led back to Severus Snape. She remembered with sudden clarity about the figure that Dumbledore had mentioned in his office when explaining his motivations regarding Draco: a young servant of Lord Voldemort...concerned over the safety and wellbeing of his beloved, a muggleborn witch...instructed by his master to spy... until his efforts implicated the very woman he sought to protect.*

It had been Snape, who was sent to spy by Voldemort, and the muggleborn witch he'd cared for... that was Harry's mum, Lily Evans. *She* was the potions prodigy that Slughorn had referenced in those first class sessions, and Snape—the Half-Blood Prince himself — had to have been her unknown partner. *She* was the witch he'd attempted to teach occlumency to, the witch whose fate Snape had used as a warning for Hermione. How surreal it must have been for



him, watching herself and Draco, like a pair of ghosts animated just to recreate Severus Snape's biggest regret.

"—and then Dumbledore bloody hired him to teach here. He let Snape teach children after he SENT VOLDEMORT TO KILL MY MUM AND DAD—" Harry ranted, his broken voice ricocheting up to the classroom ceilings. He shook his head wildly, like a wet dog. "He's going to have to look me in the eye and admit to it. I don't care if he's the bloody Headmaster or not."

"Harry, please slow down. You can't just go barrelling into Dumbledore's office," Hermione pleaded, well aware that she'd recently done that very thing.

"Good fucking thing that I have a standing appointment then," Harry snorted, removing a note from his pocket and shoving it her way to read. It was in Dumbledore's hand, asking Harry to accompany him off the Hogwarts grounds that evening to handle a matter of utmost secrecy. Accompany him off the grounds...Hermione didn't like the sound of that. Not one bit.

"Do you think he's found one?" Hermione whispered. "A horcrux?"

"Yeah," Harry admitted. He looked ashen at the thought, his anger momentarily put on hold. "I do. And he's letting me come help destroy it."

"Harry— "

"Don't look at me like that, Hermione. Dumbledore's a right git, but there's a reason that he's the only wizard Voldemort ever feared. I'll be back." He gave her a wry smile that didn't quite reach his bottle green eyes. "I always come back."

Hermione felt her heart fill with foreboding, the uncanny sense that she was sending a boy off to war. She watched her friend leave, beseeching any higher power that would listen to deliver him safely back to the castle.

"Give him hell, then," she said, offering him a weak smile of her own. After waiting until he'd departed, she hastily gathered her school bag, setting off in the opposite direction as quickly as she could manage.

Harry learned that Snape was at least in part responsible for the deaths of his parents, and while that information was shocking, something else that he'd said stood out to Hermione, made her gut clench with an urgent suspicion, demanding that she *look*.

Trelawney had heard laughter in the Shrieking Shack and assumed it was the work of obstreperous ghosts. But what if the noise hadn't been otherworldly? What if the laughter had been celebratory and whatever Theodore Nott was doing in the Shrieking Shack on Voldemort's behalf was succeeding? The last time Nott had attempted a plan, it had almost killed Ron. Who else would be caught in Nott's crossfire, if Hermione did not stop him, and who else would know how to stop him but Malfoy?

She knew that if she called through the bond, if she focused on her feeling of distress—on *needing* him—Malfoy would come. She didn't know if it would work the other way.

*Where are you?* She thought, as she screwed her eyes shut, trying to trace her magic back to some faintly glowing pinpoint. She thought of him as vividly as she could, picturing the lilt of his lips, as his mouth twisted into a smirk. His long fingers and slender wrists peeking out from shirtsleeves, which were always neatly done up with cufflinks. The way he said her surname with his lovely obnoxiously posh enunciations. His quick mind and sharp tongue, which impressed her as much as he annoyed her. The way his eyes went from slate gray to something brighter, nearly metallic, when he was intrigued.

There was *something*. A quiet presence, rejoicing in her attentions. *Here*, it seemed to call, like it had been waiting for her to reach towards it. *Come here*.

*Where?* She asked, and she could feel the answering tug, pulling her mind and body towards an unknown destination. *Here*, Malfoy's magic insisted.

The feeling led Hermione out of the castle, onto the grounds in the direction of the Whomping Willow. It was that strange time of day that bordered dusk, when she could see both the last rays of sunlight and the pale hint of the waning crescent moon against the darkening sky. She hoped that she wasn't too late and Malfoy wasn't already inside, facing off with Nott, or worse, helping him.

She was just rounding the Quidditch Pitch when she felt him. *Close*, his magic hummed, intertwining itself with hers. She closed her eyes in focus, trying to envision the feeling correctly: two bits of silver thread, twisting together until they were inextricably tangled. *Come closer.*

"You're going to get yourself killed, you daft witch."

She opened her eyes.

Malfoy stood tall in front of her, wearing his typical cloak and sneer. It seemed artificially pasted on: if she looked closer, she could see the tightness around his eyes, the barely notable tremor of his left hand from where it hung at his side. Telling her that he knew something was occurring tonight, and that he was dreading it.

"Malfoy," Hermione called, and that was all she managed before he had a hand wrapped around her wrist and a finger to his lips, steering her behind the small stone structure that held the pitch's locker rooms, constructed of concentric, dry-stone walls that had been overtaken by lichen and moss.

"You can't be out here, Granger," he scolded, releasing her arm once they were sufficiently tucked into the shadows. "Go back up to your tower and *stay there.*"

“I know about Nott,” Hermione replied bluntly, the admission severe enough to strike the annoyance off Malfoy’s sharp features. “I know that whatever he’s been planning in the Shrieking Shack is happening. Tonight.”

“Of course you do.” Malfoy lifted his hands pressing his palms into his eyes, as if trying to sink them past his sockets and further into his skull. “Why would I ever think that you could avoid seeking out impending danger?”

“What’s he going to do?” Hermione demanded, urgent. “Dumbledore’s away from the castle—” She cut herself off, unsure of how much she should share. This was Malfoy, who was bound to her by blood and magic, old and new. Then again, *this was Malfoy*.

“Nott’s planned a distraction,” Malfoy admitted, voice pitched low. He spoke very quickly, as if time was of the essence. “He’s found a way to get reinforcements into the castle to put on a bit of a show, draw out any defenses.”

“The Shack,” Hermione confirmed, wondering how he’d done it. “He’s smuggling in Death Eaters using the tunnel under the Whomping Willow.” The Willow had acted as a protection over that entrance to the grounds ever since the Shack had housed Remus Lupin on full moons, all those decades ago. She highly doubted Theodore Nott had become an animagus like the Marauders, as he’d never had more than average marks in Transfiguration. Then how had he stumbled upon the entrance without being beaten to a pulp by the tree?

“Yes,” Malfoy confirmed darkly. “But that’s just the diversion. Nott is going to be lying in wait for Dumbledore.”

Hermione’s heart almost stopped when she took in the stark look in Malfoy’s eyes. The resigned way he spoke of Nott’s plan.

“You knew,” Hermione realized, her voice brimming with accusation. “You knew what he was planning for tonight. You’re helping him,

aren't you?"

Malfoy said nothing, confirming her suspicions.

"After all that." She shook her head in disbelief, gesturing to his left forearm. "You'll still go crawling back to them?"

"I'm *warning* you, aren't I?" He snapped. "Risking my neck, mind you —"

"Yes, warning me. That's about all you're good for, isn't it?" Hermione cried, her voice carrying across the grounds before Malfoy could shush her. "You warned me about my parents last summer. You warned me at the Christmas party, about Nott. When will you *do* something about it?"

"I am doing something!" Malfoy roared, a fury emanating from him that could level houses. "I'm doing everything I can to keep this all from going up in flames!"

"What about Dumbledore?" Hermione accused. "Are you just going to step out of Nott's way, and let him try and kill the Headmaster?"

"Dumbledore is dying," Malfoy said. "I told you— that's a blood curse, Granger. He's going to kick the bucket either way. If Theo's the one to do it, at least one of them stays alive."

"So you think that if Dumbledore *kicks the bucket*, as you so respectfully put it, you'll be free of your end of the bargain? Won't have to spy on your friends for the Order anymore?"

Malfoy looked stricken by this; they had never addressed what she'd discussed weeks ago with the Headmaster in his office.

"You didn't realize I knew that you agreed to be Dumbledore's inside man, did you?" She continued, harshly mocking. "He told me you took the plea deal, but now I'm thinking that maybe you never

intended to honor it in the first place. You conveniently didn't request an unbreakable vow for *that*. ”

“The Headmaster failed to uphold his end of our agreement,” Malfoy argued, regaining some of his ire. “My mother is still in the Manor, and her magic is still eating her alive from within. Why should I uphold my end?”

“You can't just pick and choose who deserves to live and die based on the way the wind blows regarding your own interests, Malfoy. That's *horrible*. ”

“Then I'm horrible,” Malfoy spit back. “I won't apologize for trying to survive this, and making sure the very few people who actually give a shit about me survive it, too. I could give two troll pricks about Dumbledore. He'd certainly offer my life for the greater good— he basically already did, when he asked me to play spy.” He grimaced at the thought, mouth twisting into a bitter frown. “Dumbledore knew that I'd hang for it if I was caught, and that was a risk he was more than willing to take.”

Hermione could not defend this. The Headmaster had so much as told her that any consequence would be shouldered, in favor of the greater good. It was the rationale he offered for all those sacrificed before Malfoy, and all who would be sacrificed after.

“What about *me*? ” Hermione asked. Her voice didn't waver, but she felt her pulse skip uncertainly, as if her body wasn't sure why her heart was beating in the first place. Malfoy winced at her phrasing, but she continued speaking as if he hadn't. “I still have a vow in place to help you and your mother. Haven't you realized? *I'm* Dumbledore's contingency plan. He didn't fall through on his promise. He gave you *me* as your own personal guarantee.”

“Granger, I—”

“I'm not like you, Malfoy. I'm *always* going to fight. I can't just sit this war out, and the thing you haven't realized is, *you can't either*. You're

not exempt from Voldemort anymore, not after we severed your connection to the Dark Mark. And if you do this, if you help Nott kill Dumbledore, you won't be safe from the Order, and instead of fighting one war, you'll be fighting two. There's no more riding the fence. It's time to choose a bloody side already and get on with it."

Having finished her impassioned speech, she crossed her arms, as if to say, *well?* Malfoy had a very strange expression on his face, as if she'd missed something glaringly obvious.

"You don't think I've chosen?" Malfoy asked, moving quickly enough to cage her in against the mossy wall with his shoulders. Her pulse jumped from fear or anticipation or a demented combination of the two. He rested his forearms on either side of her body, pressing himself right up against her before she could protest. Forehead to forehead, his chest nearly brushing against hers.

"I suppose it didn't feel like much of a choice at all," he murmured, words delicate against her cheek. "More like something that happened *to* me. The bond between us made me sick at first. You and your magic, all good and golden, infiltrating every part of me like some sort of *disease*. You have no idea how jarring it felt, not just when you were afraid, but when you wanted something and I could sense how badly. You were so insistent. *Needy*. You didn't even realize how you were yanking me around." His mouth quirked.

"Maybe that's why I didn't mind, because you clearly didn't mean to. It made me feel powerful to be the one your magic called for when you felt fear or disappointment or pain—not Potter, not Weasley. *Me*. When I realized I could do something about it—crush the source of your misery, give you what you wanted—it was intoxicating. Before I knew it, you had me dizzy and drunk and in the palm of your hand."

Malfoy didn't give her a chance to digest this confession, just pushed closer, and she shivered under the pressure of his solid form. To her delight horror, she could feel him hard against her stomach.

"You have no idea, the effect you have on me," he said raggedly, punctuating his statement with a brush of his hips. She gasped at the

contact. He removed his hands from either side of her on wall in order to cradle her face, a gesture that felt far more territorial than it did gentle. "You could ask me to slit my own throat, and I'd do it. It's too late to even entertain the *possibility* of choice."

"What are you saying, Malfoy?" Hermione whispered, terrified of his answer. He made a noise of distaste at the sound of his surname.

"I don't know when I started hating it when you called me that," he admitted, tracing her cheekbones with his thumbs. She wet her lips and his eyes followed the dart of her pink tongue with an overt hunger.

"Draco," Hermione said instead. His name sounded like begging.

A dam broke. He kissed her.

It wasn't the time or place for it. Her world was on the precipice of destruction, but for a moment, Hermione didn't care, because Draco Malfoy had his tongue in her mouth and his hands in his hair. She went soft under him, letting him have her, and he seemed to sense her supplication and delight in it: touching her more roughly than he had before, kissing her past breathless. His hands were urgent and everywhere—fingers trailing her neck, brushing the underside of her breast, hitching around the side of her thigh to pull her flush against him—trying to take as much of her as he could, while he could, as if he thought she'd push him away. She didn't.

It was only when she felt dangerously light headed that he finally drew back, giving her only enough room to gasp over his shoulder for air. He was muttering something unintelligible. It took her a minute to be able to make out the words.

"Just wanted to," he was saying into her hair. "One more time. Couldn't not let myself. Won't apologize."

Hermione inhaled sharply, sliding her hands between them, placing them on his chest. Thinking she was pushing him away, Draco went



to step back, but she reached up and caught his collar, pulling him down to her eye level.

“You’ve made your choice?” She asked, needing to hear it again.  
“You’re sure?”

His eyes went dark, golden lashes fluttering from strain, as if it were taking an enormous amount of strength to keep himself from touching her as he’d like to again.

“Of course I have, Granger. Use your head— where do you think I’ll be more useful? Playing soldiers with Potter? Why would I add protection to the defenses of your left, if it left your right vulnerable?”

She’d misjudged him. Draco Malfoy wasn’t throwing his lot in with the Death Eaters, in defiance of Dumbledore. He wasn’t leaving Dumbledore to die out of apathy, and he wasn’t trying to save himself. He was being terribly, life-threateningly clever. Positioning himself strategically, just as the Headmaster had wanted.

Somehow, even while being aware of the chessboard, they’d both played right into his strategy.

“I can protect myself,” Hermione replied angrily, releasing him with a little shove. “As you pointed out— spies get *killed*, Draco.”

He braced one hand on the wall so he could lean towards her. “Say it again,” he murmured. “Just once more.”

“Spies get killed,” she offered obstinately, stopping his advances with a single finger to the chest. He scowled, opening his mouth to retort, when they heard it: the unmistakable sound of a howl. Too human to be wolflife, too wolflife to be human.

Hermione blanched, hot bursts of fear flooding her veins. Draco looked at her with wild eyes, and she knew he could feel it too. Her terror, manifest.

“Fuck,” Draco said, voice cracking open. He laced his hands behind his head, yanking the hair at his scalp. “*Fuck*, I was supposed to have at least two hours. They shouldn't be here yet.”

His panic ricocheted up, palpable between them, and he glanced back and forth between her and the castle, doing some internal calculations. Appraising her, his expression smoothing from terror into something cold and blank. A natural occlumens at work.

“Have you ever been in a duel with Death Eaters, Granger?” Draco asked. Sizing her up, as if he could instruct her at the last minute.

“Yes,” Hermione answered shakily. “The Department of Mysteries.”

“And did you hold your own?”

She thought of Dolohov's curse, how it knocked her clean from her own consciousness. She'd woke disoriented days later, in the hospital with her chest radiating near-unbearable pain.

“Erm,” she contemplated honestly. “Nearly died.”

“*Fuck!*” He said for the third time, wincing like he'd been punched in the stomach. “I don't know how many...at least six, and they have Greyback...”

*Greyback?* Hermione thought, realizing the source of the howls with no small degree of horror. Theo had brought Greyback onto the castle grounds as a *diversion*? If Nott wasn't killed tonight, Hermione would insist on doing the honors herself.

“I won't be able to keep any sort of cover up, not if it's just the two of us. I'm not going to just watch you get cursed. You could run and hide, but what are the chances they won't find you? There's not enough luck in the world...” He trailed off again. “We're completely and utterly fucked.”

*Think*, she urged herself, closing her eyes and slamming her occlumency gates shut. The Death Eaters were already here, but what were the problems that she could actually solve? *It was just the two of them and there wasn't enough luck...*

With shaking hands, she reached for her discarded bookbag and dumped out the contents, digging around for her D.A. galleon. She tapped her wand on the coin, spelling out the message *Death Eaters on the grounds*, hoping desperately that reinforcements would come when called. In an inner pocket, there was a vial of golden liquid, three-quarters full. She reached out in order to hand it to Malfoy, who looked at her dumbfounded.

"It's Felix Felicis," she explained. "Drink it. *Now*. "

"Don't waste this on me, Granger," he insisted, swatting her hand away. "Drink it yourself."

They didn't have time to argue, and so she huffed, "*fine*" in false acquiescence, swigged from the vial, then pulled him down by the collar, pressing her lips to his. Instinctually, he opened his mouth against her, and she spit what she hoped to be half of the mouthful down his throat, reaching up to pinch his nose in order to make him swallow.

"You....you treacherous little *goblin*!" Draco spluttered, and Hermione ignored his pejorative objection to wipe an errant drop from the side of his lips with her finger, sucking it into her mouth. *Witches* got the last drop, she thought, in tribute to the last night they'd spent together on the grounds.

In the distance, there was another howl, and a terribly familiar screeching laugh, the sound carried by the wind.

"Now?" She asked him, meeting his eyes. She felt as the influence of the Felix began to clear her head, and she promised herself that it wouldn't be the last time she looked at him like this. It couldn't be. She'd not allow it.

Draco turned and gripped her chin, pulling her into a brief, bruising kiss, his mouth tasting of preemptive farewells and liquid luck. He tapped the crown of her head with his wand, the cool sensation of a disillusionment charm trickling down her spine. They'd see him coming and hold their fire, unaware of a second presence. He was awfully clever, her Slytherin.

"Now," Draco agreed. Together, they ran towards the fight.

---

---

- The title "Breached Defenses" works on two levels here: Draco having a breakthrough with an understandably hostile Hermione, and of course, Death Eaters slipping through the castle defenses.

- I had to get a bit of fun with Lavender and Ron in before everything goes to shit. I love thinking of them as \*that\* ridiculous but hilarious on and off couple (given both of their personalities, I don't see this as much of a leap in terms of characterization)

- A little headcanon: the Quidditch locker room looks like an old Scottish broch from the outside, so as not to break up the aesthetic of the Scottish landscape. The inside is modern, fully equipped with rain showers and mirrors that attempt to cheer you up after losing a match.

- Draco's confession is inspired by a Peeta quote from Mockingjay: "I think....you still have no idea. The effect you can have."

- Oops, did I accidentally write a "spit in his mouth" scene? I never claimed I wasn't filthy.

- HERE IT IS: THE CULMINATION SPEECH OF DRACO "DOWN SO FUCKING BAD" MALFOY. He's feral, he's possessive, he's willing to slit his throat for her. Oh, the drama.

- Who guessed in the comments that Theo was smuggling in Death Eaters via the Shrieking Shack? 100000 points to your house!

- "He was awfully clever, her Slytherin." Hers!

- Funnily enough it's MY finals week next week; I always love putting a tiny bit of my life into this story, and this felt like fate!

Thank you for reading beloveds, new readers and those who have been patiently following along. Your comments give me wings!

---

# In Cold Blood

## Chapter 27: In Cold Blood

---

Hermione faces an old foe. Fleur marks her territory. Theo makes a choice.

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The Whomping Willow stood eerily frozen, the barrage of its vicious branches temporarily halted. The stillness as ominous as any warning.

The gentle, nighttime quiet that once hovered over Hogwarts had been torn to shreds by a dozen Death Eaters, reigning destruction, fighting their way ferociously across the grounds. Their faces were covered by dark hoods and chilling silver masks, wrought to resemble bone. Although she couldn't tell them apart, Hermione could hear Bellatrix Lestrange's cackle, a sound like nails on slate. The only other figure she recognized was an enormous man with a markedly predatory gait. He wasn't in Death Eater regalia, but clad in shabby clothing: an old overcoat and a torn and stained shirt, unbuttoned to show an impossibly broad chest covered in wiry black hair. Under a flash of wandlight, Hermione caught a glimpse of his face: savage eyes and a cruel mouth, his teeth bared in an expression that was more fitting for a beast than a man.

She clenched her fist until her nails drew blood from her palm. Nott had let Fenrir Greyback into Hogwarts.

The Death Eaters had been unprepared for any resistance. It had been their one advantage, the element of surprise allowing for the former members of Dumbledore's Army that had answered Hermionoe's call to keep the threat momentarily at bay. Hermione

caught glimpses of Ginny and Neville, fighting back to back. Luna, looking terribly young, her blond hair swinging as she covered Ron, who was spewing a stream of filthy swearing as he fought. It was a nightmare snatched directly from her nightly reenactments of the Department of Mysteries. They were being quickly overpowered, barely dodging injury or worse: there could only be so many missed killing curses, before one found its mark.

Hopped up on fear and adrenaline, Hermione had jumped into a fight without a sure plan, just Felix Felicis' influence, insisting she act. The potion had a strange, invigorating effect: Felix made her fight like herself, but *better*. Her thoughts were clear and certain, missing her usual hint of self-doubt. The part of her that questioned her own decision making, that caused her hesitation, was restrained, duct taped in the closet of her mind. Every spell she cast seemed brighter, more powerful, streaming from her wand with the voracity of a locomotive. If Hermione weren't in such a dangerous situation, she would have found the power of it all completely intoxicating. But she was, in fact, in danger. They all were.

*Split them up*, the golden voice of liquid luck urged, pulling strategy effortlessly from her potion-sharpened memory: a passage from a book on the Napoleonic Wars that she'd read eons ago. *Divide and conquer* .

Hermione, eager to get a pair of cloaked figures away from a panting Neville, flung a round of seemingly origin-less stunners that purposefully missed their marks, sending a pair of cloaked figures roaring in surprise. She thanked any and every higher power, and Felix twice, for the fact Malfoy had the foresight to disillusion her.

"Someone else's here," the shorter of them cried, looking around for the source of the spell.

"Obviously, you imbecile," the taller hooded figure responded, and the pair gave chase just as she hoped they would.

The taller one rounded off a killing curse that missed Hermione by a breath. *Keep moving*, the voice ordered, and Hermione skidded in the opposite direction, sending another round of red jets over her shoulder in an attempt to create the illusion of multiple points of attack, and thus multiple invisible opponents. The back and forth went on for minutes or eternities—time distorted, while dueling—before one of them finally caught on, casting a finite that shattered the disillusionment charm, revealing Hermione’s solitary existence to her opponents.

*Make yourself big*, the voice advised. *A threat*. She squared her shoulders, drew herself up to her full height—which admittedly wasn’t much—and flung her mane of curls behind her, bracing herself for a fight.

“It’s the mudblood,” the shorter man who’d spoken first called excitedly. “Get Bella—”

*Stop him*, the voice instructed, and the Death Eater cut off in a garbled scream, unable to finish his instruction as Hermione’s hyper-precise severing charm sent blood streaming from his mouth. His tongue fell silently into the grass. Hermione’s stomach lurched, as the Death Eater fell, clawing at the ground in search of his severed flesh, choking horribly on blood as he went. She thought she might be sick.

*There is no mercy for the merciless*, the liquid luck reminded her, now, **move**.

The other Death Eater was both more competent and more vicious in his dueling: his curses only *barely* missed her, shot a little too high or wide out of sheer luck. Based on the color of the spells and the scorch marks left in their path, she gathered that this was dark complex magic, not the introductory dueling spells they were taught at school. On the defensive, she shot spells back until she wasn’t Hermione anymore: she was pure instinct personified, a pattern woven entirely of *duck, roll, cast, run*. Two Unforgivables flew in



rapid succession under her chin and by her ear; she deflected one and dove to avoid the other, landing in a painful roll.

Hermione was on her knees, struggling to get back on her feet, as her opponent advanced through the blanket of fog, only stopping once he stood over her. His cloaked silhouette was framed by the mist and the cold night sky, giving off the effect that she was being approached by a spectre of death, itself.

“Hello, mudblood,” the second Death Eater said, pronouncing the slur with perfect, sharp elocution. It was terribly familiar. “It’s been—well, almost a year, hasn’t it? How coincidental that the Dark Lord has orchestrated this little reunion.” The man pulled off his silver mask, revealing sharp features and familiar gray eyes, more haunted than she’d seen them last.

“*You*,” Hermione croaked, as Lucius Malfoy looked down on her with icy fury, his thin lips pulled up in a cruel smile.

Lucius looked like a thin ghost of his former ostentatious self. A year in Azkaban had taken the vestiges of youth from his face, creating pronounced worry lines between his brows and in the corners of his mouth. He’d lost weight, creating a hollow effect around his eyes and sharpening his cheekbones into a razor’s edge. His skin had the sallow, waxen quality of a corpse.

“Yes,” Lucius agreed amicably, as if they were taking tea together. “*Me*.” He raised his wand. “The Dark Lord thought I wouldn’t be a useful addition to this effort, so soon after my imprisonment, but I insisted. You see, I’ve been rather looking forward to this. Don’t scream too loudly, now. I wouldn’t want to wake the rest of the castle.”

*Left*, Felix insisted, and she rolled in that direction without thinking. Lucius’ Cruciatus curse only brushed her, but even an indirect hit was excruciating: she felt her teeth in her skull as every bone on the right side of her body exploded with pain, her nervous system short circuiting. She understood all at once how prolonged exposure to

this curse could drive a wizard to madness: there was no sharper blade than direct, unbearable pain.

The sensation subsided, but not quickly enough. Fighting through the aftershocks, Hermione tried futilely to disarm Lucius, but he only laughed and swiped the spell away, as if waving off a pest. He bent to her level, his profile backlit by screams and bursts of light as the fight carried on a short distance from them, close enough to hear but too far away for anyone to see her in danger and come to her aid. He cocked his head, watching in amusement as she scrambled back from him, desperately trying to get away.

“Nowhere to run.” Lucius strode forward and kicked her in the chest, sending her body crumpling to the ground. He placed a polished dragonhide boot directly on her windpipe and pressed until she stilled. “If you’d been raised in polite society, you’d know it is terribly impolite to attempt escape while your betters are addressing you. Did your filthy muggle parents not teach you that in the sty?” He clucked in false dismay, removing his foot and pinning her in a wordless body-bind with a flick of his wrist. Her limbs froze in response, leaving her paralyzed from the neck down, effectively powerless before him.

Anger reared its head, coiling around her heart and constricting at the mention of her parents. How *dare* he mention them. Every cell in her body fought the paralysis, pushing for her to spring up and attack, to cause the cold light to fester out behind his bloodshot eyes.

“I’m going to kill you.” Her words were hoarse, each syllable creating a horrible tearing sensation in her throat.

“Oh, are you?” Lucius asked dryly, nudging her frozen form with the tip of his boot. “You’ve caused me quite the headache. Haven’t you, dear?” Somehow his use of the endearment was even more terrifying than when he called her slurs. “First with your mad dash in the Department of Mysteries, then again with your daring little escape from my son last summer. He was punished terribly for it. Luckily for Draco, that wasn’t a complete loss— your parents weren’t

quite as lucky, were they? Did Draco kill them first, or did he let them burn alive?"

"If your son was going to be punished on anyone's behalf," Hermione rasped, the strain of the words tearing at her crushed trachea. "I'd imagine it would be yours."

Rage flashed across Lucius' pale face; she'd clearly salted a wound. She'd be more satisfied by this, if it didn't all but guarantee the Malfoy patriarch's wrath.

"There's that mudblood disrespect, again." Lucius tutted, shaking his head. "I've come to believe poor breeding can't even be beaten out of your kind, but I'm always eager to test the theory. Would you like to be the one to prove me wrong?" He cracked his knuckles in preparation, before lifting his wand once more. "*Crucio!*"

At close range, the Cruciatus curse felt like all the worst things that had ever happened to Hermione at once: every broken bone, every singe of a hot pan or burn of an iron, every splitting headache, every hex to the chest. It was Dolohov's curse times a hundred, dark magic lighting her her body up with agony at every pulse point. The heart pang of every rejection, every death, every goodbye. And on top, a pain she didn't recognize, but would never forget, burning through her nerves like wildfire. All of it at once and everywhere.

*Breathe*, Felix insisted, and her chest contracted instinctually. *Survive*.

Somewhere, someone was screaming. It was only when the curse subsided and she felt the ache in her damaged throat that she realized it was *her*.

Lucius was crouched next to her, radiating satisfaction. He reached out and grasped her jaw, tilting her limp head to level her line of sight directly at him. Making it so that she was powerless to look away, a final cruelty.

"Once again, I have to clean up Draco's mess." Lucius sighed. "Regretfully, you escaped because I raised my son to be foolish enough to demonstrate either weakness or mercy, admittedly a mishap on my part, allowing Cissa to soften him so. But I suppose there's always room for a corrective learning opportunity—and you'll be a lesson he won't soon forget." Lucius stared at Hermione. His eyes darkened, glinting like scarab beetles. "Goodbye, mudblood."

She still couldn't move, the body-bind trapping her, the Cruciatus weakening her magic. Lucius' gray eyes glinted, like sea-dampened stones.

*He looks like Draco*, Hermione thought, and the association hurt more than she'd expected it to. She fluttered her eyes shut.

"*Avada* —" Lucius snarled, the curse half off his tongue.

*Survive*, the golden voice insisted. *If you can't use your wand, use your mind.*

She snapped her eyes open.

*Legilimens*, Hermione thought, and even though she was wandless and trembling with aftershocks, she felt her magic respond, a strong and faithful presence. The remaining liquid luck in her veins fortified her, as if strengthening her efforts with gilded support beams. She felt herself cutting through the flimsy wards of Lucius Malfoy's mind; he did not have the impenetrable mental occlumency fortress Draco did, evidence that his son's talent for mind magic was definitively inherited from the Black side of his lineage. With no firm defenses in her path, Hermione's natural inclination for legilimency sparked to life, eager for the opportunity to stretch its legs. It felt like unbridling a horse that had been itching to run, her mind clearing fences and bolting into new pastures. Lucius' defenses crumbled like chalk against the voracity of her assault, as she cut into his memories with searing precision.

What a demonstration of hubris, to insist she watch as he killed her. Not even entertaining the possibility someone as pedestrian as her could have this weapon in their arsenal.

With no clear objective in mind, Hermione was greeted by flashes of a dismally gray prison cell, an opulent office filled with dark wood, a manor proudly jutting from the misty English countryside. This mind was nothing like Pansy's crazed, feeling-forward hellscape. No, Lucius had the emotional sensibility of a bloodthirsty autocrat, his thoughts and feelings just as cold and controlled as his demeanor.

The primary sensation of his memories was a very specific kind of anger: Lucius was enraged, Hermione realized, because as of recently, he had not received what he thought he was owed: complete and utter control. The memories that were tinged with glimpses of humanity—emotions like fear, or uncertainty—were overpowered by the stubborn insistence that he should be too powerful to fear and too influential to be uncertain. It was a ghastly, selfish, tyrannical way of thinking.

The Malfoy patriarch struggled weakly against her magic, twisting away from the intrusion, and Hermione flexed her legilimency instinctually, throwing him from his own head into the unconscious, a pit of nothingness. She imprisoned him there as she entered his more precious memories: a scene of Narcissa, trembling in a mirror as she brushed her hair with a brush rather than using a wand. The memory was impregnated with Lucius' longing for his wife, which was at war with his disgust at the state of Narcissa's uncooperative magic, his horror that the Lady of Malfoy Manor had been practically reduced to a Squib.

The memory shifted: they were in an opulent entrance hall, all cold marble and gilded frames. Lucius Malfoy was towering over a child version of Draco, dried tear tracks on his face. *I won't raise a weak heir*, a younger, more handsome Lucius in his late twenties or early thirties, quietly insisted. He flicked his wand and a jet of green light was directed to where a twitching bird lay on the marble floor between them.

Outrage coursed through her, the emotion her own this time, at the sight of the younger blond boy, kneeling before his father, forcibly stopping himself from interfering as the bird stilled. *Look what he's done to his son*, Hermione thought, *his son*, and she didn't feel bad for pushing his consciousness into the pit, for drowning him in the dark emptiness. He deserved worse than suffering, for what he'd done to Draco. He deserved nothingness.

Could she trap Lucius there permanently? Leave his ego submerged, his eyes rolled into his head, as if he'd been kissed by a dementor. She tried forcing his conscious down, kicking him further into the abyss—

*"Hermione!"* A familiar voice, disorienting her, impeded her efforts. She felt as if she were underwater, hearing cloudy and muffled. "Hang on!"

She felt something touch her body: a hand around her wrist, dragging her up to the surface. At the contact, her legilimency faltered and she was ripped free.

The air was heavy with moisture, carrying the scent of damp earth and decaying leaves. She gasped for breath, bewildered by her sudden return to the castle grounds. Ron was shaking her shoulder desperately, a terrified look on his freckled face. Stars exploded behind him, bits of light blurring her vision.

Sight impaired, she could only identify the blurry movement of a threat as Lucius Malfoy came to, immediately attempting retaliation from his crumpled position.

"Behind—" She tried to warn, but nothing came out as her lips moved.

Wandlessly, Lucius sent a slicing jinx Ron's way, only narrowly missing his throat. It whistled past his face, catching Hermione on her upper arm, soaking her sleeve with blood. *That is going to scar*, Hermione thought absently, still hovering slightly outside of herself.

Ron turned to where his attacker was struggling upwards, and spat directly into his face.

"Here you go, you mangy old git," Ron said and delivered a swift kick to Lucius Malfoy's head, knocking the wizard out cold, before returning his attentions to her.

"Hermione," Ron said again, cupping her cheeks. His hands were damp and warm. Noting her wound, he released her face in order to staunch the flow with his sleeve. "What did that bastard do to you? You were just twitching on the floor and I thought..." He trailed off, complexion ashen from worry.

"Cru—" she tried explaining, but coughed painfully until she caught her breath, her ribs screaming for reprieve. "It's okay," she finally managed, wheezing. "I'm okay."

With Ron's help, she struggled to her knees. There was still fighting going on around them, but she noticed new figures on the battlefield, taking over fights for her bloodied, haggard looking friends. The Order had arrived, Hermione realized with some relief, her shoulders slumping.

She staggered to her feet, leaning heavily on Ron, who had tucked her into his side protectively, half-turned in order to intercept approaching threats. He looked incredibly shaken, like something terrible had occurred while she'd been pillaging Lucius Malfoy's mind.

"What is it?" She asked, dread acrid on her tongue.

"A few of them blew through our defenses before the Order got here and got into the castle," Ron relayed worriedly, nodding his head upwards. "Then, *that* appeared."

Hermione looked up, the sky surrounding Hogwarts awash with an eerie green light. The Dark Mark pulsed, as if embedded with a life force of its own, a snake twisting into a skull above the castle's

embankments. It was a larger, livelier version of the Mark she'd helped remove from Draco's arm; she understood now, how the Mark had struck terror in the hearts of those fighting in the first war. The gaping skull, a symbol of death. The snake, a reminder of its harbinger.

"Usually they cast that over homes where they kill..." Ron trailed off, stopping when Hermione gave him a grim look of understanding; Malfoy had cast the Mark over her house, that fateful evening in August, as a part of their cover. "We don't know who."

"Dumbledore," Hermione managed, her larynx still somewhat uncooperative. "Trying to kill...Dumbledore."

"But Dumbledore is with Harry," Ron croaked, his face turning ashen with fear. "I thought they left the grounds tonight, I thought—"

There was an animalistic roar from amongst the melee, immediately redirecting their attention. Hermione could only barely make out a flash of red hair as a tall leather clad figure went down, and the hulking shadow of Fenrir Greyback looming over his fallen prey. There was no full moon, and yet, Greyback had his wand stowed, seemingly preferring to finish off his victims the lupine way: with claws and teeth. With a snarl of triumph, he tore into the slumped figure of Bill Weasley, blood splattering the grass from the strike.

"Bill!" Ron cried desperately, breaking free to tear across the lawn. Hermione's limbs were unsteady from the Cruciatus, quivering like a fawns when she tried to follow. Ron was too far, Hermione realized, as he tried to fight his way over to his brother. He wouldn't make it in time, his desperate efforts falling short.

Those positioned closer to the attack shot defensive spells in an attempt to ward off Greyback, which all bounced off his shabby overcoat, as if it were impervious. In her mind, the golden voice was silent, offering her no solution. Greyback was going to tear the eldest Weasley to shreds and there was nothing anyone could do to save him.



Greyback raised a hand, dripping with Bill's blood, to his mouth, and licked a scarlet trail from his wrist. The enormous man let out a guttural laugh, nearly a howl, and drew back to deliver a killing blow, when unexpectedly, his bloodshot eyes widened and he stopped short, as if scenting something alarming.

There was a terrible ripping noise and a sudden geyser of scarlet, as Greyback's head separated from his neck and fell into the grass beside his would-be victim, a bewildered expression permanently frozen on his scarred face.

Hermione held her breath as she watched the werewolf's decapitated body topple, first to his knees and then completely, revealing the willowy figure in stained robes that stood behind him.

It was Fleur Delacour, her pretty face splattered in blood. Wand brandished aloft in the manner one would hold a sword

A set of enormous feathered wings unfurled behind her, framing the scene like some sort of biblical nightmare, a seraphim vanquishing a demon. Resplendent in gore, Fleur stood like a Valkyrie over Bill's crumpled form, so beautiful and terrifying that Hermione could barely stand to look, as if she were staring directly into the sun.

*"Il est à moi,"* Fleur growled, her voice echoing, embedded with a magic so ancient, it sent a shiver down Hermione's spine.

Hermione was not the only one who gasped, struck dumb by the sight. Ron stopped mid-stride as he fought to reach his brother; curses missed their intended targets; Death Eaters screeched in shock at the sight of Fenrir's severed head, rolling in the ruined grass.

"Kill the half-breed!" Bellatrix Lestrange screamed a general's order from where she was locked in a vicious standoff with Ginny and Tonks, jarring the others into action once more. But the wave of fresh fighters took advantage of the temporary distraction to form an organized defensive front. These were not school children— these

were seasoned soldiers and aurors, and apparently, a quarter-Veela that had been fatally underestimated.

The remaining Death Eaters, sensing possible defeat, began to retreat towards the Whomping Willow, the combined forces of the Order and Dumbledore's Army driving them back. Hermione was preparing to join the final push, when she felt a gut inclination to look up, the kind Felix had been sending her all night long.

Hermione caught a movement in the top corner of her eye and raised her lit wand aloft. It was enough illumination to show a figure, falling from the battlements of the Astronomy tower and plummeting all the way to the grounds. She looked around; no one else had seen, too caught up in the dregs of the fight or chasing fleeing Death Eaters. Go, the voice in her head insisted, and having not been led astray thus far, she dashed away from the battle, rounding the exterior walls of the castle until she reached the fallen form.

Time stopped when she reached the figure: she knew from the moment she spotted velvet robes, although her mind insisted it wasn't, it couldn't be the body of Albus Dumbledore. Nott couldn't have succeeded, couldn't have killed the greatest wizard of her time.

Holding back sobs, Hermione turned the body face up to reveal half-moon spectacles, lenses crushed by the fall. Knowing it was futile, she still pressed two shaking fingers to the headmaster's throat, long forgotten first aid training resurfacing. There was no pulse.

What came next? *No one could survive such a fall*, the voice told her gently, and for the first time that night, she shoved it away. Chest compressions? She began counting as she administered them, eyes blurred with tears and shock-induced dissociation: if Dumbledore was dead, did that mean Harry...? She couldn't allow herself to even consider the possibility. Her hands were shaking violently as she pressed down, both from fear and the aftermath of the Cruciatus. She felt the moment the Felix Felicis wore off; the second it dissipated from her consciousness, when she could finally feel the destruction of her body, far more injured than she'd realized during

the heat of the fight. When she got to thirty compressions, she was interrupted.

“The Headmaster is dead,” Severus Snape said from where he towered over her, his tone practically subarctic. “Move aside.”

Hermione’s head swiveled over her shoulder, half-dazed. Snape was still snarling for her to get out of his way, his face screwed up with urgency. From behind Snape, she saw three figures, all boys, dashing towards them. The first was a lithe dark haired blur, followed hotly by another boy, screaming accusations in a familiar voice, one she associated with a crackling common room fire and the smell of broom polish, howling, “*Murderer!*” That was Harry, she realized with a clench of her heart, mercifully alive and giving chase. A silver-blond streak in the distance brought up the rear, chasing the others.

“I said, *move aside*.” Having reached the end of his patience, Snape sliced his wand down, sending Hermione blasting back from the body. She landed painfully on her side, and although her shoulder absorbing the majority of the blow, her bruised ribs screamed in protest, the wind completely knocked from her chest. As she fought for air, she saw Snape frantically searching the headmaster’s body, his back to Hermione, until he pocketed something she could not see.

“You killed him!” Harry shouted from much closer, closing in, and flung a curse in the direction of the thin, dark haired boy he’d been chasing, who she could now make out as Theodore Nott. “He offered to help you, and you killed him in cold blood!”

“Fuck off, Potter!” Nott snarled, sending a retaliatory hex over his shoulder as he reached them. He was as white as a sheet and had a crazed look on his face that Hermione knew to be deadly. This was Theodore Nott at his most dangerous; a bear with its leg caught in a trap. “Let’s see how you like being on the other side of this! Sectumsempr—”

Before Hermione could scream in warning, Snape interfered, a glittering nonverbal shield erupting from his wand.

“Potter belongs to the Dark Lord,” Snape snarled at Nott, deflecting Harry’s litany of curses towards Nott effortlessly. “Lower your wand, you idiot boy.”

Harry turned on their professor with all encompassing hatred, blinding him to anyone else in the vicinity. There was no one Harry hated more than Snape, not even Draco, and now he'd been given another reason for his virulent dislike, one that confirmed years of suspicions.

“You’re a traitor!” Harry howled, redirecting his fury at Snape and increasing his barrage of spells, this time against the unruffled former Potions master. “He trusted you! You helped Nott, you stood by, you did *nothing* —”

With a flick of his wand, Snape knocked Harry unconscious with a stunning spell, his accusations cutting off abruptly.

“Theodore, your work is done here,” Snape barked. “Go. ”

The blond figure—Malfoy, her Malfoy, not his bloodthirsty father—had finally reached her, blocking her view as he knelt in the grass, his hands frantically ghosting over her throat and ribs. He let out a little sound of distress when he prodded gently at her shoulder, which was more than likely dislocated.

“Fuck,” Draco muttered, as she gasped in pain at the contact. He had dirt and blood streaking his hair. She hoped it wasn’t his. “Your magic was *screaming* for me, Granger. Don’t move, okay?” Malfoy drew his wand over her, pointing it directly at her chest. In her peripheral, she could see Snape watching them with that indecipherable, haunted expression on his face.

“Draco, come on,” Theodore called, and Malfoy twitched in irritation, but did not look away from her. “Leave her. We both know you can’t

finish it, and he won't care about whether or not you kill some mudblood, not when we tell him about that." He nodded towards Dumbledore's body without looking at it, as if unable to face the Headmaster, even in death.

Nott thought Draco was trying—and apparently, failing—to finish her off, she realized, grasping at her cloudy thoughts as they solidified. He thought they would both attempt accomplish their missions from the Dark Lord that night; Theodore had chosen, had killed someone at Voldemort's order, and he expected Malfoy to do the same. To cross the line that could never be uncrossed, to accept his fate and kneel before Voldemort. Draco certainly looked the part: wild-eyed and desperate, with his wand pointed at her chest. It was so convincing that even she momentarily doubted his intentions, a whisper of uncertainty in her heart.

*You could ask me to slit my own throat, and I'd do it,* Draco had said before he kissed her, just hours earlier. *It's too late to even entertain the possibility of choice.*

"Draco?" Nott questioned, a thread of doubt weaving its way into his voice. Doubt was a dangerous game; if Theodore were to second guess his friend's loyalty in Voldemort's presence, even the thought could get Malfoy killed. Hermione couldn't allow that.

"Go," Hermione managed, as quietly as she could in hopes that Nott wouldn't hear. Malfoy only let out a noise of displeasure in response. It was as if he hadn't heard her, as if the rational, strategic Malfoy wasn't really there anymore, his body taken over by some strange instinct that had narrowed his universe into a single pinpoint: her.

"No," Malfoy snarled, sending a nasty looking acid jinx over his shoulder at Nott, not even looking to see if it reached its target. Theo yelped, dodging the curse and barely managing to shoot Malfoy a look of betrayal before Snape descended, hauling Nott up by the scruff of the neck like a poorly behaved mutt. Nott winced, as if preparing himself for a blow to the face. As if such punishments were something he was used to.

Snape cast a charged look at his godson, who returned it, a conversation passing silently between the two.

*Will you leave her?* Snape seemed to ask, a single dark eyebrow twitching up.

*No*, Draco's face said. *I can't.*

"What the fuck is he playing at?" Nott asked Snape, wildly taking in the scene before him as if he were watching the very fabric of the universe unravel. "The Dark Lord—"

"It would do you well to worry yourself with your own concerns, Theodore," Snape spat at Nott, whose protests halted at the cold admonishment. "If you remain on these grounds you will be caught and thrown into Azkaban without a second thought. Do you think they'd show you mercy? They won't. Now, *leave him*," Snape insisted, referring to Draco, and shoved Nott in the direction of the Whomping Willow. With one last pained glance at them, Nott took off running, Snape closely on his tail.

Draco didn't so much as twitch in their direction, still entirely focused on touching her wrist, counting heartbeats. He was being foolish, by staying behind. (She didn't think she could bear it, if he left her). What would they say, if they were found like this? How would they explain it, to both her side and his?

"I'm not leaving," he assured, as if he'd heard her. "Fuck, I don't know how you're still conscious."

There was blood on his hands. Why was there blood on his hands?

"Draco, you can't be found with me," Hermione attempted. With the adrenaline fading, she could feel the dull murmur of her injuries ricochet up into a scream. "The Order will— If you don't, Voldemort will know—"

"Shut up and hold still," Draco cut her off, casting something over her that had him swearing under his breath. His voice was doing strange things to her. She wanted to wrap herself in it like a shawl.

"Are you hurt?" She breathed, her eyes going unfocused. He snapped in front of her face, trying to keep her attention.

"No. I got *lucky* tonight," Malfoy replied flatly, his lips pressed into a grim line. "You should have drank the whole potion instead of resorting to heroics, you daft thing." He was still lovely, even like this. Angry and worried and covered in grime. He shook his head, setting blond strands loose from where they were plastered to his sweat covered forehead. "I could feel it, Hermione. It was so bad I thought you bloody *died*."

"You wanted to be a healer," Hermione whispered, taking in the lights and colors of the diagnostic charm hovering over her chest. She felt it all hit her: the Cruciatus, the fall, the injuries, the blood. She struggled to remain conscious, wanting to linger under his hands, his magic. "I remember you told me that."

*It wouldn't be terrible to die here, like this, she considered. There were worse ways one could go.*

"Yes," he closed his eyes as if overcome, his warm hand possessively circling her wrist. Counting her heartbeats. "A fool's wish."

*"Stupefy!"*

There was a jet of red light, and his fingers slackened their hold. Malfoy keeled over, half the weight of his body slumping onto her bruised bones. Hermione gasped in pain, tipping over the edge of consciousness. Then he was being shoved off her, and someone repeatedly yelled her name in concern, but a starry white was flooding the corners of her eyes and she was already too far away to reply.

---

---

Notes:

- [I learned there's an amazing discord server dedicated to this fic! Kicking my feet and giggling](#)

- I always struggle with prolonged fight scenes, but I feel sort of proud of this one! POV is a purposeful decision here and Hermione is only privy to the battle on the grounds. Only Harry, Theo, Snape, Dumbledore (now dead) and Draco know what happened in the Astronomy Tower...for now.

- I love the idea that Felix Felicis, along with pointing you where you need to be at any specific time, makes you into a more efficient, capable version of yourself. Funnily enough, I based this idea vaguely on the first time I was medicated for my ADHD.

- Hello to Lucius Malfoy: deranged aristocrat fresh out the slammer. He had no fucking clue a muggleborn could be a legilimens, and that was his downfall here.

- I was inspired by Jordan Peele's concept of "the sunken place," when writing the scene where Hermione forces Lucius into the unconscious.

- I'm so excited to reveal Fleur's big, bloody triumph. It always sat poorly with me that one of the Triwizard Champions, supposedly the most accomplished witch in all of Beauxbatons, was so sidelined in the canon. Why would she be stuck in Shell Cottage instead of fighting the whole war?

- I don't speak French, but Google translate informed me that Fleur's statement means, "He is mine." My head canon is that Veela mate for life, and given that Fleur has an affinity for Veela magic (Hermione notes this in Chapter 5 if you want a refresh), she is able to channel it most when her mate's life is being threatened. So,



temporary wings and magic on steroids (enough to behead a fucking werewolf).

- I know many of you wanted Theo to be saved/helped by Dumbledore, but it was always going to be him on the other end of the wand. Can't say much more besides a promise that his arc is really just beginning.

- Readers, I love you all! I love hearing what your favorite parts were and what you think of plot developments! Seriously, I want to inject all your amazing comments and theories and analyses directly into my veins!

---

# Confrontations

## Chapter 28: Confrontations

---

Hermione wakes in the Hospital Wing with questions. Harry reacts poorly. Draco loses control.

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Hermione opened her eyes to a blurry, softened world. She couldn't feel her body beyond a distant thrum, hovering just out of her reach. The last thing she could recall was Dumbledore's crumpled figure and Malfoy's face above her, bloodstained and furious and lovely.

Where was he?

She had other questions: she was unsure who had tucked her into a starched white cot, or why the table at her bedside held a water pitcher, an ominous bottle of Skele-Gro, and a little amber tincture she recognized as Merlin's Miraculous Medeorée. At that explained why she felt the dulling haze of a pain potion, coating her thoughts.

The Hospital Wing smelled like sweat and salt and rust, the redolence of battle lingering like a bad dream. Early morning light filtered through stained glass windows, sending bits of dawn flickering against the walls. The room was abreast with sound and movement: the wounded were being patched up on cots, as members of the Order stood guard, or hurried to give reports to Moody, who had seemingly turned a corner of the Hospital Wing into a makeshift war room.

Across from Hermione, the entirety of the Weasley clan was crowded around Bill's bed. Fleur was unconscious, wrapped protectively around her fiancé's sleeping form in a way that was

nearly indecent, her wings nowhere to be found. Mrs. Weasley had her face pressed into her husband's shoulder; Ron was pacing the length of the room restlessly, his arm wrapped in a sling; Ginny, looking a bit scraped up but otherwise all right, was sitting on the floor next to the bed with her head between her knees, Harry's arm wrapped around her huddled form. Percy and the twins were hovering, still in pajamas, clearly having floo'd into the castle in the middle of the night.

They were all there, surrounding the eldest Weasley, looking harried on his behalf. Their love and concern so palpable she could practically see it, floating like dust particles in the air.

The sight triggered a miserable feeling, hot black tar pouring from her skewered heart. There was no one keeping vigil at Hermione's bedside, no family weeping over her cot. No one to feed her sips of broth and fuss over her temperature. Even Harry and Ron weren't hers, not really; Ron put his family above all and Harry belonged to the Weasley's in a way that she didn't. Hermione had sent her parents away, ripped herself from their minds without a second thought. She was the source of her own hurt. Perhaps she deserved it, after what she'd done. Perhaps solitude was a fitting punishment. At least that way, she couldn't hurt anyone else she loved. At least that way, no one else could be taken from her.

A loud bang rang through the Hospital Wing, the sound of oak doors slamming into unrelenting castle walls, followed by several shrieks of surprise and the communal rustle of several people drawing their wands at once.

"Where is she?" Draco Malfoy snarled, a wand in his hand, bursting into the room with all the subtlety of a wrecking ball.

*Oh Christ*, Hermione thought. At least that answered one of her questions.

He stood in the doorway, the uncontrolled force of a summer storm thrumming from under his skin. Instead of the cultivated wealth he

usually exuded, Draco looked wildly undone. He was missing the buttons on his collar and had torn his cashmere sweater in several places. There was blood on his hands and in his hair, probably from running the former through the latter.

For reasons she didn't care to interrogate, she preferred this to his customary manicured propriety. A part of her whispered that if she liked him rumpled and desperate, she'd enjoy it even more if it were as a result of her. She decided to blame the unwanted thought firmly on the pain potion.

"What's he doing here?" Ron called, a familiar hatred plastered on his face almost instinctively as he loudly expressed the thoughts of the entirety of the Hospital Wing's occupants. The fact that Mrs. Weasley didn't immediately chide him for his language alerted Hermione to the severity of her shock.

Malfoy's eyes narrowed at Ron's voice, or perhaps the scrutiny of the room, his free hand clenching in a way that informed her he was about thirty seconds away from breaking something.

Shouldn't he have run with Nott and Snape? Laying low amongst the Death Eaters until he could find a way to get his mother out? Not present himself on a silver platter to the Order of the Phoenix. What exactly did he hope to accomplish by facing down their leadership at wand point, besides fulfilling a death wish?

"I thought I told you to lock him in," Moody growled to Tonks, adjusting his weight on his prosthesis without lowering his wand from where it was fixed on a point between Draco's eyes.

"I did," Tonks insisted. Her pixie cut had turned an unnatural iridescent black in frustration, the color of spilled petrol.

"Why in Merlin's name did you leave him his wand?"

"I'm not an idiot, Mad-Eye," Tonks protested. "Of course, I took his wand. Sealed him in Poppy's office myself, did the whole protocol.

Dunno how the little shite wormed his way out.”

“The little shite,” Malfoy drawled, exaggerating his enunciation. “Is done asking politely. You know, there’s this clever little thing called due process, that keeps wizards who’ve witnessed crimes from getting locked in offices by lunatics. I take it you’re unfamiliar? Perhaps I should have our family solicitor educate you on the finer points.” He smirked right in Moody’s face, seemed unconcerned by the wands trained on him.

“*Arrogant* little shite,” Moody amended.

Hermione braced herself; Draco’s default reaction to being challenged was apparently a mixture of threats and insults. She couldn’t tell which his threats were an attempt at posturing and which were a real promise, and something told her that he knew and relied on that, the thrill of being underestimated. The cruel satisfaction of making good on his warnings.

“Draco, let’s discuss this reasonably,” Lupin offered, in the softened tone he’d often used as a professor. He was clearly aiming to be the sensible adult in the room. “Who are you looking for? Maybe we can —”

Malfoy wasn’t listening; he looked past Lupin as if he were a window pane, single-minded in his objective. With sharp eyes, he scanned the rows of beds that held a concussed Neville and a severely mangled Bill until he found what he was looking for: her.

Hermione’s breath caught as he met her glassy stare, the sudden lack of oxygen momentarily triggering the diagnostic charm that hovered over her head, monitoring her vital signs. Several spectators let out little noises of alarm as his body jerked towards her, as if to remind him of what it wanted.

She tried to say his name, her lips moving around the two sharp syllabus, but no noise came out. At this, several unnameable emotions passed over his face, his irises slipping from slate to

charcoal. His eyes flicked up to the diagnostic and back down to her face again, his expression settled into a controlled, muted anger, somehow more sinister than if he'd sworn and cursed and raged.

"If I'm not in arm's length of Granger in the next fucking minute," Malfoy threatened, his tone leaving very little room for argument. "You'll have to siphon what's left of whoever stands in my way from the baseboards."

The room collectively recoiled in shock; this was apparently not what anyone expected him to say. Several of the Weasleys' were looking at Draco as if he'd sprouted horns on the spot and declared himself Satan. Tonks' raised eyebrows turned white with shock. Even Lupin pursed his lips in dismay. They all looked to her for answers, but she had none; what was left of Hermione's good sense screamed that Malfoy wasn't in his right mind, because even his presence in the same room as her and the Order had put him in unthinkable danger. And yet, here he was, threatening people in her name, in front of the Weasleys and Harry and god.

Heads swiveled from Malfoy to her and back, and she felt herself flushing under the scrutiny—because honestly, how would she explain this— and Malfoy flashed her a razor sharp grin in response, as if some demented part of him was pleased to lay a public claim.

He was such an *idiot*.

"I'd like to see you try, sonny," Mad-Eye scoffed, his false eye whizzing in agitation. "I'd jump for an excuse to put you in your Pa's old cell, I would. You won't lay a finger on anyone in this room, not while I'm still standing."

"I'm not going to hurt her," Malfoy scoffed, rolling his eyes in a manner that made it clear he thought everyone standing before him a complete moron. "What sort of plan would that be? Storm in without a modicum of backup, shouting my intentions to the high heavens? I'm not *Potter*."

This elicited a minor uproar: Harry sprang up and surged towards Malfoy, Ron hot on his heels. Moody barked for them to stay put, and Fred grabbed Ron, who twisted furiously in an attempt to get loose, while George took hold of Harry by the armpits.

"Let me go," Harry panted, struggling in George's grip. "He deserves it."

"No can do, mate," George clucked with a fair bit of sympathy. "Orders are orders."

"Since when do you two follow orders?" Ron protested hotly.

"Since Mad-Eye's the one giving them," Fred replied wryly. "You see, I've got this strange little hang-up, about keeping both my bollocks attached to my body."

Their restraints hadn't silenced Harry, who, having recently watched his childhood hero die violently at the hands of a different Slytherin classmate, was positively itching for a fight.

"Murdering Dumbledore wasn't enough for you, then?" Harry spat, the flush on his face a telltale sign that he was rapidly losing his temper.

"I didn't *murder* anyone," Draco drawled, his cold composure only adding to Harry's quickly purpling face. "Although you're certainly making me reconsider."

"You've had it out for Hermione all year," Harry continued furiously. "Following her about, messing with her head. You might have convinced her of some bullshit redemption angle, but I know what you are. I watched as you did *nothing* while your friend Nott killed Dumbledore. You're a coward and a Death Eater, just like your father."

"You're out of your mind if you think you're getting within a mile of her, you ferrety fuck," Ron added, shaking free of the twins. "We

won't let you."

"Here's a novel idea— why don't you ask her? Granger can defend herself with no wand and her hands behind her back, I highly doubt she requires you two dickheads to play at being the world's most incompetent bodyguards." Malfoy smirked, apparently unable to stop antagonizing them, too accustomed to playing with his food. "Go on, then. Ask her if she wants to speak to me."

Harry—who'd been suspicious of her interactions with Malfoy ever since she'd healed him— turned towards her, eyes begging her to rebuke the Slytherin, to swear at him and hex him and send him packing, as was expected. For all anyone knew, she hated Draco Malfoy with brute enthusiasm, and the fact that she wasn't reacting as such was heightening the already noxious levels of tension in the room. The strategic choice would have probably been to play into that assumption, to snipe at each other until one of them grew too cruel, and then go off and sulk separately. They'd done it a hundred times before. But in that moment, lulled into submission by the pain potion, she was too tired of fighting to put on their usual show.

"It's fine," Hermione said roughly, her throat still sore from where Lucius had crushed it. She struggled up to her elbows, Malfoy's gaze sharpening at her discomfort. "Dra— Malfoy's not—" She stumbled over her words. "He's harmless. Really."

"I resent that," Draco said, looking very much like a cat with a canary in its jaws as he strode through the Hospital Wing to reach her. At least ten wands remained trained on him, prepared for the slightest hint of bad intention, and several spectators made noises of concern as Malfoy pulled a stool to her bedside. "Tell them I'm dangerous, Granger."

"I'm not sure that's prudent," Hermione responded, giving him a look of extreme disapproval. "Given that you're one minor provocation away from being stunned. Again."



He leaned forward resting his forearms on his thighs, some of the tension in his shoulders fading as he got closer to her. Hermione could feel it too: a loosening in her chest, as the erratic spikes of her magic, undoubtedly caused by excess adrenaline, soothed into a low, steady burn. He smelled of pine and soil and copper, simultaneously earthy and sharp.

“I’d like to see them try.” There was a cautionary look in his eyes—the look he’d had with Pansy, in the woods, when pulling rank—that warned her: if pushed too hard, he would rise to the opportunity to take the night’s events out on someone, anyone. Malfoy and Harry were obnoxiously alike in that way. Her chest panged as she worried about it, Dolohov’s purple scar pulsing angrily, irritated by her recent exposure to dark magic. It set off a chain reaction in her body: echoes of the Cruciatus burst up and down her spine.

She grit her teeth to stop from crying out. The irrational part of her who desperately didn’t want him to see her as weak insisted that it wouldn’t do for her to start weeping and convulsing in front of him. She bit the side of her cheek until she tasted blood. Malfoy’s hand clenched into fists where they rested on his knees, knuckles whitening.

“When was the last time they dosed you?” he asked, gesturing at the tincture of the pain reliever. He reached up and rubbed a spot on his own chest, in the exact location of where Dolohov’s scar was burned into her, as if chasing away a phantom ache. *Her* ache, she realized, darkly fascinated to see the bond between them manifest so tangibly. When Hermione reached inward and felt for the telltale flicker of brightness, the bond answered back almost immediately. *Good*, it hummed, relieved at the familiarity of his magic. *Safe*. The pain faded slightly, softening into a thrum of soreness.

“Would someone like to tell me what in the ever loving *fuck* is going on?” Ron’s voice punctured whatever bubble Malfoy had formed around them. He was staring at Hermione as if she were a stranger, his copper eyebrows furrowed in dismay.

This was, unfortunately, how most of the room's occupants were regarding her, with a combination of abject shock and growing suspicion. She shrunk at their scrutiny, overwhelmed by so many eyes on them; it panicked her that Draco was interacting with her so openly, in front of so many people, after months of keeping their association as secret as possible. She could feel them drawing unflattering conclusions about why Malfoy would possibly be showing interest, much less concern, in relation to her: book-smart, reliable, muggleborn Hermione, who should be too sensible to entertain such an obvious trap.

"I'll tell you what's happening," Harry growled, his glasses slightly askew. "Malfoy's a Death Eater, and he's been hounding Hermione for months. Trying to get information." He looked pointedly to where Malfoy leaned close. "Or worse." Harry turned to Hermione, his outrage mingling with bitter disappointment.

Harry didn't know any of it, she reminded herself, trying to reign in her temper. He didn't know the heartbreak she and Malfoy had watched each other endure. He didn't know they'd saved each other's lives numerous times. He certainly didn't know about Draco's true loyalties.

He did, however, know that they'd kissed, which didn't help at *all*.

"I never thought you of all people would fall for this shite," Harry said, his words laced with betrayal. "A few niceties, a little attention, and you suddenly believe he's not the same prat who thinks you're below him because of your blood? It's...it's *pathetic*."

"Watch your mouth," Malfoy spat, standing. He drew back his shoulders so that he stood at his full height, a good four inches over Harry. Harry's hand twitched towards his wand; Draco's eyes glinted with savage encouragement, goading him.

"Oh, please," Hermione snapped at Draco, annoyed by the male posturing. "As if you haven't said far worse to me."

Draco's jaw twitched at her rebuke, and Hermione felt a flicker of regret. It was too much. Having to explain herself to her friends, knowing that she couldn't tell the truth. Draco had made sure of that, hadn't he? Forcing her to make an Unbreakable Vow, and then picking and choosing what he would divulge, the messes he'd leave for *her* to clean up.

"Harry," Ginny piped up, looking drained. She gently reached out and touched his shoulder in pacification. The redhead's gaze drifted towards Hermione and Malfoy with a tired sort of understanding. "Not everything is a plot. Maybe Malfoy just—"

"You don't know the half of it," Harry interrupted hotly. "He's a manipulative little prick! He obviously wanted to throw her off his trail, so the bastard messed with her head, kissed her—"

"*Harry*," Hermione groaned, begging him with her eyes to shut his mouth for once, but the damage was already done. His words echoed, snapping the tension in the wing.

"*What?*" Ron roared, and Fred and George slackened their grip in shock; he went careening forward, unbandaged fist cocked, but the wand in Draco's hand was already raised. Up close, she could see it wasn't his sleek hawthorn wand; it was slightly lighter, with antique looking carvings she couldn't parse out around the handle. He brandished it between himself and Ron, an explicit threat.

"Give me a reason, Weasley," he snarled. "I'm not picky."

The Order would hurt him, if he started up another duel. They'd throw him in Azkaban without a second thought, because his last name was Malfoy, because he'd witnessed Dumbledore's murder, because this was simply how wars were fought. Even worse: Voldemort would find out about their association, realize why he'd failed to kill her last summer and then again this year, and all of it — her parents, the ritual, even Dumbledore's death— would be for naught. Her heart picked up speed. She'd lose him too, all because

Harry was right, she was stupid and she was selfish and she had messed with blood magic and —

“You’re stressing her,” Malfoy said without having to look at the flashing diagnostic, his tone low and dangerous. “Where’s the matron?” When he wasn’t given a response, he checked the hovering charm critically, frowning at the results. “Why’s it showing nerve damage?”

“Ask your precious father,” Ron snarled. “How many Crucios did he get in, before I pulled him off her?”

Malfoy’s head whipped down, searching her face for confirmation. As if he needed to; she had no doubt he could feel , in the hitch of her breath, the clench of her stomach. This was not how she wanted to explain what had happened with Lucius, not how she wanted to tell him that it had been his own father who’d done this to her. Draco had told her he’d chosen the side of the Order, but how could he choose them— *her*— over his own House, his flesh and blood? She remembered what she’d seen in Lucius’ memory: the boy crouched on the marble with his head obediently bowed, the dead bird before him. Draco had said he’d made his choice, but choices were easier to make when one’s father was not standing over them, insisting there was no place in this world for mercy.

*Doomed*, the familiar voice of doubt informed her. *They’d always been doomed* .

“Granger?” Malfoy prompted, sounding strangled. He had a hand through his hair, already tugging at the roots. The two syllables of her surname, a plea for disavowal. A request, *tell me it isn’t true*, hanging unspoken between them. Hermione gave a small tilt of her chin in confirmation, barely a nod.

Every bedside water pitcher exploded simultaneously.

She shrieked, not the only one in the room to have such a reaction: someone dropped a potion, spilling acid green liquid all over the

floor. Tonks swore, loud and colorful. Percy had jumped about a foot in the air. Accidental magic at their age was rare; a sign of sickness or extreme losses of control. Surrounded by shattered glass, Malfoy looked...angry wasn't the right word. There weren't any words.

"It's alright," she said softly, swallowing down her shock. *Safe*, she tried to emulate through the bond. *Calm*.

"None of this is alright, Granger," Malfoy snapped. "Don't placate me like you would *them* ." He nodded towards Ron and Harry with disgust. "For Merlin's sake, you shouldn't be comforting *me* ." There was so much loathing in his tone that Hermione flinched, unsure of where it was directed.

"Malfoy!" Moody barked, approaching down the aisle of bed with a furtive glint in his good eye, mending the pitchers with a flick of his wand. "That's enough. You've spoken to her. Now you're coming with me."

Moody put a firm hand on his shoulder, and shockingly, Malfoy didn't resist, just let himself be steered from her bedside. He didn't look back, not even a glance over his shoulder, as he was led away. Hermione pretended it didn't hurt.

---

It was night before Hermione saw Malfoy again. She'd been heavily dosed with both pain potion and Dreamless Sleep, only waking once briefly to the sounds of a hushed row. She'd blinked, confused as she scanned the room, far emptier than when she'd nodded off. Harry and Ron had been nowhere to be found; Hermione thanked the universe for small mercies, knowing their next conversation would be a borderline interrogation.

She'd watched through heavily lidded eyes as Fleur, now awake and looking rather offended, whisper-fought with Molly.

"— all I'm saying dear, is that Remus told us he'll be different when he wakes, and I don't want to see him heartbroken because it's too

much for you—”

“You think I’d leave him, when he needs me most? You have no idea, what I’d do for him—”

“No,” Molly interrupted softly. “I do. You saved his life, and for that, I’ll never be able to repay you.” She reached out to clasp Fleur’s hands, and the younger witch’s fierce expression wavered marginally. “But a mother always protects her children, and I worry—”

“I chose Bill,” Fleur said, her accent emerging as she grew more emotional. “No scars could change that. He could transform once a month and I’d love him still, as my grand-père loved my grand-mère, even when your human laws forbid it. Besides,” She smirked, her pink lips twisting attractively. “Who better to love your werewolf son than a veela daughter-in-law?”

Hermione had smiled, listening to Molly extend a peace offering by switching the topic to betrothal jewelry. Madam Pomfrey returned, administering another dose of the pain potion, its sickly-sweet taste on her tongue as she went under once more.

The next time she woke, the sun had set. The Hospital Wing’s other beds were empty and remade with freshly laundered linens. Two figures were stationed at the door, presumably on guard. One slender and pixie-like, sporting a head of mousy brown hair. The other, slightly stooped, as if nursing an old injury. Tonks and Lupin, poised in mid-argument.

“Don’t bullshit me, Remus,” Tonks whispered loudly, annoyance flooding her tone. “You’ve given me every excuse besides telling me you don’t want me. You’re punishing yourself for something out of your control.”

“Dora, please,” Lupin replied, rubbing his temples. “I’ve told you a hundred times. I can’t give you what you want. You deserve more than me.”

“You don’t get to decide what I deserve. I’m not your student, you don’t get to unilaterally choose what’s best for me.”

“I’m too old, too poor, too damaged—”

“You weren’t too damaged to *fuck* me,” Tonks’ voice sharpened, a blade’s edge. Her hair color flared, the tips turning scarlet. “You weren’t too old then, were you?”

*Oh*, Hermione thought, wishing she were still unconscious. *Remus and Tonks were...* Her whole body suddenly felt hot and prickly, discomfort buzzing under her skin. Tonks was vivacious and pretty and funny; Remus was serious and hardened and guarded. She could see how her old Defense professor could be considered handsome, if one liked their men gray and grieving. Tonks seemed so bright in contrast, a live wire. Hermione supposed she was in no position to pass judgment on unlikely pairings.

“That,” Lupin responded harshly, after a long pause. “Was a mistake.”

“Whatever you have to tell yourself,” Tonks replied, frozen over. “But don’t expect me to sit around pining, waiting for the next time you drink a pint of firewhiskey and show up at my door. I’m more than satisfied with making my *mistakes* elsewhere.”

“Good,” Lupin said savagely. “Fuck whomever you like.”

Hermione, unable to listen any longer, made a show of waking up with a performative yawn. Lupin and Tonks sprang apart guiltily, as if remembering the room had another occupant.

“Hermione!” Lupin called, with unconvincingly false cheer. “I’ll just go check on—” he offered weakly, already halfway out the door.

“Do that,” Tonks spat, glaring at his back. The older witch made her way to Hermione’s bed, her hair fading back to the mousy color from before. She seemed terribly sad.

"How much of that did you hear?" Tonks asked, as she busied herself pouring Hermione a glass of water. She gratefully accepted, her mouth dry and fuzzy, downing the whole thing in a few gulps.

"Hear what?" She asked after drinking her fill, and Tonks gave her a knowing half-smile.

"Let's make a little deal," the young Auror proposed. "We won't talk about that—" she nodded at the doors Lupin had disappeared through, "—and I won't ask about why the blond menace has been hovering outside the doors like a bloody dementor for the better part of the evening."

"He has?" Hermione shot up, dizzy by her sudden attempt at becoming vertical. "I mean— you're talking about Malfoy, right?"

"No," Tonks grinned cheekily, screwing up her button nose in mirth. "The other poncy pureblood heir who's distressingly interested in your whereabouts."

"He's been out there waiting?" The *for me*, stayed silent.

"Moody questioned him for a bit. He came out alive, which is saying something." Tonks moved to the doors, peeking out, before turning back towards Hermione. "You've got about an hour before Pomfrey returns from switching over Bill's care plan at St. Mungo's. She says she won't discharge you until tomorrow morning, so don't bother begging." Tonks winked, surreptitiously. "But don't worry, these hospital cots fit two."

Hermione blushed furiously, and Tonks offered her a little salute in parting, moving to leave.

"Tonks," Hermione called, wanting to add, *I understand what it's like, to want someone you shouldn't*, but the pain potion was still muddling her words and some things were better left unsaid. "Thank you," she finished rather lamely.



"I'll be right outside," Tonks answered, casting a muffliato charm with a cheeky grin. "Enjoy yourself."

"I don't—" Hermione protested, covering her face with her hands with a groan. Was this what everyone thought she was doing with Malfoy? Activities that required a silencing charm?

Malfoy emerged a few seconds later, crossing the distance to her bed in a dozen long strides. He was in clean clothes, washed clean of blood. His hair was still slightly damp from his bath. She took in his face: his expression placid and closed off, his gaze clouded in an indication that he was occluding. He was in control now, she realized, and the thought was more distressing than she expected it to be.

Hermione swallowed, unsure of where to begin. Did she thank him, for trying to heal her on the grounds? Scold him for putting them both in danger? Berate him for his little performance earlier? Yank him down by the collar and distribute more creative punishments?

"How's your—" Malfoy stood several arms lengths from her, maintaining his distance as he pointed to her throat and ribs in succession.

"Fine," she said, lowering her eyes. If she looked at him too much, she'd blush or yell or god forbid, cry. "Better."

"Good."

Apparently, they'd regressed to only speaking in single word utterances. Malfoy cast around, seemingly at a loss for what to say. They'd never gone so long without snarking or arguing or fighting or —

*Kissing*, her mind supplied unhelpfully. She willed it to shut up; less than twenty-four hours ago, they'd watched as a war started in earnest, and she was thinking about his mouth? Ridiculous.

"You owe me an explanation." Hermione insisted, considering the many, many answers she required from him. What had Theodore Nott done, in the highest point of the Astronomy Tower? How was Snape involved? Why had Draco stayed, instead of joining them as they fled? Why had he openly insisted on seeing her?

Malfoy grimaced as if he was expecting as much, crossing his arms over his chest in a preemptively defensive gesture. "Spit it out then."

"Whose wand is that?" Hermione blurted, settling on the simplest question in her arsenal. "Moody said they took yours."

"That's what you want to ask me?" Malfoy responded, rubbing his jaw with disbelief. "Really?"

"I've got other questions if you prefer," she quipped back. "Such as, where do you get off, antagonizing half the Order by bursting in here like a mad man?"

"I disarmed Nott," Malfoy answered, ignoring her jab. He still had that flat look in his eyes: Hermione wanted to push and prod until he came back to life under her attentions. "This is his."

"Did he really...?" The question's end was implicit.

Malfoy sighed heavily, suddenly looking much older than his years, and sat at the very edge of her bed, far more aware about keeping a distance between them than he'd sought earlier.

"I told you Dumbledore was dying. With a blood curse like that, he never stood a chance," Malfoy started, touching his tongue to the tips of his teeth as he carefully considered his explanation. "He knew what Nott was up to, knew the Dark Lord wanted him dead. He and Snape had a plan: Snape was going to do it— a mercy killing, really — and use Dumbledore's death to prove his loyalty, so he could re-ingratiate himself with the Dark Lord's inner circle, do more damage from the inside. No one expected Theo to actually follow through. But obviously..."

“Nott killed him,” Hermione surmised, considering how she’d underestimated the lanky dark-haired Slytherin. Dumbledore had known that he was going to die. Snape had arranged a merciful end, but before he could fulfill his plan, Nott had surprised them all. “I didn’t think he could, when it came down to it.” She frowned, considering. “Did you?”

“I don’t know,” Draco considered, his eyes going distant as they clouded with memory. “I don’t even remember the first time I met Theo,” Draco considered “Or Crabbe and Goyle, or Pansy, for that matter. They were just always there, after my lessons, while their mothers would take tea with mine. We had the elves build us forts and we’d practice flying on toy broomsticks that only rose three feet in the air, until we tired each other out. I expect that’s why our mothers brought us together in the first place. I liked Crabbe and Goyle because they’d do whatever I said, and I fought with Theo constantly, because he wouldn’t.” He grimaced at the recollection. “It carried into adulthood.”

“How long have you known?” She pressed. “About Snape? How could you be sure that he was truly Dumbledore’s man, and isn’t just actually doubling down on Voldemort?”

“Not many can say they truly know my godfather,” Malfoy admitted. “Being pathologically unapproachable is what’s kept him safe as a spy for so many years. No one could read him, if they didn’t know him. But I knew him. And when he helped you with your occlumency, he spoke of that witch, the muggleborn one who died. I think that’s when I realized. No true servant of the Dark Lord would speak that way.”

Lily Potter, Hermione considered, once again conjuring the ghost of the muggleborn martyr she was so often compared to. Snape’s achilles heel. A disturbing, presumptuous thought came to her: *did that make her Draco’s?*

“Why didn’t you run? After the battle?” Hermione chanced a peek up through her lashes; he was regarding her diagnostic charm, now a

pleasant blue-green, with a critical eye. “You said you’d chosen... that you decided to spy. But then you stayed on the grounds.” *With me*, she thought, but did not dare say. To say those would mean exposing her soft underbelly: how much she liked it, that he stayed. That Draco Malfoy—self-preservationist extraordinaire— had thrown caution to the wind for *her*.

“Why are you here, Draco?” She asked, the tremble in her voice evident as the sound echoed around the empty wing. “You shouldn’t be here.”

He closed his eyes at the sound of his name, golden eyelashes fluttering, undoubtably remembering the last time she’d addressed him as such, wound around him while pressed up against a wall. When he opened them, there was a steely sort of resignation in his gaze.

“I haven’t been entirely truthful with you, Granger,” Malfoy admitted, rubbing a hand over his face. “You were right, when you accused me of knowing what would happen last night, but not because I was helping *Nott*. There were other machinations in place. When Snape killed the Headmaster, it was understood that his position as a spy within the Order would be compromised. Without Dumbledore to vouch for him, it’s not like any of your lot would trust him with anything more important than a broom manual. He was prepared to ingratiate himself with the Dark Lord completely— although what he hopes to accomplish is anyone’s guess. Around Easter, Dumbledore approached me with a proposition: I’d done well, keeping my eye on *Nott*. I had a foot in both camps. I was a natural occlumens. He advised me about the plan for Snape’s defection, and said I’d be the obvious choice to replace him passing information to the Order. I had...stipulations. We renegotiated our original terms, and I accepted.”

Hermione’s pain potion-addled mind spun, recalling all the conversations they’d had where Malfoy skirted around his involvement, cloaked his motivations.

*I made a deal with Dumbledore. It's all about playing every side, Granger. I'll prove you wrong every time. I'm not like you. I don't care about being good. The Headmaster failed to uphold his end of our agreement. Why should I uphold mine?*

She didn't like the sound of *stipulations* nor *renegotiations*. What had Draco given up? What leverage had he gained?

"This seems an awfully dangerous arrangement for someone who says he doesn't care about who wins the war, so long as he comes out alive on the other side," Hermione managed, suspicion creeping into her tone. It was all very neat, wasn't it? The infamously self-absorbed Malfoy, suddenly ready to martyr himself for a cause he didn't even believe in.

"I *didn't* care," Draco gritted. "When I made my deal with the Headmaster in September, I'd agreed to a year under his thumb, no more: once Mother was well enough we would vanish to the safe house in France. No one was ever supposed to be able to find us. But then Father escaped and returned to the manor and Mother got worse and there was no way I was getting her out, not under his watch." Draco's cheeks took on a dusting of pink, and he looked down, examining the thread count of the hospital blankets. "Malfoy men are infamously quite territorial, about their spouses. Father is no exception. There are ways for husbands to find their wives written into their marriage vows, magic that not even the Fidelius can supercede. As long as he was locked up, I could manage it. But once he was free..."

Hermione remembered what she'd experienced in Lucius Malfoy's head, the focus he'd had on Narcissa, the warring feelings of longing and disgust at her condition. His values go against his desire to keep his wife. He refused to let her go, even as he watched the repercussions of his actions destroy her from the inside out. Draco had just wanted to save his mother and disappear, so he'd made a deal with Dumbledore, but Lucius had thrown a wrench in his plans. Now—once again at the mercy of his father's failings and the

schemes of more powerful men— Draco was being forced into a far more dangerous role.

“I realized that with my father at large, I’d only be able to take Mother and run if the Dark Lord was dead and my father was locked in a cell. The only way out is if Potter wins this war, so I made the strategic choice: it’s like you said before, I can’t sit and just wait for others to win fights that decide my fate. I’m no soldier, Granger.” Draco tapped his temple ruefully. “*This* is my best weapon. So I followed Snape’s approach of convincing the Dark Lord that I was actually spying on *his* behalf, still loyal to the cause. I needed him to believe that I could be a weapon of counterintelligence, and that my information could be trusted because I had ingratiated myself with one of Potter’s closest.”

“Me,” Hermione realized. Draco nodded, his eyes flickering like lit candles in the dim clinic.

“It couldn’t come out of the blue, of course. It would be too convenient if I returned home at the end of term announcing I was using the very witch he’d ordered me to kill for reconnaissance. Nott was a convenient mole, reporting my movements back to his own father. That’s why I encouraged him in the library: I was dropping crumbs, made sure I was quite obvious with my interest regarding you. Even Potter noticed, and we all know he’s about as perceptive as a troll. I proposed the whole thing over Easter, when I went back to the manor, told the Dark Lord that I’d found something far better than simply killing you— I’d use you, to infiltrate the Order. I made you important, too important to kill. It was two snidgets with one stone.”

Hermione opened her mouth and closed it again, uncertain. Did this mean...all the attention he’d bestowed on her, the flirting, the proximity, was that all part of his act? Was it just to create the illusion that he’d seduced her into trusting him— and had he seduced her into trusting him? No, that didn’t account for all the times it had been just them, when they’d fallen into each other foolishly, unable to stop

themselves. Could it really all be written off as a strategy when it felt so terribly, insistently real? Didn't he feel it too?

The doubt sent her stomach clenching in discomfort, and Malfoy looked at her strangely, bringing a hand to his own abdomen in response.

"I wish you'd told me," she finally managed, drawing her knees up to her chest. "I thought—"

"I was always going to tell you. But I couldn't, not until you mastered occlumency. Your mind was wide open— anyone who went looking would have found it."

"That doesn't explain why you stayed with me out on the grounds and let yourself get caught," she protested. "Or why you waltzed in here this morning in front of half the Order, acting like you'd raze the castle to the ground if you didn't get to see me. What asinine reason could you have for that?"

Malfoy took his bottom lip between his teeth, pressing down until he left sharp little indentations. *How dare he look like that*, she thought in annoyance, *when she was this angry with him*. It made her want to take his lip between her teeth instead, bite down until he bled

"Ah," Draco said, refusing to meet her eyes. "That wasn't exactly premeditated. You're right, I was supposed to return with Snape and Nott. But then..." He balled his fingers up in her blankets savagely. "Then I felt you. In pain." He finally looked up, shaking his head slowly as he explained. "And I just lost my head. I couldn't leave, not when you were so hurt, bleeding and losing consciousness. Even if I wanted to, my magic wouldn't let me. Then one of those buffoons stunned me, and I woke up with no clue where you were. The only thing I could think was that I had to be as close as possible, just in case..." He inhaled sharply, as he hesitated. "Just in case you needed me."

Hermione's heart stuttered at his admission, her eyes as wide as an owl's. Malfoy cast a bitter glance her way in response, frowning at the reaction for reasons she didn't understand.

"I know you didn't want any of this, Granger," he murmured, eyes flicking to where her heart quickened under her bruised ribs. "I know when you removed my Mark that you were just trying to even the scales, and because the universe is phenomenally cruel, you ended up stuck with me. Bonded. And unfortunately for you, I think it's getting stronger." He ducked his head, reticent where he was usually arrogant. "This morning, I couldn't stand being locked in that office without knowing if you were all right. Kicking off in front of all those people wasn't planned. I just lost control." He sighed, leaning back from where he'd approached her. "I...regret putting you in that position."

"How do I know you're being honest with me?" Hermione asked, doubt clouding her thoughts. "How do I know you're not using me the same way Dumbledore used you? You said you chose, and that I made it so it was hardly a choice." Her face was alight as she remembered his declaration before the fight, and she willed herself to finish her sentiment before she burst into flames. "How do I know you're not just telling me what I want to hear?"

"As if that's what you'd want to hear," Malfoy shot back scornfully, as if there was no way she could possibly be serious. His voice took on a mocking tone. "I ruined your life by tying our magical cores together and now I rather fancy you." He shook his head, as if that admission were nothing, as if he'd said something obvious, something he knew she'd dislike. "Don't be stupid"

"Do you?" She asked, her mouth suddenly dry. "Fancy me?" She blinked up at him from under her lashes. He scoffed, muttering something rude about how she was taking the piss. "I have not been...subtle about what I want. Regarding you."

"You just said you wanted to use me as an information source in the Order," she argued. "That's why you were giving me so much



attention.”

Draco blinked once, and then twice.

“No,” he said slowly. “That’s not what I said.” He turned from where he sat so he hovered over her, bracing an arm on either side of her body. “I didn’t kiss you because I wanted to convince anyone of anything. I kissed you because I wanted to, and I’m terrible at restraining myself from doing whatever I want. I kissed you because I’ve thought about fucking you ever since I saw you in that bloody dress at Christmas. Maybe before.” Her breath hitched and he let out a low, pleased sound, almost a purr. “After the Dark Lord sent me to you last summer, I thought about how you’d gotten terribly pretty. Even then, when I thought I was marching to my death, I couldn’t help but notice you. I doubt anyone could.”

“Oh,” Hermione managed faintly, *I thought about fucking you* echoing in her mind like a skipping record. “I—Oh.”

Her pulse took off, a hummingbird in her chest. Instinctively, she arced up towards him, so that her lips were inches from the soft, exposed skin of his neck. Without thinking, she pressed her lips to it, dragging a whine from his throat that she could feel against her mouth. It sounded terribly promising, but before she could continue, he’d removed himself from her, gently pushing her back down onto her pillows.

Had she done something wrong? A doubt filled voice in her head considered. Did he not want her like this: in borrowed, ill-fitting pajamas, with dark circles under her eyes and a bird’s nest of knotted hair piled messily on her head?

“I am a selfish man with very few scruples,” Draco interrupted her thoughts, his pupils blown with arousal. He *looked* like he wanted her. “But not when you’re injured and double dosed on pain potion.” His face took on a far darker look, and for a moment she wondered if he was going to explode something else. “Especially if the injuries were sustained because of my fucking *father*.”

"I'm not," Hermione protested, almost offended. She wasn't *dying*. "I feel fine, it's just—"

"Don't you dare downplay it," Malfoy cut her off. "I know what the Cruciatus curse does to a body. I know how long you were under his wand, because I felt it, the whole fucking thing."

With a huff, he unstoppered the pain potion, handing it to her insistently. She administered the suggested three drops under her tongue and immediately relaxed, her body going slack.

"What I *don't* know," he continued. "Is how you managed to get away. Father usually makes sure his opponents don't leave, at least not in one piece."

She felt warm and slightly suspended as she watched him speak. Had he asked her something? He'd asked her something.

"Legilimency," Hermione explained after a long pause, her voice slowed and softened from the effects of the potion. "Looks like your lessons ended up being rather handy."

Draco's grim mouth parted in surprise. His eyes were liquid mercury. There was an expression on his face she'd never seen before, under all the guilt and misery. He looked...pleased with her. It reignited the flames in her belly, the ones that insisted that she needed him closer, closer.

With delicate movements, Draco reached over Hermione's relaxed body and placed Theo's stolen wand on the side table, before stretching out beside her on the cot. He reached for her wrist and drew it to his face; her hand instinctively cupped his jaw, and he rotated it, so that his lips were moving against her palm. He was saying something, pressing words into her skin.

"Please," he was whispering, his voice muffled. "Forgive me."

*Oh.* The look on his face was contrition. He was blaming himself.

“Draco,” Hermione whispered. His throat bobbed; even now he could fully keep himself from reacting, when she said his name. “You’re not him. You’re not your father. You’re *good*.”

He released her hand in order to pulled her closer by the waist, positioning her back against his chest, and she repeated the words —*you’re good, Draco, you’re good*— until they lost meaning, trailing into delirious mumbles. Until he hushed her and stroked her hair and made it impossible not to feel like perhaps here, wrapped in his possessive grip, she was the safest she’d been all year.

---

---

#### Notes:

- I like my whiskey neat, and my Draco deranged, possessive, arrogant, snarky, and with a soft spot for exactly one witch with curly hair and an attitude.
  - Hermione: I'm completely alone, I have no family / Draco, kicking open the door: YOU CALLED? Oh, that bond IS getting stronger.
  - If you’ve been following along, you know how much I love call backs to earlier chapters! My favorite here is the pain potion induced hospital wing cuddle that mirrors that of Chapter 19.
  - Tonks and Lupin: the toxic nightmare commitment phobic older guy situationship we all recognize. Girl, run. Tonks will have her day in this fic!
  - One more chapter for Part I of this story— I’m literally dying to show you guys what I have planned for Part II!
-

# The Last Summer

## Chapter 29: The Last Summer

---

Hermione has a lot of explaining to do. Harry breaks down. Lavender is full of surprises. Draco requests a rendezvous.

---

---

Should you care for a soundtrack, the preferred listening for this chapter is "Halley's Comet" by Billie Eilish. Full playlist coming soon!

CW: There is brief mention of sexual violence in this chapter, although it is not by any means explicit. Mind the tags, friends.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The English countryside in summer was a tapestry of vibrant greens and soothing blues. The grassy hills surrounding the small village of Ottery St. Catchpole rippled like undulating waves beneath a boundless sky, dotted with wildflowers and interwoven hedgerows. Hermione would have thought it peaceful, before. Now, she could hardly feel anything besides the growing wave of apprehension that heralded the inevitable war ahead.

She'd cried for the entirety of Dumbledore's funeral service. She knew of Dumbledore's questionable motivations better than most, his devious manipulations and maneuverings of those who trusted him. But that didn't negate his good: despite his methods, he'd given his life in service to what he thought was right and just, and for that, Hermione wept, because she knew he would not be the last to make such a sacrifice.

Dumbledore's death had felt like a line in the sand, a marker of what came before and what would undoubtedly follow after. Classes had been cut short, exams canceled. The wizarding world was preparing for conflict; after the Headmaster's funeral, students had been sent home in droves, and for the first time since she attended Hogwarts, Hermione was uncertain if any of them would ever return.

While her peers returned to their families, Hermione followed Ron and Harry back to the only thing resembling home that she had left: the Burrow. The Weasleys had graciously offered to house her, taking in another stray orphan without a second thought, as they were wont to do. She'd attempted to refuse, insisting they were already stretched to their limits with preparations for the upcoming wedding, noting that she was of age and could get a flat in London, but was wholeheartedly rebuffed.

There'd been much debate about Harry: the decision over where he was to live for the remaining months before he turned seventeen was the topic of more than one closed door discussion. Gone were the days he could run off on the Night Bus without a word; his safety was now a matter of national security. Even Scrimgeour had been brought in, alongside a number of Aurors who specialized in defensive protocols, for a tense meeting in the former Headmaster's office before they left school grounds.

Lupin and McGonagall were of the mind that Harry should follow Dumbledore's directive and stay at the Dursleys' where he'd be protected by his mother's blood until coming of age. The Ministry contingent, Tonks and Moody included, heartily disagreed. Hermione and Ron observed the argument at a reticent Harry's side, having reluctantly been given the privilege to sit in on the meeting, mostly because it was understood at this point that the three of them were a package deal, and Harry had threatened to run back and tell them everything that had been discussed anyway.

"The wean would be a sitting duck on the thirty-first!" Moody roared, once the debate had escalated to raised voices. "You-Know-Who expects him to return to that place, Minerva, and I don't doubt that

traitorous bastard Snape told him the plan to move Potter on his birthday in detail. Albus couldn't have accounted for that. We have to pivot strategies!"

"Dumbledore had provisions in place for the boy—" McGonagall countered, her Scottish brogue thickening with frustration, a tone almost anyone would have shirked away from— anyone besides Alastor Moody.

"Dumbledore would agree those provisions have to be reassessed. Any protection that house might afford isn't worth the danger of extracting him from it. If you're asking me, the boy's better off protected by wards than by some blood magic that none of us can monitor!"

"Wards can fail, Alastor," Lupin interjected. He seemed more tired and wan than usual, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he spoke. "Dumbledore made it abundantly clear—"

"Dumbledore's dead," Tonks piped up, sporting her usual pink hair and a frosty expression directed unilaterally at Remus, who wilted slightly under her gaze. Clearly, they had not resolved their row from the Hospital Wing. "There's no point arguing about what he'd want. We have to focus on what would keep Harry safe."

After significant pressure from the Minister, it was decided that Harry would not return to Surrey; a team of Aurors were dispatched to evacuate his relatives, working alongside officials from the Muggle Protected Persons Service, a suggestion of Hermione's so as to ease their transition into hiding. Harry's few remaining belongings were packed in a leather trunk and delivered to the Burrow, where he'd presumably be staying for the summer.

Harry, ever the martyr, disavowed the new plan.

"I'm not putting your family in danger!" He insisted, as Ron put him in a sturdy headlock and dragged him into the Floo. "I can go into hiding on my own." Harry kicked out, his reflexes quick, but Ron

subdued him, too accustomed to fighting off five older brothers to be phased.

“Mate,” Ron sighed, giving Hermione a look that said, *can you believe this idiot?* Hermione fought a smile; when they weren’t frustrating her to the point of murder, the two of them could be so very endearing. “We already are in danger. What, do you think if you got a flat in London, the Death Eaters would just wash their hands of us? We’re blood traitors, you loon. Now stop whinging and get your arse in the fireplace.”

June at the Burrow was filled to the brim with evacuation plans, strategy meetings—some of which Hermione was privy to, some of which she was not— and preparations for Fleur and Bill’s nuptials in early August. It felt markedly different than other summers: the constant preparation only increased Hermione’s sense of trepidation that their days of peace were growing numbered. The Burrow had become the unofficial headquarters for the Order of the Phoenix, so it became more and more common to see both Order members and trusted Aurors filtering in and out through the newly reinforced wards.

Hermione had taken special notice in their installation, following Bill around the Burrow’s perimeter as he drew runes in the dirt, muttering incantations.

“Wouldn’t the wards be stronger, if you used your blood?” She asked the scarred cursebreaker, worrying her lip as she considered her research on the matter. She’d been interested in warding magic ever since Malfoy had spoken to her of the defenses he had enacted on his safe house. “I know that some purebloods use theirs in order to reinforce existing protections and strengthen the ley lines under family homes, couldn’t the Burrow use that?”

“That’s only applicable for old family homes, Hermione,” Bill corrected patiently. “Purebloods, mostly, although that isn’t a prerequisite. That sort of ancestral magic takes generations to cultivate. We’ve only lived at the Burrow since Mum and Dad were

married. A blood ward here would be just about as useful as a wooden fence.”

Besides Bill, Hermione most frequently saw Moody and Remus, who’d more or less taken up the shared mantle of senior leadership. Having been present for the dramatic events of the hospital wing, both wizards took the opportunity to address her regarding the issue of Draco Malfoy. To her mortification, Lupin cornered her in the hall after an Order meeting, imploring her to consider that even the people they loved couldn’t always be trusted, and sermonizing about how he was young and in love once, and how it was imperative she use her head, not her heart.

“I know it sounds bizarre,” Hermione countered, feeling strange about defending Malfoy to an adult she once held in such high esteem. “But I’ve developed...an understanding with Malfoy. He’s not the person he used to be. War changes people, Remus. I thought you of all people could understand that.”

“You have to remember Hermione, that I knew Draco during my brief tenure as your Defense professor,” he warned her, exhaling heavily at the memory. “During that time, he was a bigoted, selfish boy, prone to acts of cruelty when threatened. I’m afraid that colors my opinion of him, perhaps more than I would like.”

Hermione studied Lupin, noting the bitter twist of his lips and slump of his shoulders. Remus had already fought in one war, and now, he was watching history repeat itself, bracing himself for more loss. In a way, Hermione couldn’t help but begrudge him his concern, while simultaneously wishing he’d piss off and focus on his own love life.

“I happen to know for a fact that cruel boys can become unlikely heroes,” she said softly, her tone taking Lupin by surprise. “James Potter managed it, didn’t he?”

“I understand your point,” he sighed. “But James came from a very progressive family; his father disavowed the Dark Arts for many years before—”



“Sirius Black, then,” Hermione countered. “Imagine, if he’d been trusted instead of thrown into Azkaban because of his family name.”

Remus looked stricken, as if she’d punched him directly in the gut. He’d left soon after, visibly bothered by her statement.

Surprisingly, the only person who’d taken her at her word regarding the whole affair was Moody.

“Had a talk with the Malfoy whelp,” Moody said gruffly, sitting down at the kitchen table as Hermione peeled a mountain of potatoes for Molly. She could hear distant hammering and swearing as the boys and Ginny repaired the roof. “Told me that he and Albus had an understanding. He seemed quite interested in you, Granger. Want to explain?”

“No,” Hermione said bluntly, before remembering who she was speaking to. Moody seemed unbothered by her terseness, baring his teeth in what could possibly be considered a grin.

“Humor me.”

Hermione considered the grizzled old Auror’s question over a pile of discarded peels, wondering what he could have said or done to extract that information from Malfoy, and hesitated as she considered how to answer. She couldn’t sound too sure, then he’d treat her like a lovelorn idiot like Lupin had. But she couldn’t doubt Malfoy openly, for fear it would ruin his already delicate position as an informant. The Order had to trust Malfoy enough to give him minor information to pass along to Voldemort, and to believe and employ whatever intelligence he provided in turn.

“I can’t—It would put us both in immense danger, should that information be...extracted from anyone.”

Moody, sensing her hesitance, grunted in consideration. “You don’t spend forty years in the Auror department without picking up a few

tricks," he said, tapping his temple with a scarred finger, a dangerous twinkle in his good eye. "Go on then. Try to get in."

Hermione had narrowed her gaze, wondering if he meant what she thought he did. Maintaining eye contact, she pulled from her legilimency, attempting to breach his mental defenses only to come up against a wall of solid granite. She pushed harder and he wheezed a bit— at first she thought it was from the strain, but promptly realized he was *laughing*.

"Don't give yourself an aneurysm, lass," Moody barked in amusement. She huffed as she abandoned her efforts, sweat trickling into her collar from the mental exertion. He stood, but before he could leave, Hermione interjected.

"In regards to Malfoy," she had finally answered, meeting Moody's unnerving gaze. "Yes, I trust him. Or at least, I trust his motivations."

That, apparently, was good enough for the Auror. It was *not* good enough for Harry and Ron, who she'd gotten into a screaming match with after Harry accused her of sleeping with the enemy in rather explicit terms, resulting in the a frosty silent from both sides that subsisted for several, increasingly awkward days, until Mrs. Weasley had enough and locked the three of them outside until they could resolve things.

Hermione, bound by her vow, insisted that they'd simply have to trust her that Malfoy was not the prejudiced wizard of years past, and if they couldn't, why was she even there?

"Honestly, you've known me since I was eleven," she insisted, frustrated by their lack of understanding. "Have I ever once seemed like the kind of witch to fall at the feet of someone like Malfoy? He's always been a nightmare, but he's not exactly an evil genius is he?"

"We thought the same of Nott," Harry shot back, crossing his arms. "And look what he proved himself capable of."

"Nott is *nothing* like Malfoy. Do you really think so little of my judgment? Because if you do, you shouldn't be trusting me with anything, especially the—" she lowered her voice, nervous about sound carrying over the moors— "*horcruxes*."

"That's the issue," Ron said darkly. "We've known *him* since he was eleven too."

Finally, unable to come to a true understanding, it was decided that Malfoy would be a taboo topic between the trio: Ron and Harry wouldn't rankle her with snide remarks, and Hermione wouldn't defend Malfoy in their presence. A tenuous peace, in which Hermione could already see the cracks forming.

Her association with Malfoy wasn't the only secret she had to keep: the Order's senior leadership had also interrogated her, Ron and Harry several times about their role in the war and the task Dumbledore had bequeathed them, but they'd remained tightlipped regarding their mission to obtain the horcruxes. During a rare moment of solitude in the attic the boys shared with the resident ghoul, Harry had tried to shake them off, stubbornly determined to take on the quest on his own.

"It's me who's got to kill him," Harry stewed, his hair sticking up every which way. He mussed it when agitated, a habit that reminded Hermione painfully of Draco. "You've heard the prophecy. Me and me alone."

"Mate," Ron shook his head slowly, using a voice reserved for when Harry was being particularly thick. "We knew what we were signing up for when we went with you to save the stone in first year. I think it's a bit late to ditch us now."

"Since the troll," Hermione added in a soft, wistful voice, remembering how the two had fearlessly, stupidly confronted the creature in the bathroom in her defense. They'd been children— brave, stupid children. She wished she could go back in time and warn them.

“You don’t understand,” Harry continued furiously, throwing up his hands in frustration. “He’ll come after your families, he’ll kill—”

“Actually,” Hermione interrupted coldly. “I do.”

Harry finally quieted, looking at her with a terrible sadness on his face: his mouth turned downwards, bottle-green eyes radiating distress behind his spectacles.

“What you seem to forget is that while yes, I’d take a curse for you regardless of whether you’re the Chosen One or just my friend, that’s not the only reason I’m here.” Hermione said, her voice only shaking slightly. She hoped she sounded stronger than she felt. “What kind of life is left for me, if Voldemort wins this war? What do you think will happen to the muggleborns and blood traitors, they’ll just let us continue on existing? Look at Grindelwald or Barnabas Deverill—every aspiring Dark Lord has attempted to wipe out whichever marginalized group that they’ve blamed all societal issues on, pretty much since the beginning of time. I’m not just fighting for you, Harry. I’m refuse to become another statistic.”

Ron whistled low, nodding in agreement. “Bloody hell,” he added. “What she said.”

Harry—overwhelmed and affected by her little speech— slumped onto Ron’s mattress. His eyes began to fill.

“Oh,” Hermione panicked, throwing her arms around him. Over his head, she mouthed *do something* to Ron, who awkwardly patted Harry’s shoulder in response.

“I’m afraid,” Harry admitted, as a few tears escaped and slid down his face. He was silent and stoic when he cried, like someone who had been told often and from a very young age that he wasn’t to make any noise. “Everyone who tries to help me...everyone dies. I don’t want anyone else to die for me, Hermione.”

Watching him broke her heart, because she couldn't in good conscience assure him that no one else would. All she could do was rub circles on his back until his lungs stopped stuttering and his face was wiped clean of tears.

After that, Harry didn't argue with her and Ron's involvement, but they came upon another issue: there was simply no space nor solitude to secretly plan the hunt for Voldemort's horcruxes. The Weasley family home was far past capacity, although a harried Molly insisted there was always room for anyone who would require it. As the political climate worsened, Bill, Percy, and the twins all moved home, unwilling to leave their parents as the sole defenders of the family, should the Death Eaters come calling.

Hermione was sharing Ginny's bedroom with both Ginny and Fleur, offering her limited to no privacy on any given day. She couldn't even count the number of times one of them had walked in on her changing. Fleur—being French and thus, immune to nudity induced embarrassment—was unphased by this, openly changing into pretty lingerie sets and gauzy summer robes without any of Hermione's decidedly English shame.

"Lingerie is not for the wizard's benefit, Hermione," Fleur informed her slyly on one such occasion. "It is for the witch, to use as a weapon of absolute control." She was sitting at the vanity—a repurposed writing desk with a looking glass attached—brushing out her long silver hair, resplendent in a delicate lace negligee and a lilac silk dressing gown.

Ginny, having overcome her aversion to her brother's fiancée after she'd sprouted a pair of wings and decapitated the wizarding world's most infamous werewolf, listened to Fleur with the rapt dedication of a soldier attending to their general. For a moment, Hermione imagined mercurial gray eyes, darkening at the sight of her in nothing but ribbon and lace. She wondered if he'd try and remove them with his teeth. *But you don't look like Fleur*, the part of her that harbored years of insecurities chided. *You'd look ridiculous.*

Hermione knew she was pretty in the right light, but she wasn't exactly the type of beauty people launched ships for.

"Well, given that I don't have a wizard," Hermione responded, flushing at the topic. "My knickers really aren't an issue."

"Don't you?" Ginny interjected, a wicked smile curling her lips upwards. "Someone ought to tell Malfoy."

"I'm not— Malfoy isn't—" Hermione sputtered. She wanted to hex the Slytherin in question— it was due to his tantrum in the Hospital Wing that she had to rationalize a situation she didn't even fully understand herself to everyone from her former professors to Ginny Weasley. How was she to explain the fact that somewhere between clawing at each other's throats and saving each other's lives, she and Malfoy had become... *something*? What kind of clarification was that?

"The ill-tempered blond one, yes?" Fleur asked, meeting Ginny's grin in the mirror. "That is her Malfoy?"

"He's not *my* Malfoy," Hermione protested, her disagreement falling upon deaf ears.

"Sure, Hermione," Ginny sing-songed, closing her magazine entirely. "I'm sure he'd threaten a room full of Aurors for anyone."

The last time Hermione had seen Malfoy was when he'd slid into her bed in the hospital wing, solid and warm and flush to her back. When she woke, he was gone and there was a raven's feather quill and a leatherbound, two-way journal on the bedside with a note already written on the first page. It hadn't exactly been a declaration of love. *For emergencies*, it said in his meticulous hand. *Don't owl me*. She checked the blank pages frequently, but hadn't received another missive since. To her great irritation, the quill didn't even hold ink.

From her hazy, half-drugged memory of the Hospital Wing, she knew Malfoy had admitted he fancied her, that he'd thought about what it

would be like to sleep with her. She'd be lying if she said she hadn't thought about it too, hadn't woken up flustered from dreams of him bending her over the common room sofa with an ache between her legs. But Hermione wasn't foolish enough to believe that sexual interest automatically meant he considered her romantically; she was not blind to their shared attraction, but she also wasn't sure what it *meant* to kiss someone you once professed to hate

Her confusion was justified: they'd missed all the steps Hermione typically associated with romantic relationships, and jumped into deeper, more nebulous waters without ever fully learning how to swim. Every time they'd messily collided had been either while drunk or mid-argument. Draco had never courted her, as the pureblooded Slytherins often did to declare their intentions; instead, he'd burst into the Hospital Wing and threatened half the people she loved. Malfoy may have abandoned his father's ideology politically, but that didn't mean he'd abandon *everything* he was raised to believe—his very family motto was *Sanctimonia Vincet Semper*, for god's sake — and consider a muggleborn as a serious prospect.

And even if they had romantic intentions towards each other, what good would it do to vocalize it? She and Malfoy did not have the luxury of indulging in flights of fancy without considering the consequences. They'd been conscripted into opposing sides of a *war*, the reality of which discouraged star-crossed relationships that would undoubtedly get both of them killed. *No*, Hermione thought. *It was best to leave some desires buried.*

"Fleur," Ginny said conspiratorially, her tone wrenching Hermione from her internal debate. She wasn't the only one with such dilemmas; Harry had ended things with Ginny out of a misplaced desire to protect her, and Ginny hadn't taken his decision sitting down. "If one were interested in exercising absolute control, how would one go about procuring such weaponry?"

Fleur summoned a glossy catalog from her trunk and tossed it to Ginny with a wink. Hermione got a glimpse of its cover, where a supple young witch pranced around clad in knickers so small they

were practically nonexistent. Ginny grinned savagely, flipping through the pages with interest. Privately, Hermione believed that Harry's self-control regarding their relationship was not long for this world

---

Hermione's already crowded living situation became even more untenable one day in late June, when Lavender Brown appeared unexpectedly at the ward line of the Burrow, a pink duffle bag slung over one shoulder.

"Ron," Ginny called wickedly, leaning out her bedroom window to summon her brother from where he and Harry were de-gnoming the garden. Hermione looked up from her book, sitting cross-legged in the grass nearby. "Delivery for you!"

"Huh?" The ginger called, wiping his dirty hands on his trousers as he stood, only to be leveled once again by a flurry of limbs and blond curls, knocking him prompt into the dirt.

"Won-Won!"

Hermione and Harry exchanged a look of poorly hidden amusement as Ron was bowled over by Lavender's embrace. When they'd had their fill of reunion snogging, he staggered to his feet, letting out a winded noise, as Lavender promptly deposited her visibly heavy bag on his shoulder. She turned to where Hermione sat on the grass with a wide smile.

"Hermione!" She called with a huge grin, before barreling her over as well.

"Ow, Lav— gerroff me!"

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you! I wasn't sure when Ron invited me to stay with his family for the wedding— it's a rather bit of a big step, isn't it?" Lavender prattled, as she released a gasping Hermione from her surprisingly strong grip. "But then he said you'd be here,



and I thought it would be nice to have a friend around, to take a bit of the pressure off, you know? Now we'll get to be roommates again! These pureblood types are a bit old school, don't you think, what with girls sleeping separately from boys and what not? Oh, we're going to have *such* fun!"

Hermione glared at Ron surreptitiously, before patting her old dormitory companion gingerly on the arm. After a month of sitting in on grim Order meetings and planning for future disasters, Lavender, clad in a sunny yellow romper and oversized sunglasses shaped like daisies, seemed like a relic from a past lifetime.

"Lavender," Hermione asked, not wanting to dampen the girl's infectious spirit *too* much. "You do know there's a war on, right?"

Lavender's smile faltered, her glossy lips pursing into a serious expression. "Of course," she said, more subdued, fluffing her golden ringlets out of nervous habit. "That's the other reason I'm here. See, my parents are muggles, and I wasn't about to put a great big target on their backs—" She cut off, looking stricken, as if just realizing what she'd said and to whom. "Oh, Hermione, I didn't mean— It wasn't your fault, what happened—"

"It's fine," Hermione said softly, because Lavender had no idea how right she was. "I understand."

Hermione had worried about the other muggleborns ever since that fateful day last August— if they'd be targeted, if there were systems in place to protect their families should an outright war ever break out—but she'd been afraid to learn the extent of how very little the world she'd chosen to fight for cared to protect those of her origins. This, of course, was a deeply selfish choice, but one she'd hidden behind like a shroud.

"I didn't tell them about You-Know-Who," Lavender confessed, and Hermione felt a kinship bloom with the girl she'd shared a dormitory with for the past six years. Although the two of them hadn't ever been close, in that moment they understood each other in a way no

one else could fathom. “They’ve no idea about the war. I’ve told them I ran off with my boyfriend on a Eurotour—god, I’d never seen mum go spare like that. But at the end of the day, I’m of age and they couldn’t stop me, could they? I’d rather she be upset than dead. I even went and bought a bunch of postcards from different countries and pre-dated them, so they’ll get one in the post every so often. Even if I’m...” Her voice cracked under the weight of dread. *Even if I’m killed*, Hermione heard clearly.

Ron put an arm around her, tucking Lavender into his side. It was a sweeter gesture than Hermione had thought him capable. “It’ll be okay, Lav,” he muttered into the crown of her head. “You did the right thing.”

“Although it always pains me to say this, Ron’s right,” Hermione added. “Did you put up any security measures around your house? I know it’s awful to consider, but I reckon you can never be too safe.”

Lavender visibly brightened at this, wearing a rather devious expression. “You know how there are muggle-repelling charms? I wanted to take my parents to the World Cup a few years back, but they made it so awfully tricky to get nonwizards in that I eventually just gave up. Well, it got me thinking: what if that could be inverted somehow? Like if the charm was reverse so as to repel—”

“Wizards,” Hermione realized, gaping at Lavender as if she were a total stranger. Her ditzy, overly romantic, astrology-obsessed roommate had figured out how to invert a muggle-repelling charm? That was difficult, theory-based magic, the kind that required months and months of trial and error. Hermione hadn’t even attempted it; in fact, such a thing had never even occurred to her before.

“Yeah. If anyone with magic tries to approach, they remember some urgent pending they’ve forgotten and get distracted. Not even I can get in,” she finished sadly, a small smile on her lips as triumph and regret warred for dominance in her expression. “So, yeah. Now I’m here.”

“That’s...” Hermione searched for the correct words, hoping not to offend the girl. “Lavender, that’s seriously impressive magic. I’m sorry I didn’t know you were so adept at charms theory.”

“Well, the hat tried to put me in Ravenclaw, but I didn’t want the stuffy old boffin house, did I?” Lavender mused, ignorant to the fact Hermione’s eyebrows were raised to her hairline. “It wasn’t just me or anything, Padma and Parvati helped out a lot. We started practicing right when...” Lavender looked at her with uncharacteristic gentleness. “Well, right when everything happened to you, last summer.”

Hermione stared at Lavender, her guilt over underestimating the girl overshadowed by a newfound respect. Hermione may have been too afraid to consider certain realities about how the world they’d chosen was an active threat to their families, but Lavender had faced them head on. She’d bravely made the same difficult decision Hermione had, putting her parents’ safety above her relationship with them.

After a long pause, Hermione gave Lavender a brisk nod. “Come on then,” she called, heading for the house. “I’ll show you to our room. Mind you, it’s a bit of a squeeze, but you’ll get on with Fleur like a bloody house on fire. Oh, and don’t touch Ginny’s Quidditch kit if you want to keep your fingers.”

She turned to find Ron and Harry still standing in the garden, regarding her as if she’d gone mad. Ron opened his mouth, only to promptly reconsider and close it again.

“Ronald,” she chided, sounding terribly bossy, “Stop gaping. Make yourself useful and bring up Lavender’s bag.” Ron, somewhat stunned by the turn of events, followed them obediently.

“Now to get in good with Molly,” Hermione continued, lowering her voice as Lavender bounced on the balls of her feet. “You’re going to want to offer to do the washing up right away, don’t wait until she asks someone else. Compliment her baking and she’ll basically never let you leave.”

Hermione continued dispelling six years of Weasley related advice as they took the rickety staircase up towards Ginny's bedroom, the boys in tow.

"I prepared for them to row, but I didn't consider that they'd actually get on," Ron whispered agitatedly from behind her. "What if they gang up on me?"

"*What if* is a bit optimistic, mate," Harry finally managed, after catching his breath. "I reckon at this point, it's a guarantee."

---

Shortly after Lavender's arrival, Hermione dealt with two anxiety-inducing situations in rapid succession. The first was a message from Malfoy, appearing in the journal he'd given her. A time and date, written in his graceful hand.

*Portkey activates July 29th, it read. 9:00 pm.*

*Portkey?* She'd responded, just as tersely.

When she checked the journal again hours later, there was only a single word written in response to her query: *Quill.*

Hermione dug in her school things for the raven's feather quill, the one she'd contemplated disposing of given its uselessness as a writing instrument, now infinitely glad that she hadn't. A flutter of nerves turned her stomach: how could she know this was truly Malfoy, and not a ploy to lure her out using his handwriting? How could she confirm he hadn't been compromised? Ink dripped from her quill as she hovered over the page uncertain of her response, the droplets staining the creamy paper before disappearing altogether. As if he'd her mind, she watched as new words bloomed below his instructions on the page, imprinting themselves onto her treacherous heart.

*Stop worrying. I'd never let anything happen to you.*

It was all she could think of as she completed endless pre-wedding chores, trimming rose bushes and cleaning shutters and hanging fairy lights in the low branches of the trees. *I'd never let anything happen to you*. Draco had no authority to be making such promises, but for some reason, she still believed him. Perhaps Lupin was right — perhaps she was letting her emotions lead her to certain destruction. She couldn't quite bring herself to care; she felt summer winding down around her, threatening her fragile sense of peace, and knew that her days of safety at the Burrow were numbered. She'd already nicked emergency supplies to store in her magically extended bag, the little beaded one her mother had given her years prior. She felt it, the certainty that soon they'd have to run, and so she couldn't help but begrudge herself the chance to see Malfoy one more time.

Somehow, the second event was far more discomforting: after catching Lavender and Ron in incriminating states of undress in the broom shed, Molly Weasley shooed the boys out of the Burrow and sat Hermione, Ginny, and Lavender down at the kitchen table for what was the most excruciating twenty minutes of Hermione's young life.

"There comes a time for every young witch," Molly said, pink blooming in twin spots on her cheeks. "When you begin to consider physical intimacy with a wizard. Now I know some of you have experience with sex—"

"*Mum*," Ginny sputtered, horrified. "Not this again." Lavender had turned an unflattering shade of scarlet, her eyes fixed determinedly over Molly's shoulder.

Hermione shrank in her seat, unsure of why this conversation even applied to her; *she* wasn't currently living in close quarters with her boyfriend. She was nearly eighteen and still a virgin, not that she put much stock in the social construct of virginity or equated it with any sort of worth. She'd just never gotten that far with Viktor, and he hadn't pressed the issue, satisfied to wait until she was ready. No one else had ever pursued her with that in mind, never flirted with

the sort of cloaked implication of *more* that they attempted with Ginny or Lavender.

*Would Malfoy want that with her?* Her subconscious considered. *If she offered? Would he mind that she hadn't ever before?*

"Be quiet, Ginevra," Molly snapped, before turning back to them with her palms clasped. "Girls, I only wish to speak with you about such a tender subject because you're both in my care, and as a mother, I owe it to your parents to have this conversation with you."

"There's really no need, Mrs. Weasley," Lavender said, in a higher pitch than usual, a weak smile on her face. "My mum already told me about, er, all that. Birds and bees, birth control. The whole thing."

"Be that as it may, I'd feel far better if you'd allow me to demonstrate the contraceptive charm for my own peace of mind."

"Not that it historically worked out well for you," Ginny grumbled, earning herself a cuff over the head. Despite their protests, Molly showed them the incantation and wand movement, how to point the glowing pink spell at one's lower abdomen. Ginny stood when it was over, eager to flee the kitchen, but Molly stopped her, a grave expression on her usually cheerful face.

"These are dangerous times," Mrs. Weasley said, a haunted look in her eyes that gave Hermione pause, her heart started beating faster as she sensed the dark turn of tone. "I've lived through a war before. I know of the violences that can befall young witches, violences that wizards have the privilege to never have to consider. I saw it happen, with girls your age taken prisoner. There were...unspeakable horrors that occurred in those Death Eater camps." Molly's eyes were brimming with unshed tears. "Unspeakable, and yet, I must speak of them with you."

Ginny and Lavender had been shocked into a morose silence, their eyes wide with fear. This was not the conversation any of them had expected. Hermione felt sick to her stomach as they sat frozen in the

kitchen, Molly's warning floating around them: *girls your age*. For some reason, the threat of sexual violence had not occurred to her: somehow she'd considered such acts firmly ensconced in the muggle world. But why would they be? Wizards were still men and men could be so very dangerous, whether they wielded magic or not.

"I hate that I have to warn you of such things. I hate that we live in a world where I have to fear for the safety and well-being of my daughter. I wish so desperately that I had built something better for you." Molly's voice broke, but instead of giving into rapidly brimming tears, she straightened, something determined in the hard set of her mouth. "No matter what happens, I'll be here for whatever you need —"

"Nothing like that is going to happen, Mum," Ginny soothed, skirting around the table to wrap her arms around her mother. Molly stroked her daughter's cheek, as if she were memorizing her pretty, freckled face.

"I don't know that, love," she said sadly. "War offers no guarantees."

---

On the evening of July 29th, Hermione crept out of her shared room with a raven's feather in her pocket. The night was balmy, the heat of dead summer brushing at her neck like an old friend. The trees were lush and resplendent in the evening breeze, slackening their limbs in hushed harmony. *A pretty night*, she thought indulgently, trying to quell the nervousness pricking insistently in her throat.

In a few moments, she was going to see Malfoy.

"I'm just going out for a bit of fresh air," she insisted to an inquisitive Ginny. "A walk, maybe. To clear my head."

"You are such a *liar*," Ginny gasped, sounding strangely excited by the prospect of Hermione's dishonesty. "A walk? In a sundress? Please, I wasn't born yesterday." The redhead gave her a once over, noting how her hair was a little more tamed, smoothed into glossy

curls courtesy of one of Fleur's hair potions. How her cheeks were a few shades pinker, her eyelashes tinted slightly darker. "Merlin and Morgana," she breathed, her eyes sparking with realization. "Are you going to *meet* someone?"

"What?" Hermione's heart rate picked up, incriminating her with every thud. "No!"

"Is it Malfoy?"

"*Ginny*," Hermione admonished through clenched teeth. "Please shut up before your brother and Harry hear. Or worse, *Lavender*."

Ginny squealed, only quieting down once hushed. Hermione checked the Prewett watch on her wrist. She had four minutes before the quill would activate. Somehow, she wasn't sure if she was more nervous about the prospect of seeing Malfoy or the possibility of walking into a Death Eater trap, the conundrum certain evidence of her complete and total descent into madness.

"I'll be back...well, I don't know. Before morning."

"Take your time." Ginny assured. "Send a patronus if you need me, seriously. Don't feel pressured to do anything you don't want to."

"I'm not planning on doing *anything*," Hermione lied.

"Dressed like that? Sure you aren't. Remember, if that posh git tries anything untoward—"

"—you'll dismember him and feed the pieces to Charlie's dragons, I know the drill."

Ginny leaned over and gave her a quick, bruising hug before Hermione pulled away, grabbing her beaded bag. She flew out the kitchen door with barely enough time to skirt behind the broom shed before the quill activated. At precisely nine, she felt the familiar,



unpleasant sensation of portkey travel pulling at her gut, whisking her into the unknown.

When Hermione touched down, dizzy and vaguely nauseous, she looked around to find that she was on the grounds of an impressive white stone cottage with glass windows that seemed to suck the darkness from the sky, making it impossible to see inside. The cottage's outer walls were accented with climbing ivy, and pink hydrangeas peeked out sweetly from immaculately manicured bushes. The chimney emitted furls of delicate smoke, alerting her that there was someone inside.

Hermione fingered her wand nervously as the door was flung open to reveal the sharp figure of Draco Malfoy, his sleeves rolled up to his forearms, looking like sin personified.

"Granger," he called as she approached. "You came."

There was a hint of stubble on his jaw, and his hair was slightly longer than she'd seen it last, its platinum sheen catching on the cottage's light. She'd feel bad for ogling him, but his eyes were running over her figure like a starved man taking in a banquet, lingering on the delicate straps on her shoulders, her exposed clavicles, her tanned legs. She watched as his throat bobbed noticeably, something hot and insistent unfurling inside her at the sight.

She stood on the first stone step below the doorframe, exacerbating their height difference, and nervously twisted the hem of her skirt. She had a plan for tonight, a plan Malfoy was unaware of, a plan that involved liquid courage and scraps of lace. A plan that, should she have misread his intentions, could go terribly, terribly awry.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Hermione asked, peeking up at him through her eyelashes. His eyes were dark and overcast; their shadows sent a thrill ghosting across her skin.

"I'd prefer to do this first," Malfoy admitted, his voice devastatingly rough, as he yanked her firmly against him and pressed his lips to hers.

---

---

Forgive me my beloveds, I know I said this was the last chapter of Part I. But...then I hit 6,000 words and was only half way through, so I had to split it into two installments. And thirty chapters is such a lovely, neat number for the first third of story to culminate with. You'll get the continuation next week...I promise it will be worth the wait.

Notes:

- This chapter is for the girls! It's so important to me to write strong female characters, something I fear the canon sorely lacked.

- I always thought that sending Harry back to the Dursley's was literally the dumbest thing ever. If he was safe at the Burrow after turning seventeen...why didn't he just go to the Burrow in the first place?

- I write Moody is Irish, so "wean" just means kid/youth/youngster.

- I laughed so much while writing Fleur's lingerie scene (you just know she walks Bill like a dog). She is undoubtedly Ginny's new hero.

- It's long been my thought that Lavender Brown, resident ditz, is actually very, very smart. It was important to Hermione's character that she realize how she'd underestimated those who don't present as "academically clever."

- The talk Molly has with the girls was devastating to write, but it would be remiss to pretend that sexual violence is not a reality of war (it will not play an important part in this story, but it made sense to have the characters consider it as the threat of Voldemort looms).

- Not much Draco here, besides "I'd never let anything happen to you," but that's just in preparation for our favorite two idiots' looming interaction next week in Chapter 30: "That Which Cannot Be Undone."

---

# That Which Cannot Be Undone

## Chapter 30: That Which Cannot Be Undone

---

Draco and Hermione play a dangerous game of firsts. News interrupts breakfast at the Burrow.

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The world fell out from under Hermione as Draco kissed her on the steps of the cottage, his lips hard and certain like he'd resolved himself to do it the moment he'd set eyes on her. His hands were insistent on her waist, pulling her against him until her hips met his. She shuddered at the sensation, and he responded with a low, pleased sound, emanating from his throat.

Then, she came to her senses, drew her wand, and pressed it directly to his neck.

The atmosphere surrounding the cottage was unusual for the English countryside, almost anticipatory in its stillness. The wind carried the earthy scent of dry soil and dust, and she could smell just the barest hint of rain. The typical sounds of summer—the crinkling of leaves, the sweet hum of crickets—seemed too quiet, as if nature itself was holding its breath. Off in the distance, billowing clouds had begun to gather, their edges diffused against the night sky.

Malfoy all but ignored the weapon against his neck, looking at her with intrigue in his nebulous gray eyes. Despite the clear threat between them, his hands still lingered, fingers flexing at her waist.

“Granger,” he greeted with an irreverent smirk. “Is this any way to say hello to your wizard?”

Hermione caught her breath: she'd lost her head for a moment there, melting into him before even checking whether he was under an Imperius curse or if he even was who he said he was, and not an imposter under the influence of Polyjuice.

She racked her mind for a question only he would know the answer to.

"We went to a burial, before the term ended," Hermione asked, searching his face for any hint of deception. His skin was still fair, but with a healthy glow that suggested time spent outdoors. He looked slightly more tousled than usual, but that could have been her doing. "Who died?"

"Seriously?" Malfoy raised his eyebrows in disbelief. Wearing such an incredulous look, he certainly *looked* like the Malfoy she knew, but it would be remiss of her not to make sure of it. "I hate to break it to you, but if I were a Death Eater, you'd be dead already."

In response, she just pressed harder with her wand, forcing him to increase the space between them.

"Fine, I'll play," he allowed, like he was humoring her. *Prat.* "Hagrid's enormous eight-legged friend kicked it. We got lashed, did a bit of snogging, and then Pansy showed up and ruined my life, as she is wont to do. I recently wanked over the memory, it was quite stimulating."

She gaped at his cheek and he smirked, obscenely satisfied.

"Does that satisfy your inquiry? Certain that it's really me?"

"Ask me something, you prick," Hermione insisted, ignoring his casual reference to the 'bit of snogging' they'd done in Hagrid's pumpkin patch, and the self gratification he'd recently used it for.

She was sure her face was on fire. Her embarrassment delighting him.

"I forgot how aggressive you are when you're in a strop," he noted, his voice lowering into a near purr. "Not that I don't enjoy it."

She clenched a fist at her side. Why did he always have to be so bloody difficult? Why did it feel like she was running a fever whenever she was within a foot of him?

"*Malfoy*," she gritted. "You're supposed to make sure it's really me."

"Let it be said that if you *were* someone else impersonating the walking headache known as Hermione Granger, I would have known fairly quickly." Malfoy's lips curled up at the thought. "I doubt an imposter would react so enthusiastically to being greeted like *that*."

"What a foolproof plan," she quipped back with an exaggerated roll of her eyes. "Tell me, do you go around kissing everyone to confirm their identity?"

"Why?" He questioned mockingly in response, his infuriatingly smug expression deepening into something she desperately wanted to slap off his face. "Are you jealous?"

"Ugh," Hermione huffed, shouldering past him through the doorway. "I know it's you. No one else is this obnoxious."

The interior of the cottage was far more splendid than the exterior. This was no mere country house: the entrance hall opened to a stately room, with floor to ceiling windows and a gilded fireplace surrounded by plush settees. Below intricately designed crown molding, the walls were painted a muted seafoam green and dotted with framed paintings, some turned to face the wall.

"Don't turn them back around," Malfoy cautioned darkly as Hermione examined the inverted frames. "Some of them are rather mouthier than others,"

"Where are we?" Hermione questioned as she examined the room. "What is this place?" Upon closer look, the designs in the crown

molding were actually linked script, made up of names— Artemion, son of Oberon; Demetrius, son of Aster, and so on— covering the ceiling.

“It’s where I was going to hide my mother. I had to portkey you here, didn’t dare to write down the address now that the secret keeper’s dead,” Malfoy admitted from where he leaned casually on the mantle, a fiber of anger in his voice. Against the background of the opulent country house, he looked every bit the young, bitter aristocrat, ripped straight from the pages of a Bronte novel. “This is the Black family’s Second Son’s Estate.”

“Second son?” Hermione wondered, a million questions on the tip of her tongue.

“Traditionally, the Black Manor is passed along to the family’s heir—the first son, barring complications— but to keep second sons from squabbling, or murdering the elder brothers for their inheritance, provisions had to be made. Second sons were traditionally willed country homes, far enough from the family seat to ensure they couldn’t cause too much trouble. It was a convenient way of shipping off the spare without discounting them completely, in case the first son died before providing the family line with an heir.”

He conjured a silver tea service as he spoke, nodding at her to sit. She did so, perching on the edge of one of the settees, wholly out of place in her simple cotton sundress and leather sandals. Compared to Malfoy’s linen suit jacket and dragonhide loafers, she felt more than a bit underdressed. At least he wasn’t wearing a tie.

“Technically,” Malfoy continued as he sprawled beside her on the small seat, taking up an unnecessary amount of space. She felt a prickling heat stem from the place his clothed knee nudged at her side. “This house was supposed to go to my cousin. Regulus Black, younger brother to Sirius Black, both sons of Orion and Walburga.” He parroted off the genealogy instinctually, as if it had been drilled into him at a young age. Given the state of the crown molding, it probably had.

“Sirius had a brother?”

“You knew him, didn’t you? I had heard he was Potter’s godfather,” Malfoy’s face turned grim. “Regulus was a few years younger. He was made the Black heir once his elder brother was disowned. He joined the Death Eaters when he was sixteen, right before the first war. His body was never recovered.”

He went a bit distant as he spoke, a telltale hint of occlusion in his gaze. Hermione got the impression Regulus’ death was something he thought about often, probably in relation to the possibility of his own predicament.

“Because Sirius was disinherited, and neither brother had a son to pass the name to, the inheritance passed to Cygnus’ descendents, Orion’s brother’s line. Cygnus was my grandfather, and because he had no sons himself and Bellatrix is blessedly uninterested in children, I became the Black heir by default. Since I don’t have any siblings...”

He gestured around the great room in a self-explanatory fashion.

“The Second Son’s Estate goes to you,” Hermione surmised. “Until there’s a second son to bequeath it to.”

“Precisely,” he responded. “It was an ideal choice for a Fidelius charm. It’s already warded to the high heavens so that even blood relatives can’t get through— not even Bellatrix. If I had a younger brother, it would be his and I’d only be allowed in unarmed and by his express invitation. Sibling rivalry used to be a bit of an issue for the Blacks.”

Hermione thought *a bit of an issue* was a generous understatement. “You purebloods certainly contemplate fratricide more often than most.”

“Pity the wards don’t negate marriage bonds,” Malfoy said darkly, reminding her of how Lucius had foiled his escape plan. “Bonded



spouses always have a way of finding each other, inheritance wards be damned.” He gestured at where the silver pot sat forgotten on the tray. “Tea?”

“Erm,” Hermione hesitated, chewing on her bottom lip. She’d lost some of her nerve while surrounded by the grandeur of a dead boy’s hereditament. “Actually, I brought something a bit stronger.”

She fished around in the endless depths of her beaded bag, finally giving up and summoning the bottle of cheap scotch she’d picked up at a market in Ottery St. Catchpole.

Malfoy let out a low whistle, examining the bottle. “Didn’t take you for a lush, Granger. I’ve never seen this label before.”

“I’m not a lush. Certain scenarios simply...require a drink,” she countered weakly. “And you wouldn’t be familiar with it, it’s muggle scotch.”

“Certain...scenarios,” he repeated, and she could practically see the mental calculations behind his flattened eyes. “Is my company really so tiresome that you require inebriation?”

“No,” Hermione protested, before slyly reconsidering. “Well, I’m sure you’ve driven more than one person to the bottle. But that’s not what—not why I—oh, just pour us a drink, will you? Why do you have to make everything so difficult?”

Malfoy raised his eyebrows at her outburst and she looked down at her ravaged cuticles in embarrassment. He expertly conjured two crystal tumblers and filled them with amber liquid, giving his own a delicate sniff.

“Dare I ask,” he drawled, taking a sip and immediately screwing up his face at the taste. “Why you’ve brought abominably cheap liquor to an intelligence drop?”

“An...intelligence drop?”

He summoned a tightly wound scroll and tossed it to her. Miraculously, she caught it, examining the extensive privacy charms on the parchment.

*Oh*, Hermione realized, flooded by dismay. This was why he'd summoned her. He had information for the Order, information that could only go through her.

"Granger?"

This was fine. Hermione could be professional. He kissed her on the cottage steps, and she'd thought that maybe he'd asked her to come because he wanted...It didn't matter.

"Sorry." She shook out her curls, hoping to knock the intrusive thoughts from her head. "I...I don't know actually. I'm staying with the Weasleys, and there's just so many people around all the time, poking around in your business and walking in on you in the bath. Suppose I just needed to blow off a bit of steam."

He pulled a face, unable to hide his evident distaste at her living situation. It rankled her; not everyone was bequeathed a bloody manor.

"It's lovely most of the time," she added, defending the Burrow valiantly. "But after a while it can be a bit much. It might just be because I'm not used to having siblings to squabble over everything with."

"I can confirm that being the only child certainly makes one awful at sharing," he mused, examining her with the same heat from when he kissed her on the cottage steps. She got the impression he wasn't talking about sharing bathroom space.

Hermione busied herself with taking a drink, coughing as the beverage burned at her esophagus. It was shite; she supposed that was what she should have expected from a bottle that only cost her less than ten pounds.

“Sorry,” she offered, once she’d finished spluttering. Malfoy looked terribly amused by her reaction. “I guess there was a reason it was marked off.”

“Oh, it’s *discounted* liquor. You shouldn’t have.”

“Go have some of your two hundred-year-old slave made wine if you’re so bothered,” she sniped, contemplating finishing the contents of her glass out of pure malice. It really was undrinkable, but she didn’t want him to think that he was right.

He vanished both tumblers before she could spite him by tormenting herself.

“First of all, everyone knows the *doñas de fuera* are the best vintners, not elves,” Malfoy countered imperiously, standing and beckoning her to follow. “No one makes a vintage Montepulciano like an Italian sprite.”

He led her to another room, this one much smaller. She was greeted by the rich scent of polished wood and old books. Dark, gleaming mahogany paneling covered the walls, some equipped with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves filled with leather-bound volumes. Attached was a rolling library ladder, made of the same mahogany. It was furnished with several high backed leather chairs and a large, sturdy oak desk. There was a well stocked wine rack—the apparent reason for their relocation—and what looked like a cigar humidor in the corner. A thick Persian rug covered the hardwood floors, its intricate patterns and rich colors complementing the room’s opulence.

A crackling fire roared to life, enchanted to light itself as soon as they crossed the threshold. Malfoy strode in like he owned the place—which of course, he did—and opened an expensive looking bottle of red wine, pouring her a glass. She took a conservative sip, savoring the flavor, a harmonious blend of forest fruits, spice, and earthiness.

“Told you so.” He looked obnoxiously self-congratulatory as he watched her swallow. “Much better than your muggle swill, isn’t it.”

Her temper spiked instantly, as if he'd called for it by name. "Of course you'd think anything made by muggles is swill."

"It's swill because it's cheap, Granger," Malfoy answered mildly. "I'm sure wealthy muggles drink liquor that's far more palatable than whatever *that* was."

Hermione examined his expression, looking for traces of mockery, but only saw a calculated interest as he stared back, curious as to what she was still doing in his home.

If she was honest, she wasn't sure herself.

"What's in the scroll, then?" She asked in a transparent attempt to skirt his absolute focus. "Bit of Death Eater gossip?"

He grimaced, momentarily having forgotten where they were and why.

"I'm sure you know the ministry is hanging by a thread," Malfoy said, and to her surprise, he ignored the wingback chairs in favor of settling down on the rug covered floor, positioning his spine against the desk's leg. "Get down here. I don't like you towering over me, it's off putting."

He beckoned her with an incline of his head and her heart quickened. There was something strangely intimate about sitting on the rug together, the hearth crackling nearby. Despite her better judgment, she kicked off her sandals and sank to the floor alongside him.

"Scrimgeour is on borrowed time," Malfoy continued, looking into the fire pensively as he spoke. "Any affiliated Aurors will need out before they wipe the department clean of sympathizers. Ministry approved wards will be effectively useless; Fidelius charms are your best bet, if you can find someone able to cast them. I don't know when it'll happen—they don't tell me much, mostly just stick me in the potions

lab with Snape— but they do seem to forget it's *my* manor, and the elves overhear everything."

"The Death Eaters are staging a coup d'etat?" Hermione questioned as she settled, tucking her skirt around her knees. Malfoy tracked the movement with unabashed interest. "Does Vol—"

"Stop," Malfoy barked, shooting out a hand to cover her mouth. Alarm flared momentarily in his gaze, an urgent flame that countered the heat of even the fireplace. She squirmed against him but he held fast, pressing his palm firmly against her lips.

"There's a taboo on *his* name," Malfoy explained. "A tracking charm triggers every time it's uttered aloud. To round up all potential insurgents — the only ones dumb enough to use it are those who dare defy the Dark Lord anyway. So don't run your mouth in order to win any bravery points, and make sure Tweedle-Dee and Tweedle-Dickhead don't either."

She ignored the jab at Harry and Ron to consider this new, dangerous information: Voldemort was using a taboo on his own moniker. It combined several oppression tactics that Hermione knew were historically used by authoritarian regimes: both the censorship and tracking of opposition and the encouragement of Voldemort's cult of personality. The Dark Lord was taking pages right out of the modern dictator's handbook.

"Thanks," Hermione offered weakly, once he removed his hand.

"Don't mention it," he muttered.

The wine was smooth and velvety on her tongue, heralding a warm languid feeling that traveled all the way down her limbs. She stretched luxuriously, her skirt riding up an inch or two.

Malfoy cleared his throat.

"Is this a social call, Granger?"

“W-what?” Hermione’s lungs contracted sharply in distress. Was she really so transparent? “What makes you say that?”

“You’re wearing a dress. You’ve brought what could be loosely categorized as liquor. One could draw certain conclusions.” He paused and scowled, as if considering something distasteful. “Did you have an engagement before this?”

It was as if they were silently having a second, more delicate conversation under the first.

“No,” She answered honestly. “Nothing else.”

Hermione contemplated. She wanted him to touch her. To look at her in that way he sometimes did, like she had him leashed and bound. She wanted to feel like she was young and uninhibited, like she was a real person, not just a soldier in a war or an emblem of an ideology. His presence had a way of unconsciously making her into herself again, more intoxicating than any sprite-made wine.

She wanted him, but...she wasn’t sure exactly how to go about it. She should have asked Ginny.

“I don’t want to overstep,” Hermione finally said. “You’re already doing so much. But I— could I ask a favor?”

“It depends.” He ran a finger absently around the rim of his glass. “What would I get out of it?”

“Christ, that’s such a Malfoy response.”

“Go on then,” he allowed, waving his hand magnanimously. “Ask.”

“Can you...” Hermione bit her lip, shoving her roaring pride to the side. “Can you pretend with me that there’s not a war on? Just for tonight?”

“That’s your big request?” Malfoy scoffed, shaking his head in disbelief. “*Pretend there’s not a war?*”

“Oh, shut up,” she snapped, feeling oddly exposed. “You don’t have to make me feel stupid about it. I just wanted one night, where I didn’t have to be a spy or a soldier or a healer or a strategist. I wanted one night where I could be seventeen, be *normal*. I wanted a drink and a chat and—” She cut herself off abruptly, before she divulged something she’d undoubtedly regret. “I should have known better than to ask *you*.”

She moved to rise, but Draco was faster. He shot out a hand, steadying it on her bare knee, and dragged his thumb across it in a manner that could be described as soothing, if it weren’t so proprietary. Hermione started, looking between his hand and his face, which had suddenly gone very serious.

“Yes,” he said simply. “Yes, I can pretend.” He leaned over into his side, sprawling out on the rug, and propped himself up with his elbow, his movements slightly too casual. “Stay, if you want. You’re decent enough company.” He seemed slightly embarrassed by the admission, his cheekbones taking on dusting of color.

“What do you want in return?” Hermione asked hesitantly, aware of his propensity for making deals that served him far more than the other party.

“I’m sure I’ll think of something,” he answered with a smirk, and her pulse quickened at the hint of his tongue darting out to wet his lips.

The fire sent shadows flickering across his face, sharpening his bone structure with every change in the light.

*Say something*, her heart instructed. *Take what you want*.

*Keep your mouth shut*, her head snarled. *You’ll embarrass yourself*.

“It occurred to me.” Hermione let out a nervous, affected little laugh. “I’ve been caught up in this fight for so long, I’m not actually sure what normal people our age *do*.”

Draco raised his eyebrows, looking as if he wanted to say something salacious, before reconsidering.

“Games, I suppose,” he drawled after a long pause. “Usually those involving drinking.”

“I’ve never played one.”

“Merlin, you Gryffindors are *dull*, ” he declared. She was nearly insulted, before picking up on the teasing note in his voice. “What did you get up to in the common room? Fist fights and Exploding Snap?”

“Pretty much,” Hermione admitted, and his lips twitched in amusement. It made her want to pull a proper laugh from him. “How do you play then?”

“It can’t be anything too complicated,” Malfoy explained, topping off their mostly untouched wine. “Given the main objective is inebriation, simplicity is key, otherwise it all goes to shit after the first round. And no firewhiskey— we had to ban playing with liquor when Goyle boked all over the dormitory the fourth or fifth time.”

Hermione was filled with a grim wonder at his casual retelling: how strange, to consider Goyle as a lad, having a laugh and making a drunken mess with his mates, rather than a harbinger of hate and violence, clad in Death Eater robes. She wondered when it had happened— at what age did school boys become truly dangerous?

“What did the winner get?” Knowing the nature of the Slytherins, she was unsure whether she actually wanted the answer.

“Mostly, we played for secrets,” Draco explained. “We asked each other questions, usually designed to be equal doses of incrimination and public ridicule. People revealed a decent amount of family dirt after a few cups, and that’s basically as good as currency in Slytherin.”



"I can see that going awry rather quickly. What if you don't want to answer?"

"You drink." He raised his wine in demonstration. "The objective is usually to get pissed and gossip, preferably at the same time. It's not exactly alchemy."

"What if you lie?"

"Well." He smirked at her over his glass. "Usually, we spiked everyone's drinks with veritaserum."

Hermione blanched at the thought. Answering Malfoy's most prying and personal questions while inebriated and dosed with truth potion was her idea of Dante's ninth circle.

"Not like you can get your hands on veritaserum these days, not with the shortage. When we were younger, we'd play using just a vow of honesty. No blood, just the normal assurances: swear on your house, may your line die out if you lie, the usual."

"Right, the usual," Hermione scoffed, sitting up so she could drink properly. "Alright then. I, Hermione Jean Granger, first of my house, vow to speak only the truth. At least, for tonight." Draco repeated her words, adding in a few colorful provisions regarding the last of the Malfoy name dying in destitution, should he be caught in a lie.

It was the least serious vow they'd ever taken, a notion that struck her as completely ridiculous, and she giggled at the thought. He started at the noise and stared at her as if she'd sprouted horns.

"What?" She asked self-consciously, accidentally asking her first question of the night. "*What?*"

He shook his blond head in refusal, his hair curling at the edges. She liked it like this: a little too long, more imperfect than he usually allowed.

"I'm drinking," he answered, taking a gulp of wine. His initial question was immediate, as if it had been preemptively notched on a bow. "Were you ever interested in Weasley?"

"Ron?" Hermione asked, surprised by his choice of topic.

"Why, was there a different Weasley you were interested in?" He asked dryly, seeming unamused by the possibility.

"I wasn't interested in Ron," she said firmly, shaking her head. "There were moments that I thought maybe I could be. In fifth year, especially. But it was a bit weird to consider, even then." She struggled against the urge to never ever divulge her innermost romantic feelings with Draco Malfoy. "Is this a normal topic of inquiry for this game?"

"Yes," Draco answered. "Interrogating someone's sexual history is a favorite. That counts as a question, by the way." She spluttered about his unfairness. "You didn't answer the other bit. Did you fancy a different Weasley?" He pulled a face similar to the one he'd made while trying the scotch.

No, Hermione went to say, but the vow of honesty twinged gently, reminding her of something she'd long forgotten. An answer that was so terribly embarrassing, she was forced to take a hearty gulp of wine instead.

No, she would most definitely *not* be sharing with Malfoy the fact that in their first year, she'd had a harmless, juvenile crush on Percy Weasley. She didn't think it counted; she was *eleven*, for Christ's sake.

"*Really*," Draco asked, sounding equal parts intrigued and disgusted. "Which one?"

"It's not your turn," Hermione sniped back, hoping her face wasn't beet red. "What happened with you and Pansy?" She asked very quickly, nearly running the words together as she spoke.

“Me and Pansy?” Draco looked bewildered. “What, from back in fourth year?”

“It seemed rather...” Hermione struggled for the correct words. “Intense.”

“If you count a couple of virgins fumbling around in the dungeons for the first time as *intense*.” He grimaced with self-effacing humor at the thought. “Pansy dumped me at the end of fifth year for Warrington, then she started up with Blaise for a bit, that was a nightmare for everyone.” Malfoy shuddered at the thought, before coming back to himself. “It was never...Pansy’s like a sister to me. I know that sounds odd, given the fumbling, but I mean it. We were fourteen and curious and when you put randy teenagers in close living quarters, what do you expect?” He worried his lip between his teeth before adding, “You and Krum?”

“What about him?”

“Very cute, Granger. You know what I’m asking.”

“We’re friends,” Hermione defended. “I visited him in Bulgaria the summer after fourth year and we...got on well.” She swatted any thoughts of their sweet but brief time together to the back of her mind. “But you know, Quidditch was always his priority and school was always mine. It was never anything serious or particularly romantic. I think we’d both agree that we’re better off for it.”

“Sure,” Malfoy scoffed. “I don’t think *he’d* say that, but I’ll take your word for it, Granger. Go on, it’s your turn. Want to know more about my embarrassing first ventures into the world of shagging in broom closets?”

Hermione very much did *not* want to know more about that, not if it meant hearing about Pansy’s involvement.

“Do you still think wizards are superior to muggles?” The question was out before she could stop herself. It was something she hadn’t

even realized that she desperately needed to hear until that very moment.

“Straight into the deep then,” Malfoy sighed. “Why did I expect anything different?” He took a long pull of wine and she opened her mouth to protest his cowardice.

“Relax,” he drawled, before she could interrupt. “I’ll answer it, I just needed a drink first.” He topped off both glasses, and Hermione got the impression he was buying himself time.

“Yes,” Draco finally said, meeting her eyes. “I think wizards have their superiorities in relation to Muggles. But not because of anything I was taught about muggles being a lesser race and existing only to persecute purebloods. I don’t believe that they eat our young and pollute our gene pools or any of that rot.”

“Charming,” Hermione said, with no small degree of disgust. “You’re a real activist.”

He sent her a withering look. “I only say superior because wizards can do magic and muggles can’t, and I don’t think it’s *radical* to say that magic is the predominant force in this world. Which isn’t to imply muggles aren’t powerful in their own right. I doubt we’d be so scared of them if they weren’t. You can’t fear something and also call it inferior without calling yourself inferior in the same breath.” Malfoy said all of this very quickly, as if he was scared that if he didn’t get it all out at once, he’d be stopped before he could finish. “I’d fucking hope that you know I don’t see myself as superior to you, but I’d understand your doubt if I didn’t.”

“But you know *me*,” Hermione argued, her blood heating. “What about any random muggle on the street?”

“I think of magic as the superior force, but I don’t think that my life is worth more or that I am intrinsically better than a muggle just because I can wield it.” He shook his head bitterly. “There, go have a

laugh about how it took me a pathetically long time to realize that some wizards are worse than any muggle could be.”

“You’d be surprised,” Hermione responded, startled by the depth and complications of his response. She didn’t think he’d thought about the sociological paradoxes of his culture. She was impressed, not because of the validity of his opinion— him not being overtly prejudiced left the bar firmly on the floor— but because what he’d concluded was actually rather interesting.

“Muggles can be horrible in the same way as wizards. There have been plenty of unbelievably violent dictators in the muggle world. There’s been countless wars and genocides. Power just manifests differently, there. And there are lots of different kinds of magic in the world; I don’t agree that the kind we’re genetically predisposed to is simply the superior one. Take muggle technology, for example. They don’t need owls or tracking spells or moving pictures, not when they have emails and GPS and films. Electricity is just the bare minimum in terms of innovation these days—” She cut herself off, noting the strange look on his face. “I’m ranting, aren’t I? Sorry, I know it can be terribly irritating.”

Pink cheeked, she took a long drink from her goblet, allowing the heady acidity of the wine to stem her embarrassment. Why couldn’t she go a single evening without delivering a lecture?

“No, I...like it,” Draco said suddenly. He was looking at her in the way one might regard a particularly mystifying piece of art. “I like when you get like that. Passionate. Clever. It’s...I just like it, okay?” His voice took on a sudden snap, bewilderingly defensive once more.

“Okay,” Hermione answered slowly, both bemused by his turn of tone and flustered by his admission.

Outside the study, there was a bright bolt of lightning, evidence of an impending summer thunderstorm. Hermione shrieked, lurching

towards him instinctively. Malfoy didn't so much as twitch, his profile lit up magnificently from the flash.

"It's just a storm, Granger," Malfoy smirked at her, having apparently recovered from her line of questioning. "Don't tell me the brave little Gryffindor is afraid?"

"I'm not *afraid*," she insisted hotly, rising to his challenge in a manner that was almost instinctive. She was, after all, a Gryffindor, for better or for worse. There was nothing she hated more than being seen as timid, weak. Powerless.

"Not of anything?" Malfoy teased. They weren't drunk, at least not yet. But they'd conjured a sense of intoxication in the study: something in the way his voice roughened on the consonants of her surname, or how her eyes were undoubtedly shining, the way they did when she found a lesson particularly challenging.

"Are you afraid of me?" He asked, after a beat of silence.

Thunder rumbled outside the cottage, alerting them of the storm's proximity. If she counted the seconds between the flash and the sound, she'd have found the storm was only a few miles off. But for once, Hermione was completely unconcerned with the world outside of the study, not even fully sure it still existed.

"No," she answered, resolving herself to honesty. "I'm not afraid of you. Afraid *for* you, yes. Sometimes, I worry so much it makes me feel a bit sick." Unconsciously, she rubbed the purple scar Dolohov had left on her chest. He followed her hand's movements. "Are you afraid of me?" She asked, meaning to lighten the heaviness between them with a bit of a joke, but the admission came out breathy and strangely coy.

Malfoy shut his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them again, she knew that the darkness in them could overshadow any storm.

“Terrified,” he replied, and she saw it in his face, his fear mixed with a savage sort of delight at her answer. She felt a thrill run through her, a swooping sensation in her stomach like she was falling from a great height.

She’d moved much closer. His face was inches away. He was going to kiss her, she could feel it with as much certainty as she’d felt the impending promise of rain.

Draco’s lips were less than a centimeter from hers when Hermione blurted, “I think we should have sex.”

He froze.

Immediately, she wished the ground would crack open a chasm and swallow her, take her directly to Hades where she belonged.

“What?” Draco croaked, drawing back from her.

She buried her head in her hands, knowing there was no amount of wine in the world that would erase this from her memory.

“I—” *You’re supposed to be brave, Hermione*, a voice insisted within her. It filled her with enough resolve to stammer over an explanation. “I thought maybe you wanted that. To, um, with me. We’ve almost...a couple of times, right? And I...I haven’t, yet.” Her face was most definitely the color of a brick wall. “But don’t worry about me not knowing how, I’m a quick learner. And I don’t care about some precious virginity shite or anything, I won’t make a big deal of it. It doesn’t have to mean anything. Molly Weasley taught me the contraceptive charm,” Hermione finished weakly. “I cast it before I came.”

She chanced a peek at his face, mortified over what she saw.

Draco Malfoy’s lips were parted as he gaped at her, undoubtedly in sheer horror. He promptly stood, leaving her blushing on the rug, and

began pacing the length of the study. He muttered to himself under his breath as he went, shaking his head in disbelief.

“M-Malfoy?” She ventured, pulling herself up to stand. “I can, erm. I can see myself out?”

His head snapped around, his eyes like bits of coal.

“Let me get this straight,” he said, his voice like a ship that had run aground, completely wrecked. With every word, he took a step closer. “You’d like for us to shag because you haven’t before and because Molly Weasley taught you the contraceptive charm?”

She backed up instinctively as he approached, putting space between them until her back hit the oak desk.

“Those aren’t good enough reasons to fuck someone, Granger,” he growled, closing the distance between them. He caged her in against the desk, forcing her to lean back onto the wooden surface. “Would you like to hear some good reasons?”

Hermione could feel the tension in the room heighten, crackling around them like uncontrolled magic. At a loss for words for the first time in her life, she nodded.

“I think we should have sex—” Draco leaned in, his breath cool on her neck as he whispered “—because I’ve wanted to for months. Every time I got myself off, I thought of you. Imagining how you’d feel inside. What you’d sound like. How pretty you’d look for me, when you came.”

He reached up and stroked her cheek as he spoke.

“And just so you know, I’d make it mean something. I’d make it good for you. If you let me. ”

She couldn’t breathe. If he kept talking, she’d asphyxiate and die.

He kept talking.



“I’ve never seen you in a dress like this. Flimsy little thing. Did you wear this for me?” Draco asked, trailing his hand from her face down her clavicle, her shoulders. “Don’t you dare lie.”

He ran a finger under the strap of her dress, teasing the skin underneath, trailing fire from his fingertips as he went.

“Yes,” she breathed. “I wore it for you.”

He pulled the delicate strap slowly down her shoulder, taking his time in undoing her. She was shaking now, her whole body trembling.

“Good.” He pulled the other strap off, reaching behind her for the zipper. “Tell me to stop,” he warned, fingering the clasp. She shook her head; she’d burn up if he stopped, consumed by how badly she wanted him to keep touching her until she was nothing but ash.

The dress pooled at her feet.

Underneath, she wore a simple set, ordered surreptitiously from Fleur’s catalog of Muggle inspired lingerie. It wasn’t anything complicated or scandalous, just a pretty lace lined bra and matching knickers. The color made her tanned skin look golden, warm against the powder blue.

Her blush spread from her cheeks all the way down to where the swells of her breasts peeked out from under the lace. There was something excruciating about putting oneself on display. She felt deeply self conscious before noticing Draco looking at her avariciously, in the way that a dragon might regard a hoard of gold.

His eyes were dark and wide, caught up in the sheer expanse of bare skin as if he wasn’t sure where to look first. After a long, heated moment, he dragged his gaze up to her face.

“And this?” Draco finally managed, his voice thick with desire. “Is this for me too?”

She nodded.

"I take it back," he said. "Muggles are superior. I'll never say anything to the contrary ever again."

She laughed. He reached out to brush the waistband of her knickers. The slightest of touches sent goosebumps across the soft skin of her lower abdomen.

To her dismay, he pulled back.

"Are you drunk?" He asked, through clenched teeth.

She shook her head slowly. She'd only had a few glasses of wine; she felt warm and relaxed, but not inebriated.

"I won't—" Draco cleared his throat. His hands shook from the effort it took not to touch her. "I won't do anything you don't ask me to. I'll go slow." It sounded like he was begging. "But only if you're sure."

"Ask me," she breathed, as if they were simply continuing their game from earlier.

"Are you sure, Hermione?"

In answer, she laced her fingers around his neck, and met his mouth with hers.

It was both more and less desperate than their other kisses. More because of the urgency, her need to have her tongue in his mouth right away. Less because they both knew it was a precursor to something else.

Hermione slid her hands up his chest, undoing the buttons at his collar, impatient to equalize their states of dress. She wasn't quite sure what to do with her hands next, and she could feel her nerves making a resurgence, fluttering in her chest.

Malfoy seemed unhastened, taking whatever he wanted at the pace that suited him. Moving his lips to her neck and then, to the swell of her breast. He bit down, digging his teeth into her skin. She inhaled sharply, surprised by how *good* it felt, the little pinpricks of discomfort alongside the heightened pressure between her legs.

Then, he ran his tongue against the dark purpling scar of Dolohov's curse and she saw stars.

"I was right," he murmured into her skin. "I knew you'd make such filthy noises."

She hadn't even realized she'd cried out.

"Should we—" Hermione gasped, as he pulled down the lace cups of her bra with his teeth. His tongue laved her nipple before sucking it into his mouth. The world exploded and reformed at the sensation. "A bedroom?" She finally managed.

"No," Draco growled, and lifted her under her thighs, hiking her up around his hips. She instinctively wrapped her legs around him and he lifted her, positioning her body as he saw fit. "Here."

He lowered them, laying her down on the plush Persian rug, knocking over their glasses as he went. He leaned over her, tasting her neck, mouthing at her jaw.

"The wine—" she protested weakly. "It'll stain."

"I don't give a single bloody fuck about the rug," Draco said, his pupils dilating as he took in her figure, splayed out before him. Ducking his head, he licked a long stripe from her waist to the underside of her breast. She let out a harsh breath, thoughts of wine stains forgotten.

From above her, he looked like a classical painting, a marble sculpture. Lovely and hard and unmistakably masculine. His chiseled jaw, the solid planes of his chest and stomach peeking out from his

unbuttoned shirt. She could see the sectumsempra scars that *she'd* healed, the evidence of her magic all over his body forever.

The thought caused her to tighten around nothing. She felt strangely *empty*.

"I think you should take your clothes off now," Hermione whispered, before she could lose her nerve.

He moved faster than she thought possible, toeing off his shoes and socks before shucking his shirt and trousers and tossing them haphazardly behind him. When he was down to his pants, he hesitated.

"That too," she added, watching as he pushed them down, revealing his painfully hard cock. She sucked in a breath, remembering that sometimes, especially the first time, sex could be painful.

"Are you..." She questioned nervously, staring at him as he took it in hand, groaning as he gave a sharp tug. "Does that hurt?"

"Hurt?" He asked, taken aback. "No, it—" He took her hand gently, guiding it to himself. She wrapped her fingers around his cock in the same way he had, feeling the dizzying heaviness, the warmth of it. Tentatively, she squeezed his length and he let out a sound like he'd been terribly wounded. She jumped, withdrawing her hand apologetically.

"It doesn't hurt," Draco managed, his voice utterly wrecked. "It feels bloody incredible."

He leaned into her until she laid back. Caressed her waist, arranged her hips. Wrapped his large hands around her thighs. The sight caused a bolt of need to flash through her, brighter than any mere lightning.

"Let me show you."

Draco settled between her legs, slowly hooking two fingers into the band of her knickers, a question in his darkened eyes. She whined in affirmation, already desperate for him to touch her.

Hermione closed her eyes as he pulled them off, overwhelmed.

It wasn't like she was ashamed of her body, but she wasn't sure of it either. What if it wasn't what he liked? Maybe she should have—

When she opened them again, she saw Draco looking directly at her exposed cunt, his usual inscrutable facade cracked completely open, a rapturous awe in its place.

“You're so pretty, Granger,” Draco said hoarsely.

She was embarrassingly wet. He dragged his fingers through her, stroking her slit. When he reached the bundle of nerves at the top of her sex, he pressed until she bucked her hips, seeking more friction. To her dismay, he let up, lifting his fingers to his mouth and sucking them clean.

*Oh.*

Thanks to Lavender's waxing poetic on the topic, she knew plenty about oral sex, knew some men didn't prefer it and some men very much *did*. But it was one thing to know this hypothetically and another to see Draco Malfoy leaning over her, with his sinful lips inches from her center.

From the way he was looking at her, she'd assume he was one of the latter.

“So wet and pink,” Draco murmured. “What a sweet little cunt.” He gave her clit a soft kitten lick, the barest of pressure, and she gasped at the sensation. It was nothing like what she could do with her fingers. It was indescribably better.

“Has anyone ever done this before?” He looked up from between her legs to meet her eyes.

“N-no,” she moaned, as he kissed along her inner thighs teasingly.

“Good,” he said. “I’ll show you.”

Without hesitation, he kissed her cunt in earnest. His tongue did unspeakable things to her clit as he ate her out, making obscenely wet sounds as he went.

“You taste like ambrosia,” he murmured, spreading her wider for better access. He had her slick all over his chin and the sight made her delirious. “Nectar of the gods.”

Hermione keened at his words. She’d be embarrassed at how wanton she looked, her legs spread and cunt dripping, but she was too far gone to care. Too desperate for him to make her come, to give her reprieve from the all encompassing tightening of her body.

“Please,” she babbled, unsure of what she was begging for. “Please, Draco, please.”

She could feel him smiling into her clit.

“Patience, Granger,” he said, pulling his tongue away despite her whining, so that he could slip a finger into her. She clenched around it instinctively. He swore violently at the sensation, the intense grip of her walls. “Fuck, you’re so tight. We have to get you nice and relaxed so you can take it, okay sweetheart? Gonna open you up for me.” He pumped his finger as he spoke, sending sparks bursting behind her eyes.

“Another,” she insisted, head thrown back as he obeyed. She knew from experience getting herself off that she could take two fingers, but his were thicker and longer and more dextrous.

He fucked her with them, dragging against her inner walls as he withdrew, heightening the pressure. When he added his mouth back in the mix, lapping and sucking at her clit, her cunt tightened and she came with a cry of relief.

She spasmed as she climaxed, a white hot pleasure coursing from her center all the way to her toes. She babbled praise—*so good, it's so good*—and he didn't let up on touching her, stroking her through it and murmuring encouragements into crease of her thigh as she came down.

When she fully stilled, Hermione covered her face with her hands, pressing her palms firmly into her eyes.

"Thank you," she croaked weakly, hating how grateful she sounded.

"Fuck me," Draco muttered, staring obscenely as he pulled his soaked fingers from her. He sucked them right into his mouth as if he hadn't gotten enough. "So polite when you come. You're going to be the death of me." His voice was slurred with pleasure, and she tingled with the thought that she was the one to cause it.

"That's the idea," she said, feeling emboldened. "Isn't it?"

"You don't have to," Draco choked out as she wriggled under his body, lining up her pelvis with his as best she could. It was a little awkward—she had to tilt up her hips, lock her legs around his waist so that they aligned correctly— but when his length brushed her center, he made a noise so indecent that she nearly came again.

"I want to," Hermione responded. "I want it to be you."

His resolve snapped.

He pinned her under him properly, dragging her hips flush to his and wrapping her legs around him. With a muttered curse, he reached down and ran his cock through her folds, coating himself with her slick.

“Tell me if you don’t like something, alright?” he begged, pressing the head of his cock into her, the sensation already overwhelming. “Tell me what you want.”

“It’s so much,” she gasped and he growled, his fingers digging into her skin as he pushed in another inch.

“Whatever you want,” he babbled, his eyes shut tightly. “I’ll give it to you.” Another inch disappeared into her cunt. She started to feel a little discomfort, an overwhelming sense of fullness, like maybe she *couldn’t* fit him inside her.

She made a little noise and Draco’s eyes flew open, checking her face for any uncertainty. They were loveliest shade of gray— glinting like gunmetal, caught in the sun. Hermione made the decision for the both of them, tightening her legs around his hips and using the leverage to pull him deep. There was a bit of pain—blunt and surprising— and then he was completely sheathed in her.

Her cunt pulsed as she took his cock to the hilt, stretching to accommodate him. His hips twitched, desperate for friction, but Hermione winced, not yet ready for him to move.

Understanding, he stilled and dropped his head into the crook of her neck, whispering about how tight she was into the valley of her throat.

“Like a dream,” he breathed, as she adjusted to the feeling of him. “You feel like a fucking dream. I can barely— can’t even believe I get to be inside you.”

His fingers found her breasts, plucking at her nipples. He was never not touching her; it was as if he needed to, in order to confirm she was still real.

“Do you like this? Like having your pretty little tits played with while you’re stuffed full with my cock?”



She gasped, overwhelmed by the filth coming from his lips. She didn't think he'd be so wonderfully mouthy in bed. It was almost too much to handle.

After several torturous moments of teasing, she ran her hands into his silky hair until he lifted his head, his face inches below hers.

"I want you to move now, Draco."

Obediently, he dragged his cock from her, slowly thrusting back in. They both let out strangled sounds. He repeated the motion more intently. Over and over, until the friction burned brighter than the discomfort, the movements turning devastatingly pleasurable.

Hermione understood now: *this* was why people launched ships and burnt cities.

As he moved over her, he stared at the place they were joined. Watching as he pushed in and withdrew with her wetness gleaming on his cock.

"I'm going to picture this every time I close my eyes," Draco hissed through clenched teeth, pushing her legs towards her chest and holding her thighs so they were bent open. The position let her take him deeper, and she hissed with pleasure at the change of sensation. She felt completely, devastatingly full. "Every time I close my eyes, I'm going to see the way you look when I'm fucking you." He thrust harder, nudging a spot that had her gasping. Encouraged, he reached down and rubbed her clit, the combination of fullness and friction sending her soaring. Distantly, she was shocked she might be able to manage a second orgasm.

"Gonna picture you taking me like you were made for it." More pressure, his fingers and thrusts speeding up in tandem. His words started to blur together as he ran his mouth, praise and demands spilling from his lips. "You were made for me, weren't you? Your tight cunt and your pretty eyes, all mine." He punctuated each word with a thrust, his breath hitching as he went. "Fuck, I can't last."

She was made of glass, ready to shatter.

“Yours,” she moaned in agreement, half out of her mind as she was wound tighter and tighter, the world contracting into a single pinpoint of pleasure. She could feel herself begin to flutter around his cock.

“Oh Christ, Draco. It’s—”

“— I know, sweetheart, it’s so good. You have to come now, okay? Please, *please* come for me—”

Hermione fell to pieces, his encouragement tipping her over the perilous edge of a cliff, gentle nets woven of silk waiting to catch her below. As soon as her cunt started pulsing around him, Draco pushed forward, practically bending her in half, and came in her with a deep moan.

It could have been minutes or hours or years before they moved, Hermione had no idea.

“So... *that’s* what it’s like?” She finally asked, once she’d found she still had a voice. He was crushing her a little, but she found she didn’t truly mind.

“Sometimes,” Draco managed, sounding a bit strangled. He rolled them both onto his back without disjoining, positioning her to lay on his chest. She rested on him, unwilling for it to be over just yet.

After a short while, she could feel him softening, his come starting to leak from her. Her cunt pulsed at the sensation, overstimulated, and he winced.

“Sorry,” she whispered, moving off him. Their combined release spilled from her, dripping onto her thighs and the rug below.

To her mortification, he kept his eyes fixed on her cunt, staring until she squirmed. He reached out and touched her over sensitive center, dragging his fingers through their mess in dark admiration of

his own work. She shivered at the look on his face, and as if suddenly coming back to himself, he finally drew his hand away.

Looking slightly lost, Draco summoned his wand from where it had rolled near the desk and conjured a glass of water, somehow predicting that she'd be incredibly thirsty. She murmured her thanks, drinking it in silence.

At some point, the storm had stopped. The early morning light peeled through the study's windows like a warning. It must have been four or five, just before dawn.

She had to be back at the Burrow by sunrise. The thought nearly broke her heart.

"That wasn't my best—" Draco started, cutting himself off. "What I mean to say is, I can go longer—er, make it more— or gentler, I'm not always such a brute—" Finally, he gave up, lacing his hands behind his neck in discomfort. He seemed at a bit of a loss, the snarling confidence from when he'd fucked her slowly diminishing.

Now, as daybreak loomed, his eyes grew uncertain, perhaps considering what came next. *Maybe he regretted it*, the cruel voice of insecurity forced her to consider. Maybe sex was supposed to be different, faster or slower or more acrobatic.

"Was I alright?" She asked, her voice smaller than she'd intended it to be. "Did I—I mean, was it—"

His brow creased, like he was flummoxed by the question. He narrowed his eyes in accusation. "Are you taking the piss?"

When he realized she in fact *wasn't* making a joke at his expense, he shook his head, the blond strands darkened from sweat.

"You don't even realize what you've done to me." Draco barked a laugh, his mirth tinged with a strange bitterness. "I'm ruined, Granger." His tone took on a possessiveness, a claim that shouldn't

have thrilled her, but did. “I won’t give you up. No one will take you from me. *No one.*”

“No one *can* take me,” she said and his eyes darkened at her implicit acceptance of his claim. She’d never felt more powerful than like this, naked and spent, under the covetous gaze of Draco Malfoy.

From outside the cottage, birds began to chirp, the hesitant calling of early morning.

“I have to go,” Hermione said, hating the words as if they slipped from her lips. “Everyone will be up in arms if they realize I disappeared overnight.”

She summoned her dress from where he’d discarded it, not bothering with her underthings. A part of her—the part that wanted him to remember this night, to be tortured by it, so he wouldn’t forget her—was satisfied to leave them behind.

“Right,” Draco said tightly, as she dressed. “Of course.”

Hermione fastened the straps of her dress. She couldn’t read his face; he had turned his back as she changed to allow her privacy, a ridiculous thought considering he’d just been watching his come drip from her cunt in fascination. She blushed furiously at the thought.

“Right,” Hermione said. She knew she should discuss other matters with him before she left, but she couldn’t bring herself to ruin the intimate little world they’d created between them, where the impending war didn’t exist.

Before she could convince herself otherwise, she crossed the room and pressed a brief kiss on his cheek. “Bye then, Draco.”

Malfoy grabbed her wrist, yanking him against her, and kissed her properly—long and languid, with liberal use of his tongue. Both hands cradling her face, like she was something precious.

“Bye then, Granger,” he whispered, before pulling himself away.

---

Hermione slipped back into the Burrow just in time for breakfast, cutting the line for the shower in order to wash the heady smell of sweat and sex from her skin before anyone could notice.

She ignored the banging on the door, feigning confusion as she emerged, scrubbed clean and pink from the heat. Lavender, the origin of the banging, was fuming.

“Sorry,” Hermione apologized sweetly. “Thought it was my turn.” She ducked instinctively, dodging Lavender’s stinging jinx as she went.

Hermione sat at her usual spot at the breakfast table, steadfastly ignoring raised eyebrows from Ginny, losing herself in the hectic bustle and occasional brawl that accompanied mealtimes at the Burrow. Percy had to ask her to pass the eggs twice before she heard, earning more than a few confused looks.

“You alright, Hermione?” Ron asked, half a sausage in his mouth, as Lavender looked on with mild disgust.

“I’m fine,” Hermione managed weakly. “Just haven’t had a coffee yet.” She couldn’t exactly explain that she’d had sex with Draco Malfoy mere hours prior, and that as a result, she was bereft of cognitive function.

She methodically cut her pancake into squares, only half listening to the conversation at the table—chat over the morning’s Prophet, good natured ribbing about Harry’s upcoming birthday—as she lingered in the events of the night.

Hermione had wondered if having sex would feel like losing something, giving a piece of herself up. She’d never considered that it could result in her feeling she’d *gained* something, a method of expression that was new and stunningly effective.

Hermione was still lost in thought when a wisp of silver came streaking through the open kitchen window, an urgent Patronus. The table immediately fell silent.

*The ministry has fallen.* Kingsley's calm voice emanated from the Patronus, echoing around the Burrow ominously. *Scrimgeour is dead. It's starting.*

Wizarding Britain was officially at war.

Someone dropped a plate. Molly Weasley gasped. Bill and Fleur sprung up instantly, abandoning toast in favor of rushing out to check the wards. Moody had made them all drill evacuation plans for moments precisely like this one. They had prepared for the worst, but it didn't change the intensity of the fear that flooded Hermione, leaving her paralyzed at the breakfast table.

The war was no longer a threat, a specter of the future. It was *here*. And it would demand blood.

End of Part I

---

- Rated E for "Even I'm Blushing, and I Wrote the Damn Thing." Smoke Signals Draco is, predictably, a TALKER during sex.

- Angel: wait to post the chapter until tomorrow morning at a reasonable hour. Devil: POST IT NOW and you can wake up to comments like it's Christmas!

- Not to overshare, but. I was raised very religious, which led to a difficult relationship with sex. I worked on my mental health, practiced exposure therapy \*wink wink\* with a supportive partner, and ultimately healed that relationship. But I wanted to write this chapter for any reader who had a complicated or negative experience with their first sexual encounters. Draco and Hermione aren't perfect, but they respected each other (and each other's

pleasure) during this encounter, and I hoped to use Hermione's POV to prioritize all the empowering ways sex can make you feel. (I died a little while working on this in public at a cafe, though)

---

# A Missed Migration

## Chapter 31: Missed Migration

---

Draco does Hermione a favor. Theo visits with the dead. The Slytherin boys desecrate Snape's garden.

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

### Part II

The last dregs of autumn were still circling the drain, the cold November air only made more frigid by the merciless spray of the North Sea. The desolate island was located off the Yorkshire coast, only accessible by enchanted boat, which meant Draco Malfoy was wet, freezing, and in an absolutely *rotten* mood.

He swept ahead of his companion, double lined cloak fluttering in the bitter wind as he climbed along the narrow cliffside path. When he finally reached the outlook, he saw what they'd come for: a romanesque castle with weathered stone walls, looming over the craggy bluff. A sentinel of the past, its towering turrets and crumbling battlements casting long shadows that whispered of their arrival.

Draco hated it here. He could hardly hear himself think over the sound of waves, crashing against the jagged rocks. Even the sight of the occasional seabird, cutting across the gray skies, soured his attitude; any bird he saw would undoubtedly be dead in the next few months, one of the stragglers that had missed migration. He hated the miserable cold. Hated the uttered desolation of a place where nothing would dare grow.

And most of all, he hated that it had been three months and eleven days since he'd seen Hermione Granger. Since the gods showered



him with undeserved good fortune, since she'd allowed him to fuck her, hold her, even if it was too briefly. Three months and eleven days, and he'd thought of her—how her eyes sparkled when she disagreed with him, when she laughed, when she came—every single fucking one of them.

It had been three months and eleven days of war. Of toasting the Dark Lord's bloody vision of the future while occluding himself half-unconscious. Of raids and duels and bodies, and the relief he felt when each corpse dragged onto the manor grounds had a face other than hers. Of brewing highly illegal potions for the Dark Lord's stores under Snape's tutelage, and then when his godfather returned to Hogwarts as the Headmaster, on his own.

There'd been no conversation about Draco returning to school, and he'd not pressed the issue, knowing he'd be all but useless to the Order if confined to the castle. He couldn't afford to become useless, not when his mother was still trapped in the Manor under his father's thumb, undergoing increasingly extreme and experimental treatments from increasingly fraudulent healers in hopes to return her magic to its former potency.

Returning to school would also leave him unable to meet with Granger, not that he'd had the opportunity. The only reason Draco even knew she was alive were the responses that appeared, written in her lovely cramped script: *Safe. Locked down at the Burrow. No one in or out.* He didn't tell her that the diary he'd give her to communicate with him was half of a pair of courting journals, charmed to only show the contents to the intended recipient. Draco didn't want her to think he was making any assumptions by giving her such a presumptive gift, but she'd probably figured it out anyway, clever as she was.

Well. That wasn't the *only* reason.

Draco had thought it was a trick of the light at first, a side effect of her sudden and prolonged absence from his vicinity. The foreign sensations he'd grown used to feeling since the ritual—her pain and

fear, demanding his attention— had grown stranger, stronger. Draco had assumed the distance would numb the channel between them, as it had over Easter when he'd been miles away and unable to feel her at all. Back then, he hadn't yet realized how much he'd gotten used to the pull on the other side of the bond: Granger, calling for him. He hadn't realized how intoxicating it would feel, to be *needed* by her.

But in the months they'd been separated, his sense of her had only grown keener. It wasn't just when she was scared or in danger anymore. Now, he got flashes of other emotions that did not belong to him, stronger than Northern winds. They overtook him suddenly, so intense he sometimes forgot they weren't his. There was still fear and pain, but now also rage, sorrow, frustration, concern, guilt. Rage, again.

She was angry all the time. It was a revelation. He shouldn't have been so smitten over the thought that the perfect, composed Hermione Granger was secretly a cauldron of fury, ready to boil over at the merest of stoked flames. He wished their lives were different, wished he'd learned this back when he could enjoy himself. Back when he could wind her up during potions. Push her to her limits in Defense. Pull and pull until she snapped, which would have hopefully manifested physically: he didn't know what he wanted more, for her to hit him or fuck him. He'd jump for either.

There were also other feelings, coming from her end of the bond. Too dangerous to even think, much less say aloud. Sensations that forced his lungs to contract, made him catch his breath. Sometimes, at his most desperate, he allowed himself to name them. Desire. Hunger. Longing. The jealous beast that resided in his chest—the Black side of him— reminded Draco that he wasn't even certain it was *him* she was thinking of. What if she was getting off to the dragon tamer, or the curse breaker? What if pickings were so slim she'd resorted to fucking the Weasel himself?

He wasn't certain it was him she was thinking of, when she sent arousal coursing through the bond, but even with his insecurities, he

suspected. Smugly, he thought that despite their other difficulties as a pair, they proved quite...compatible, physically. She'd begged for him, hadn't she? Begged for his cock so nicely, he hadn't had the willpower to deny her.

*As if you'd ever deny her anything,* the Black side of him objected, calling his bluff.

It happened early in the mornings or late at night, as if desire snuck into her subconscious once already in bed, forcing her to take matters into her own hands. Fuck, he'd kill someone just to *watch*. Every so often Draco would awaken, slammed by a sudden swell of heat. It swept away all his good sense and left him with his cock in his hand, muttering nonsense about sweet skin and dark curls and the way her cunt tasted, like spun sugar and the sea.

This was the bullshit he'd been reduced to. Spun sugar and the sea. Draco was so unbelievably fucked.

"Salazar, you're in a hurry," the trailing figure of Theodore Nott caught up to him as they approached the castle. "Got somewhere to be after this?"

"Your mother's bedchambers," Draco snarled, not in any headspace to be trifled with.

Theo—stronger, sharper than he'd been in school, with his face now marred with a series of silver scars to prove it— twitched towards his wand before smoothing himself back into a cold placidity, his expression like a frozen lake. "Stop trying to bait me into hitting you again, Draco."

Draco grimaced at the thought of their last duel. A few days after Theo had mucked up the whole plan by killing Dumbledore, and Draco had disarmed the git for his own good. The aftermath of casting Unforgivable Curses, especially for the first time, often consisted of uncontrollable outbursts and the development of an unhealthy reliance on dark magic. Not that Theo saw it that way.

Draco should have just let him blow himself up and saved himself the headache.

Upon reuniting at the Manor, they'd clashed spectacularly. Theo was always the friend who fought back, and Draco both respected and hated him for it.

Draco had just gained the upper hand, disarming Theo and sending his borrowed wand arcing through the air. Then, Theo's temper had snapped and he'd charged at Draco like a bull. It caught him off guard, allowing Theo to wrestle him to the ground, before digging around his robes and reclaiming his own wand.

It wasn't like Draco was ever going to keep it in the first place. But overpowering a peer was an exhibition of power, and Draco had never turned down the chance for more control.

*Touch my wand again,* Theo snarled, *and I'll break your fucking hand.* After that, he'd helped Draco up, and they'd never spoken of it again, as was typical of the Slytherin manner of resolving interpersonal issues.

"I'd like to see you try to beat me," Draco scoffed, as they reached the foreboding castle gates. "Wand to wand, that is. Not wrestling in the mud like brutes."

"Don't flatter yourself. If I wanted to beat up on someone, I'd play with the new recruits." Theo grinned at the thought, his smile taking on a feral quality it hadn't previously managed with any authority. Lately, the Heir to House Nott had taken to releasing his temper on the Dark Lord's freshest crop of soldiers, many of them the children of his first wave of supporters. He crashed training sessions whenever his temper had been pushed to unsustainable limits, and his thinly veiled practice duels tended to devolve into wands being cast aside in favor of fists and teeth. He'd left more than one wizard bloodied and mangled on the training grounds.

Seemingly unbothered by the wind, Theo removed one of his gloves with his teeth, flipping open a silver switchblade as he went. Droplets of sacred blood fell onto the frozen ground, and the gates groaned, unlocking in recognition. Theo smeared some of his blood on Draco's palm and the wards shimmered, allowing them both through.

Draco wiped his hand clean on his robes once they'd crossed into the desolate grounds. There wasn't a single living thing in the entirety of the garden; the earth was inhospitable, even in the summer.

"Ah, Nott Castle, my birthright." Theo scowled at their surroundings. "What a dump."

The entrance was guarded by a pair of heavy oak doors, their iron hinges rusted with age. They opened instinctively for Theo, emitting the musty scent of dust, wet wood and tallow candles. The estate had been poorly maintained in the years since Lady Nott's death, after Theo's father moved them to a smaller family estate near York. Cobwebs littered the ceilings, swathing ancient, tarnished chandeliers. The floor was strewn with relics of a bygone era, all cracked suits of armor and faded tapestries. The portraits were still, having long gone silent. Draco shivered in the unnatural quiet, the void-like nihilism that accompanied it.

"Mother?" Theo called, his voice echoing back from the high ceilings as they wound through corridors, navigating a labyrinth of twisting passages and hidden chambers.

When they reached the main hall, an otherworldly sense of cold ate through Draco's cloak, a sensation like falling through ice into frigid water, and being unable to resurface.

"Darling, you've returned." The figure of a painfully slim woman—translucent in appearance—turned to address them from where she hovered near the room's unlit hearth, a grim replica of the act of warming oneself. "What a pleasant surprise. I feared you'd been taken by the sea."

Ah yes, this was the *other* reason Draco tried to avoid Nott Castle at all costs, and the explanation of why Theo's father had taken his son to live in the country.

The ghost of Lady Aphasia Nott floated before them, preserved just as she'd been when she'd died, thirteen years prior. Fretfully young—no older than twenty-five—far too young for her much older husband. She was still dressed in the conservative, high-necked robes of her day, eternally trapped in time. Theo resembled his mother far more than his father, who was burly in build with a shock of wiry grey hair, a perpetually ruddy complexion and a cruel, thin mouth. In contrast, Aphasia Nott neé Fawley had been quite pretty once, if the portraits were any indication. In death, her eyes were milky and unfocused, her dark curls mingling with wisps of shadow.

"Of course I've returned, Mother," Theo greeted, sounding more gentle than Draco thought possible. The ghost reached out to her son, who did not shiver as her hand passed through his face in the memory of a caress. "Even the sea, in all its vastness, wouldn't dare steal from you."

"What happened here, darling?" The ghost asked, voice like shards of glass as she inspected his face. "Have you been harmed?"

"Don't you think they make me look dashing?" Theo said lightheartedly, turning his face away to hide his scars. Draco could see where his fingernails were digging into his palm, no doubt drawing blood.

"Did he do this? Did he hurt you again?"

There was no need to specify who *he* was; everyone in the room, living and dead, knew what Theo's father was capable of.

The chandelier rattled precariously, crystals threatening to burst as the ghost grew more distressed. Draco looked warily at the ceiling; when disturbed, Lady Nott had a tendency to destroy parts of the castle she was trapped within.

“No, Mother,” Theo soothed. “Just a bad moon. Nothing to worry about.”

“My sweet boy,” Lady Nott moaned, and the tallow candles flickered, threatening darkness. “My husband will pay for what he’s done. His crossing will not be swift nor pleasant,” she warned, and the foundation of the castle groaned. “The ferryman has received his ransom. My husband will die like swine, and his suffering will not abate with death, no it will only have just begun—”

“Lady Nott,” Draco cleared his throat and bowed at the waist, overly formal, interrupting the ghost’s escalation. Theo shot him a begrudging look, a mix of embarrassment and gratitude. “A pleasure, as always. Please forgive our intrusion, Theo was gracious enough to allow me a visit to your library, should you be amenable.”

“Who’ve you brought to visit, Theodore?” The ghost asked, casting her strange, cloudy eyes on Draco as she floated closer. He felt her presence rolling through the room like fog. It reminded Draco of the uncanny sensation of being watched from behind, the feeling of a spider scuttling across his skin.

“You remember Draco, mother,” Theo replied, as casually as if this were a conversation over tea, “Lucius and Narcissa’s son, heir to House Malfoy? He’s in search of a rather rare book, and I thought we might have a copy in the library.” Theo stooped over, dipping his lips as if kissing the specter of his mother on the cheek. “It won’t take more than a moment to retrieve it. Unless there’s any blood curses, in which case, give me half an hour. I know how paranoid Grandfather could be.”

Draco moved to follow him, lest he be left with the ghost, but Theo stopped him with a hard stare.

“Now, now Draco,” Theo chided as he slipped from the room, something wicked in his pale green eyes. “You know the rules. No one visits Nott Castle without receiving a reading from Mother. Yours will be a good one— she’s not had company in months.”

This was the final reason Draco hated Nott Manor: no one could enter without receiving a prophecy from the ghost of Aphasia Nott, who'd taken the gift of the Sight with her after she'd died. Now in her purgatorial state, her predictions were magnified, twisted beyond recognition without the temporal constructs of space and time.

"I couldn't possibly trouble you," Draco insisted to the ghost, his stomach twisting at the thought. Several lesser Nott relatives, eager to claim the family seat as their own, had entered the castle only to be driven mad by its poltergeist and her *visions*. "I've already intruded on your hospitality enough."

"Never an intrusion, Little Malfoy," the ghost waved him away, her movement sending a gust of cold air and mothballs into his face. "Or should I say, Little Black? I haven't seen you since you were a whelp. You've grown. More of your mother than your father, now, although the Malfoy greed runs deep with you. But it's not gold you're after, is it? Or fame? My, what a strange one you are."

In the absence of her son, Lady Nott drifted closer, examined him in the manner one would while burning ants through a magnifying glass. Draco fought the urge to squirm, squaring his shoulders and shuttering his mind. He was back in his mother's garden, behind the hedges of his occlumency. He spent most of his time there, these days.

"No mind tricks," Lady Nott chastened, interrupting his efforts. "How will I be able to See if you're so far away?"

"My apologies," Draco said stiffly, forcing himself back to the gloomy castle and resigning himself to get this over with. He reminded himself it would be far more perilous, to anger an unruly ghost.

Lady Nott tilted her head, revealing the dark slash on her throat that was normally kept covered by her collar. Everyone had heard whispers, but few knew the entire story of how Theodore's father had slit his wife's throat while she was sleeping, thirteen years prior.



After several years of marriage, during which Aphasia's gift of the Sight manifested uncontrollably, Tiberius Nott rid himself of his troubled young wife in order to take a new, more suitable bride, not prone to fits of madness and prophecy. The old bastard had no idea of the extent of both her spite and her love for her son. Her ghost proved impossible to be exorcized from Nott Castle, no matter how many soothsayers or warlocks Theo's father employed, finally forcing him to abandon his own ancestral home and move to the mainland with his son. Tiberius Nott attempted to remarry several times during Theo's childhood, as was customary for heads of wizarding households with only one heir. On each of his three attempts at a wedding night, he'd found his pretty new bride in their marriage bed with her throat cut. Lady Nott would not be replaced, not while she lingered on this earth, living or dead.

"Do you know what they say about the Blacks?" Lady Nott interrupted his grisly train of thought, a rolling fog taking over her mist-filled eyes. She floated closer to the enormous halls dingy windows, almost invisible when hit by direct light.

"I'd imagine they say quite a lot," he replied dryly. "Most Noble, Most Ancient. Most Imprisoned. So forth, so on."

"They say every Black is born alongside the toss of a coin," the ghost continued, as if Draco hadn't spoken. "On one side, lies greatness. On the other, madness. It was the ancestors of the Black line, who built our glorious civilization." She cocked an ear, as if listening to an interjection from a voice he couldn't hear. "Of course, they tried to burn it down as well."

Sometimes, he could feel it. The Black side of him, insistent and nearly always enraged: *Take what you want. Burn what you don't. What's yours is yours, in body and in blood.*

"The spirits know which way your coin will fall. You're driven by need, just like your ancestors before you. The House of Black, its progeny always blind to everything but their own desires. Your mother's sister

knows this better than most. Oh, but you haven't seen that yet, have you? The house on the hill? The bluest of blues? Soon, Little Black."

Draco's blood ran cold at the mention of Bellatrix, the ghost's other ramblings thrown to the wayside. Madness. That was what had happened to his aunt, to numerous Black ancestors whose acts of terror were now only spoken of in whispers. Those who had ended up jailed and raving, and far more, who had died at wandpoint.

"Do you wish to know?" Lady Nott hovered before him, caught in a web of glittering dust particles and whisperings from realms Draco was not privy to pass through.

"Know what?"

The ghost laughed like he'd made a fantastic joke, a sound like nails against glass.

"Of your future. You wizards always inquire of love, you know. When you'll get it, and from whom. Witches are more practical—they ask of wealth, longevity, children—but your gender's great preoccupation seems to be regarding love as something you are owed. Once you obtain it, you quickly squander it, generation after generation. Your father was foolish to lose sight, just as his father did before him. And you..." The wraith of Aphasia Nott inhaled sharply, taking up no oxygen and emitting no breath. "You are wise, not to think of the girl by name. I feel her magic: strong, although it's grown stale on you. You'll do terrible things in the name of love, Little Black, and the world will curse you for it. For you were not made to build nor raze temples; you were made to worship at them."

"Oh, good," Draco said, feeling a bit sick. "How smashing that you've cleared that up."

"Mother," Theo drawled from down the hall. "Please tell me you've given Draco something to keep him up at night, I fear he's been sleeping too well."

For the first time, Draco thought of Theo's reedy voice as a welcome reprieve, evidence of life in the otherwise vacuous emptiness of the castle.

"His mind is already crowded with fears," Lady Nott replied, drifting towards her son with a forlorn look stretching over her gray, pallid face. "As are yours, my pet."

She looked at Draco over her translucent shoulder, pure ice emanating from her unfocused gaze. "You'll watch over my son, Little Black." It was not phrased as a question.

"Mum," Theo groaned, trying to sound irritated, but coming off incredibly fond. "Don't threaten our guests."

The ghost of Aphasia Nott ignored his protests. "You'll keep Theodore safe in your realm. Despite my husband's best efforts, it is not his time to cross. Your protection will be rewarded, in this life or the next. I swear it."

"Yes, Lady Nott," Draco responded quietly. One did not simply refuse a poltergeist, especially one with the Sight. "It would be my honor."

"You'll come back soon," Lady Nott insisted, more instruction than invitation. "And you'll bring the girl, won't you Little Black? I wish to See her."

"The girl?" Theo asked, his dark eyebrows raised in amusement. "*The girl*, Draco?"

"Now, now, darling," Aphasia's ghost chided, floating away as if being tugged by an invisible string. "We must allow our guest his secrets, as he allows us our own." She pressed a wistful kiss to her son's forehead, and Theo closed his eyes, shivering as she passed through him, before disappearing altogether.

"Bye, mum," Theo whispered, his eyes suspiciously full. Draco looked away, giving his childhood friend what little privacy he could

offer.

After all, they were at war; the only mercies Draco could afford were the small ones.

---

Back in the rickety boat, blasted by the freezing spray of the sea, Draco had to yell in order to be heard.

“Did you get it or what?” He roared to Theo, over the din of the waves, as the little vessel skimmed the surface of the water like an unruly stone.

Theo had his cloak drawn to his nose to keep out the cold as he directed the skiff with his wand, sending them flying back to shore.

“Who’s the girl?” Theo hollered, his voice equally raised.

“Give me the bloody book Nott, or so help me, I’ll have your entrails bronzed and turned into Malfoy heirlooms—”

They crashed onto the shore, the impact sending both of them flying from the boat and into the cold wet sand. Theo shook seaweed from his curls, grinning madly, clearly exhilarated by the ride.

“I got it. You can stop whinging now, you git.” Theo withdrew a blood red tomb from his cloak. “Awful thing, I could feel its magic the whole way. I think it tried to drown us once or twice. What do you need it for, anyway? I thought they had this in the Restricted Section. I bet you a hundred Galleons your library has a copy and you were too lazy to look, weren’t you?”

Draco examined the cover, the title burned into the leather: *Magick Moste Evile*.

His search for the tome had started a month prior, when he’d received a message in his courting journal.

*What I'm about to ask you must be regarded with the utmost secrecy, do you understand?*

*Another favor, Granger?* Draco had responded, a failed attempt at flirtation, before her question shimmered, ink manifesting on the page.

*What do you know about the term 'horcrux?'*

"Much like Hogwarts, the Malfoy Library has a *censored* copy," Draco explained to Theo, as he shook clumps of sand from his cloak. "The originals have all been burned." He could feel the sensation Nott had described, a pull that sent a pricking from his Dark Mark all the way to the cursed scars on his chest. That promised him power and glory and blood. "That is, all except this one."

---

The Dark Lord had temporarily vacated the Malfoy family home after the fall of the Ministry, off attending to pressing matters outside the country. Whispers had placed him in Sweden, near Durmstrang, and then in Austria. In an effort to collect intelligence, Draco had tried to discern what he was looking for on the continent, but it seemed not even Lucius or Bellatrix knew the answer.

Even without the Dark Lord's presence, Draco evaded his childhood home, preferring to spend his days brewing in Severus Snape's cramped bungalow in Spinner's End. He felt miserable and guilty for leaving his mother, but Narcissa's magic had polluted her mind enough that she thought he was away at Hogwarts most days anyway. Draco's presence only confused her. Sometimes, even just catching sight of her son brought Narcissa back to the night Draco was marked, which sent her into dangerous fits of accidental magic. After one such instance, she nearly burned down the drawing room and had to have her wand confiscated. It had left Lucius fuming, unable to understand something he could not bend to his will using money or violence; no matter what he paid or who he threatened, his wife's magic continued to devolve.

No, it was best that Draco stayed away. Preparing, planning. Lying in wait, a snake in the grass. He could be disciplined, patient. He could wait for the correct moment to strike.

His godfather had added him to the bungalow's wards without protest, his glittering black eyes always too knowing, too certain of what Draco stowed away in his treacherous heart. More often than not, Draco slept there, choosing the little cot he'd set up in the kitchen-turned-potions-lab in order to tend to temperamental overnight brews over his plush featherbed at the Manor.

Some nights, Theo came by for his potion, and they'd get pissed together while they waited for it to brew.

For an entire year, Draco had kept Theodore Nott's secret. He'd helped him conceal the true source of the bruises and cuts that riddled his body, by spreading rumors about how Theo's father had escalated his violent treatment of his son (to Draco's disgust, they weren't baseless claims). After that first full moon, which left Theo practically in pieces, Draco had taken false responsibility for cursing him in the corridor and sending him to the Hospital Wing for days on end.

That was when Draco began to teach himself to brew Wolfsbane. It had taken months under Snape's tutelage before he'd managed an acceptable batch.

Draco wasn't doing it to be *nice*, or anything nearly so pedantic. Wolfsbane was simply a useful potion, one that every healer required proficiency in brewing. And if he continued to brew it every month, well. It was important to keep one's skills sharp.

He had been there, when it happened. In a twisted way, it was something they shared. Both of them, pathetic. Powerless to protect themselves and each other. Too weak to deny the mark or to die for their refusal. Theo had passively watched as Draco was marked, watched as his mother was tortured, watched as he was cursed and sliced by Dolohov when he'd failed to kill Hermione Granger. Draco

had stood by as Theo was bitten, had chewed his tongue and occluded hard when Fenrir Greyback was released into the woods where the boy he'd grown up with was bound to a tree, like a sacrificial virgin to a ship's mast.

Once, when they'd been completely bashed off firewhiskey, Draco had wondered aloud why it hadn't been him, who was bitten.

"Father's only got me to use as leverage," Theo explained, and Draco had pretended not to hear his voice crack. "He wouldn't mind if I died, if it weren't for his inability to make another legitimate heir, thanks to Mother's curse. And I've got no family to threaten now that she's already dead, have I? If the Dark Lord had a go at Father, I'd probably send him flowers. But this way, I'm fucked for life and Father's precious, unsullied bloodline is ruined by his half-breed son." He'd finished the bottle before looking back at Draco, sadder than anyone he'd ever seen. "You know, I still think you got the worst end of the stick. At least when you've got no one to die for, there's no one they can kill in your name. He'll have you wrapped around his finger, so long as he has Narcissa's life in his hands."

At that point, Draco wasn't certain if they were talking about Voldemort or Lucius anymore.

Lately Theo visited the bungalow even on nights he didn't require Wolfsbane. After the visit to Nott Castle, they congregated in Spinner's End with a bottle of something strong enough to blind them.

When Draco and Theo got pissed together, they'd pretend they were different people. They sat out in the garden and didn't talk about the Dark Lord. Dumbledore's death. Draco's mysterious dalliance with a certain know-it-all Gryffindor. They didn't talk about anything that mattered, not if they could help it. Instead, they rebelled in infinitesimal ways, ran their mouths as if they were just a couple of lads, having a bit of a rowdy night.

They sprawled in the grass, unbothered by the cold: Nott because of his lycanthropic tolerance to extreme weather, and Draco because, well, he'd always been a bit of a masochist, hadn't he?

"Greengrass, Pucey, MacMillan." Theo ticked off fingers, listing conquests as he went. "Davis, Warrington, Davies—"

"Wait, Davis or Davies?" Draco questioned from where he lay on his back, staring up at the night sky and wondering when Theo had the bloody *time* last year to bed half of Slytherin.

*I'd bet you'd have had a lot of free time too, the Black side reminded him. If you hadn't been chasing Granger's skirt. Fantasizing about her pert little—*

"Both," Theo answered with a sharp grin. "Tracy was better with her mouth, but Roger was just *prettier*."

"You're telling me you shagged Roger Davies?!" Malfoy exclaimed, shuddering at the unwanted image of the poncy Ravenclaw on his knees. "I thought he was after Chang all year?"

"Oh, I don't think one negates the other," Theo replied. "And technically, he shagged me. Reckon Roger's a follower of the time honored philosophic belief, *a hole's a hole*."

Draco grimaced, not wanting to imagine the previous Head Boy in regards to anyone's holes ever again.

"What about you?" Theo jibed, swigging straight from the bottle. "Saving it for your bride? Is it written into your betrothal contract? *Groom must have the purest of peckers—*"

Draco threw a stray pot of lavender at Theo's head. The other boy dodged it, thanks to his new and improved instincts.

"Mangy mutt," Draco insulted, and Theo raised the bottle as if toasting the sentiment. "You already know about Pansy—"



“—yes, and I almost obliterated myself after having to listen to *that* coming from the bed next to mine. *No, Draco, it doesn't go there—*”

“Well, you're evidence that it *does* go there, aren't you? And Pansy was...well, it was bloody weird, wasn't it? But I dunno. Fun. Something to stave off the boredom.”

For a long time, Draco had thought of sex the way it had been with Pansy. Strange and visceral, a mix of pure sensation and directing of bodies: hips up, elbows here, faster, slower, there, there. It was all very transactional: when she sucked him off, he returned the favor. If he made her finish, he was allowed to come. With Pansy, the act of fucking was a sort of mad, semi-choreographed dash, where Draco raced her towards inclement pleasure.

Then, he'd had sex with Granger and he'd realized it wasn't just pleasure that he sought. It was complete and total possession. Nothing had been transactional when they'd come together, because it had all been *his*. Every breathy little sound, every arch of her back. Her eager mouth and her sweet cunt. When she came, it was for him.

Somehow, it was also all for her. When he pressed into her and she slowly took all of him inside, inch by inch, the beast within him roared in triumph. Finally, he'd been good enough to be chosen, to be owned in his entirety.

Draco told the beast to shut up, told himself it would be the one time. He'd allowed himself the slip, even while knowing it would destroy him to never touch her again.

*Fool*, the Black side of him cried. *Go to her. Please her. Beg.*

Theo's mother had been right: the Blacks were insane, all of them, himself included.

“Are you sure you're straight mate?” Theo snorted inelegantly, ripping him from his recollections. The dark haired boy tipped back

his head and finished the bottle. “Because I’m just dying for a mediocre time, and what did you say your specialty was? Oh right, *something to stave off the boredom*. C’mon, show me your best sixty seconds—”

“—that was the first time, you wanker. I’ve had plenty of practice since. Not your definition of plenty, mind you. Not all of us are the Slytherin trolley, offering free rides—”

Theo barreled towards him in the grass and they rolled around, wrestling: before his bite, Theo had been slight and weedy and Draco could have beaten him to a pulp. Now, he was stupidly strong and eager to burn off aggression; it was no wonder they usually ended up tussling before the night was done.

“Are we out of firewhiskey?” Theo asked, once he’d managed to pin Draco, in a presumptuous use of the first person plural. Draco extricated himself, feeling merciful for once, and refrained from pointing out that Theo always got the drunkest after visits to his mother’s ghost. He’d be a hypocrite to chastise him; Draco did the exact same thing, every time he returned from the Manor.

“*You’re* out of firewhiskey,” Draco corrected, as the gnarled trees surrounding the bungalow shivered, having recently lost the last of their leaves. “*I’ve* got tequila left.”

Theo made a face of disgust, but summoned the bottle regardless. A year ago, if someone were to tell Draco he’d develop a taste for muggle liquor, he’d have laughed in their face. Now, the choice of beverage was one of the ways he and Theo communicated without saying the things that would assuredly get them killed.

A month or so ago, Draco had brought muggle scotch whiskey for them to imbibe for the first time, and Theo had stared at him as if he’d placed a severed head on Snape’s kitchen table. It had taken Draco hours of attempting to figure out Muggle currency, before giving up and confounding the clerk at the shop. He never claimed to be a saint, alright? And if he’d bought it to remember the taste of

Granger's tongue that night, the burn of cheap liquor layered under expensive wine, well, Draco wouldn't think too hard about that.

"Is that...?" The dark haired boy had examined the label carefully, as if the bottle could explode at any moment.

"So what if it is?" Draco had posited, fists preemptively clenched. He hadn't been trying to start a fight that night, but he wouldn't have turned one down either.

Theo had given him a long, knowing look before accepting a glass. They'd finished the bottle, and then another. Drinking until they threw up all over the bungalow's hedges. Apparently, muggle liquor, while slightly different in its thick, hazy intoxication, was just as potent.

After that, they'd tried other spirits, growing more adventurous as they went: Caribbean rum, Russian vodka, and Draco's favorite, a beverage called tequila which left him feeling alternately randy and like he wanted to put a hole through a wall. The first time he'd tried the smokey gold liquor, they'd ended the night by beating each other to a pulp. In the morning, Draco had healed them both. As with anything else, they didn't speak of it.

"What do you think Pansy's doing right now?" Theo asked as he got into the tequila. This was a game they sometimes played, part of their pretense of normalcy. They guessed at Pansy's whereabouts back at Hogwarts: was she pitting Crabbe and Goyle against each other in the common room? Tormenting the new faculty? Hiding from everyone in the Owlery, her preferred place to have a think?

It seemed ridiculous that school resumed at all. Hogwarts had been twisted beyond recognition: Muggle Studies, Care of Magical Creatures, and Defense Against the Dark Arts had been slashed, replaced with Magical Race and Nation Studies, the Harvest and Use of Non-Sentient Species, and the eponymous Dark Arts. If Pansy's carefully redacted letters—filled with obviously false enthusiasm for the new curriculum—were any indication, the classes

were base attempts at indoctrination, armed-party politics, and the slaughter of whatever was deemed subhuman.

The few Muggleborn students who had unknowingly registered themselves with the Ministry and boarded the train had never made it to Hogwarts. The papers reported them missing, claiming they'd run off to join the known terrorist group, the Order of the Phoenix, despite the fact that most of them had been under the age of fourteen.

Draco knew those children would never be found.

But— a surprising number had gotten out. Far more than the Death Eaters expected. Most Muggleborns with exposure to the current state of the magical world refused to register themselves all together, and when Ministry emissaries went knocking, they all had the same bizarrely identical experience: no matter how hard they tried to find the missing Muggleborns' family homes, they'd find themselves elsewhere, doing another task they deemed far more pressing.

"Pansy? She's probably complaining with Daphne about the lack of eligible bachelors this year," Draco finally replied, aiming for light but coming off more than a little sullen. "Their biggest problem is probably the state of the marriage market."

"Pity there's a war on," Theo responded, putting on a high-pitched imitation of the self-appointed Slytherin princess herself. "It's *ruining* the season!"

At this, Draco laughed, the sound sharp and foreign. His breath was visible in the cold, exhalations lingering in the air, evidence that somehow, he was still alive.

For now.

Even while drunk, Draco found it impossible to forget that he had an assortment of impending problems that could get him killed at any moment. The fact he was in communication with Hermione Granger,

in a capacity far more dangerous than his supposed spying. The increasing pressure he faced, to reveal the location of the Order's headquarters to the Death Eaters and prove his usefulness.

Draco never forgot, not even for a second, that as soon as he stopped being useful, he'd be dead.

There was also the fact that his Dark Mark—now an ugly, reddened scar that refused to fade— didn't burn black anymore when the Dark Lord called. Draco had only gotten away with it thus far because of Theo, who he'd luckily been with during the last time it had happened. When the dark-haired boy clapped a hand to his own forearm, Draco recreated the motion, wincing as if he could feel it too.

But what would happen when one day the Dark Lord forced Draco to raise his sleeve?

He thought about confiding in Theo. The boy was undoubtedly his closest ally within the Dark Lord's forces, and yet, Draco didn't trust him as far as he could throw him. Theo was infamously hard to read, played at friend and foe in equal capacity. He drank muggle liquor, but he'd murdered Dumbledore without hesitation, in cold blood. The only time he seemed remotely out of control of his impenetrable facade was immediately after a full moon, when the cracks would peek through, before being sealed over once more.

Where did Theodore Nott fall? Draco had only come to one potential conclusion: wherever he thought would serve him best.

"Let's get you inside, Malfoy. Your lips have gone all blue." Theo leered performatively, standing on wobbly legs and dusting himself off. "Want me to warm them up with mine?"

"And get a taste of Roger Davies arsehole? I'll pass, thanks." Draco rubbed his hands together, realizing he couldn't feel his fingers. "Same time tomorrow?"

Theo passed Draco the rest of the tequila, looking a little to the side in a way that gave Draco pause. Even though Theo's expression was flat, eyes giving nothing away, after a lifetime of knowing one another he recognized what uncertainty looked like on Theodore Nott. A bitten lip, a torn cuticle. A barely noticeable avoidance of eye contact.

"Spit it out," Draco said harshly, his heart picking up speed. "What's wrong?"

"They've found the Order's headquarters," Theo confessed, after a prolonged hesitation. "I overheard my father, arguing with Dolohov about the wards. The Notts are historically—"

"—the famed wardmasters of the Sacred Twenty-Eight, I know." Draco rolled his eyes. "Everyone knows. Hasn't anyone ever told you Notts that it's in poor taste to brag."

"I'm not bragging," Theo said, a bit of flint in his tone. "I'm trying to tell you that they've found a way through. They found them and they're breaking into the wards. Tomorrow."

Draco nearly exploded the bottle, only barely getting a hold of his magic at the last second. If the Death Eaters had found a way into the Weasley home, it meant they'd found Granger. If they found Granger—

No. He slammed his occlumency walls in place.

"Why are you telling me this?" Draco asked coldly, his feelings of panic tucked into his mother's garden, amongst roses and rosemary and flitterblooms. "Why would I care?"

"You know why," Theo said, as if Draco had missed an obvious point. It made Draco want to strangle him. "It's the same reason you check that diary every night."

Draco's hand was on his wand in an instant. If Theo got him caught, got *her* caught, Draco would kill him, friendship be damned. He'd do it slowly and with great zeal.

"Relax," Theo instructed, rolling his eyes at Draco's defensive position. "As Mother reminded me today, it's none of my business. I intend to keep it that way." He looked Draco in the eye, green meeting grey. "I don't like owing you, Malfoy. This way...we're square. For last year."

Draco had the suspicion that Theodore Nott, in his own, strange way, was trying to *thank him*.

From somewhere distant, a bird called, the questioning song of a creature left behind by its flock, *where are you, where are you?* not realizing it was too late. The heir to House Nott grimaced at the sound.

"Theo," Draco said, rolling up his sleeve. "I have to show you something."

---

- !!! DRACO POV !!! It's been so hard not to spoil this; I've been planning for it since the beginning. Originally, Part II was supposed to begin at Chapter 10 (obviously, things quickly got out of hand). Part I was for the girls, and Part II? Part II is all about the boys.

- This chapter's title refers to the idea of migration, and getting out in time, which Draco and Theo unfortunately did not. The motif of the bird is a recurrent one in this fic, and it's nearly always tied to Draco's ideas of mercy and freedom.

- There's also been a time jump of over three months. Keep this in mind when wondering "why is it winter?"

- Everyone say hello to Lady Aphasia Nott, who did NOT go gentle into the night. Theo was raised by a wife-murderer and a Seer turned

poltergeist, which frankly, explains a lot.

- The toss of the coin bit is inspired by Game of Thrones (one could make a lot of comparisons, between the Targaryens and the Blacks. Both families full of power hungry, incestuous, prone to madness)

- This chapter is really an exploration of Draco and Theo's very complex relationship and roles in Voldemort's wartime society. A few people called the fact in earlier chapters that yes, Theo is a werewolf and also bisexual, but I had to wait until we got Draco's POV to reveal it!

- I always thought it was a bit unbelievable that Draco immediately got a spot at the table/inner circle. To me, it makes far more sense that Voldemort regularly underestimates him as both a spy and a soldier (especially because he hasn't successfully managed a Killing Curse), putting him on potion duty (for the time being).

- There were a lot of theories about Draco disarming Theo in Chapter 27. All I'll say is, yes he disarmed Theo and took \*Theo's\* wand the night of Dumbledore's murder. Do with that information what you will.

- Going forward, this fic is going to be almost completely canon divergent. Horcrux hunting is going to look very, very different this time around.

- I love you all. Your comments on last chapter literally made me smile and laugh and contemplate this story so intently. I can't wait to hear what you think of Draco's voice.

---



# Unforgivable

## Chapter 32: Unforgivable

---

Draco is tested.

---

---

CW: Sensitive discussion of miscarriage. Violence and Torture.

I do my best to avoid being graphic, but going forward, please read with this in mind.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

When Draco was a child, everything was simple.

His perception of society was limited to tea at the Parkinson Manor or the Goyle House, the rare trip into wizarding London. History was the double-balustrade grand staircase, adorned with portraits of his ancestors, the Malfoys of days past. The world was made up entirely of the Manor, its high-ceilinged ballrooms and grand pianos and immaculately manicured grounds. Opulent, carefully designed so as to never prompt questions of what lay beyond the hedges, and at its nucleus was the resplendent Narcissa Malfoy. Lovely and sharp as a diamond, catching all the light in the room. Cold and composed, just as a Malfoy wife should be.

But his mother wasn't cold, not to him. In fact, Narcissa was the only person in his little world that seemed to realize Draco was a child, and who treated him as such. She had a way of making every terrible thing into a lively game. Skinned knees became battle scars, wrought from slaying dragons. His tears, the result of a scolding from Lucius, turned him into a phoenix, capable of healing any wound.

And when Lucius was gone on business, when perfection was no longer required of them, there were truffles eaten with his fingers for supper and mattresses conjured in the observatory, so that Draco and his mother could fall asleep under the stars.

When his mother took him to the shops in Diagon Alley, he marveled at how she looked down her nose at everyone around them, as if innately certain they were inherently below her despite being unaware of their pedigree.

“Everyone *is* below us, darling,” she would say, patting him on the head. “We’re Malfoys.”

Now, Draco thought grimly as he stood at the foot of the grand staircase, everything was terribly complicated. Society turned out to be a vicious, self-immolating beast, bent on destroying itself. His understanding of the world had been wrong. The manor held none of its childhood enchantment. The ancestral home of House Malfoy had been tainted by dark magic, stiling the air and filling the halls with a noxious sense of dread. And his mother—

In her day, Narcissa had been an exemplary witch, with a strong bloodline and powerful magic. That was, after all, why she’d been chosen as a Malfoy wife. But her cold, haughty exterior had always housed an inner sensitivity that only Draco had been privy to. Narcissa’s secret gift was that of nurturement, an inherent predilection for coaxing saplings into groves. She loved her son and her garden. She’d have flourished under a brood of children like the Weasley brats, with enough sons to play at heirs and spares and daughters to dote on and spoil.

Draco knew that after his birth, there had been other attempts. All unnamed, all buried in the garden not the crypt, their graves long obscured by sunflowers and lemon trees. Once, after years of pestering her for a sibling, his mother had shown him their locations, explaining that she had been unable to carry another child to term, not after the stress of pregnancy during the first war.

*It was worth it, Draco, because it gave me you. She'd stroked his hair and held him close and said, and you're all I need, darling .*

Perhaps that was why Draco felt as if he had to present himself as a near caricature of the ideal pureblood Heir, not a person so much as a performance. He proudly shouldered the entirety of the expectations of the Malfoy name, locking the individual bits of himself, the bits that didn't quite fit the narrative, into his heart's innermost vaults. He had no one to lessen the load.

Perhaps that was also why Narcissa put all that she had— every kindness, every hope, every drop of magic—into Draco. She hadn't broken when she was tortured under the Dark Lord's wand for the sins of her husband. She broke when Draco was marked, when she held her only son in her arms as he struggled and screamed, knowing she'd lost the one thing that had ever truly been entirely hers. It was Draco's worst memory and the one he watched most often in his father's pensieve. Not as a form of self-laceration, but as a reminder of the lengths he would go, to ensure it would never happen again.

But now, standing at the threshold of the Manor's great room, Draco had to lock that all away, make sure his occlumency garden was pristine, its gate unbreakable. He had an audience with the Dark Lord. He could not afford to entertain the dangers of sentiment.

After a year of occupying Malfoy Manor in Lucius' absence, the Dark Lord typically held meetings and gatherings in Lestranger Manor where Bellatrix and Rodolphus held court, a pointed snub to the now disgraced Malfoys. For the first time in his life, Draco relished at being seen as inferior.

But Lord Voldemort had returned to Wiltshire for a specific purpose: he wished to meet with the heir to House Malfoy. The Death Eater's youngest and most ineffectual spy.

It was true that Draco's intelligence had been poor and mostly useless— this had been by his own design. Draco had learned from

watching his father flounder in search of power and glory. Watching his godfather mind his webs in the shadows. He'd learned a wizard was only truly in control when his opposition was unsuspecting. He'd learned to play to his strengths: he wasn't the most powerful, nor the most vicious, but he was *terribly* clever.

When Draco had offered himself up as a spy, he knew he couldn't use Snape's strategy; he wasn't a half-blood with no lineage, who'd willingly joined the cause. He was Draco Malfoy and his servitude was meant to be an act of public ridicule. The Dark Lord wanted Draco to fail, to bow and scrape and beg, and so Draco would give it to him, because a useless spy was rarely suspected of being capable of double-crossing his master. If he wanted proof of that, he only had to look at weak, sniveling Peter Pettigrew.

Draco didn't care if he looked weak. He cared about getting what he wanted, and he knew the power of underestimation. He'd learned *that* from Hermione Granger.

"Young Malfoy." Lord Voldemort was sitting in his father's seat at the head of the long table in the great room, emanating the noxious fumes of the Dark Arts. Ash and tar. "Join us."

The Dark Lord's voice was enough to break Draco into a cold sweat. He wished he had more control of his body, but it seemed to remember his physical reactions to the tone, even when his memories were locked safely away. Lucius was on his right, his head whipping around as Draco entered. A look in his eyes that Draco had long familiarized himself with, a warning. *You will not disappoint me.* He was unsure when that look stopped meaning anything to him.

"My lord," Draco rasped, sounding just as terrified as he felt. He took a knee, ignoring the protest of his bones against the cold marble. It was important not to obscure his apprehension; it made the Dark Lord seem feared, and no one expected a knife in the back from the wizard with shaking hands.

“You may rise.” The Dark Lord examined him through slitted eyes. The snake—the origin of many of Draco’s more graphic nightmares—was curled protectively around the back of his chair. “You came to me months prior with a proposal, did you not, Draco? You’d spun quite the web around your plans for Potter’s mudblood, insisting you could use her foolhardy trust for intelligence regarding the movements of the Order of the Phoenix?”

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his father’s knuckles tighten around his armrest.

“Yes, my lord.”

The Dark Lord spread his arms, sickly gray hands outstretched, looking around in false uncertainty. “Then where is it?”

“There were plans, my Lord. I gave them to my father, they—”

“I know what you’ve provided. I have no use for potential locations and lists of known affiliates, not when most of them have disappeared without a trace. The days have turned to weeks, all with nothing to show for your efforts. Would you make your lord wait?”

“I found the girl reticent,” Draco tried to explain. When talking of Hermione, he emptied his mind until it was a cold nothing, the night sky during the depth of winter. “She disappeared months ago with the other traitors, and I haven’t been able to—”

“The location of the Order’s safe house has been revealed.” The Dark Lord cut him off as if he hadn’t even been speaking. Draco could feel his hands start to tremble instinctively, his body anticipating pain before his mind had registered the possibility. “Our forces mobilize to strike as we speak. Was that thanks to your efforts, young Malfoy?”

“No, my lord.”

“So, in your own words, you have failed me.”

“Yes, my lord.”

“A disappointment,” Lord Voldemort regarded him with glinting, unnaturally red eyes. “Just like your father, you require proper motivation. Antonin?” He called to the drawing room, where Draco heard footsteps approaching. Two pairs. “Help us inspire the Malfoy men to greater heights.””

*No*, Draco thought, a bolt of white hot fury breaking through his shields. *No, no, no.*

Antonin Dolohov strode through the double doors, his wand fixed on Draco’s mother. She was dressed in all the finery of a wealthy pureblooded witch, but even her luxurious robes could not conceal the freshly formed stress lines on her face, the vacancy in her eyes.

“Narcissa,” the Dark Lord’s voice was a mockery of warmth, an imperative threat. “Our gracious hostess.”

His mother said nothing. Mouth slack, gaze lowered to the marble floors.

*Stay inside*, Draco begged his mother internally, hoping her dissociation would protect her. *Stay far, far away.*

“My apologies, my Lord,” Lucius explained nervously. “I fear my wife hasn’t been well, but you can entrust me with anything you’d require of her—”

“No,” the Dark Lord interrupted, his eyes on Draco. “I doubt you’d have the same *encouraging* effect.” He tapped one, spindly finger on the wooden table, as if he were deciding something trivial. “Do you know what plagues me about you, Draco? You have no hunger. No drive. You do as you’re told, but only just so. You killed the mudblood’s parents, but couldn’t manage the girl. I admit, I had hopes regarding your plans to use her, mine her for intelligence before discarding her like the filth she is. At least, it showed *initiative*.”

Draco's heart pounded, insistent. *Do something.* He closed his eyes for a split second to bring himself under control. The Dark Lord seemed to take this as an admission of embarrassment and smiled, something hideous and curling, marring his warped face with amusement.

"You spoiled the boy, Lucius. You didn't prepare him, and now, he struggles to reach his potential." The Dark Lord tilted his head in consideration. "Members of the noble Salazar Slytherin's house are noted for their ambition, their willingness to reach for power, no matter the cost. Where is your ambition, Draco?"

"I aspire to serve you faithfully, my Lord. To elevate House Malfoy to its rightful rank. To eradicate the scum and swine from our streets."

The Dark Lord met his gaze. Draco could feel his powerful legilimency prodding, and instantly allowed his walls to give way. His mind became a small room, filled with a heady blanket of emotion: fear, hatred, anger. His memories came naturally: sneering at Granger, cursing Potter, fighting alongside Theo. He let the Dark Lord see his weaknesses: his worry for his mother, his urge to please his father. Allowed his selfishness to swell like the tide: what did Draco want? He wanted control. He wanted wealth. He wanted prestige. He wanted everything he was supposed to.

Lord Voldemort withdrew, appeased. Draco exhaled, but didn't move an inch.

"We will strike tonight. Despite your lack of results, we have found Potter and his companions, hiding like rats in the dark. The Order of the Phoenix will be reduced to rubble, its vermin exterminated just as its founder was. Tell me Draco, do you wish to achieve the same glory as Theodore, when he felled the late Albus Dumbledore? To wipe our world of its scourges entirely?"

Glory. What a ridiculous concept. Draco knew there was no glory to be found in this world, not for wizards like him. There was death and there was survival and whatever it was that happened in between.

“Of course, my lord.”

“Should I give you the opportunity?”

“Allow him to accompany you, my lord,” Lucius insisted. His eyes had not moved from his wife. “My son will be your most faithful, most valued—”

“Your son can’t cast a Killing Curse, Lucius.”

His father fell silent. Draco knew what was coming. He’d been given this test before.

He looked to his mother instinctively and when her glazed eyes met his gaze, there was a spark of recognition. He brushed against her mental walls gently, just enough to peek over the dunes. His mother’s occlumency had always manifested as a seaboard, sand dunes and sea shells and coloured pebbles, each one of them holding a memory, holding back the tides.

He always found her there, watching the sea. At first, she’d speak, but now he always found her silent. One of his theories as to why his mother’s magic had begun to turn in on itself, uncooperative and eruptive, was that because Narcissa was a natural legilimens, she reacted badly to being forced to internalize her talents, to turn herself inside out. She was never meant to be confined to her own head.

His mother stood on the shore of her mind, staring out at the gentle waves, transfixed. Draco took her hand and led her to a rowboat, as he had many times before.

*There will be pain, soon,* Draco warned, as his mother climbed into the boat dutifully. *It’s time to return to sea.* She was younger, in her mind. Pretty and flushed, less frail. Narcissa Black. It broke his heart.

He pushed the little vessel off the shore and into the bay, willing the tides to take her as far into her subconscious as possible. Draco had designed it—the boat, the oars, the strategy—using his natural talent



for occlusion to push the limits of how the severely the mind could divorce itself from the body. The cruciatus didn't hit Narcissa as hard when she was adrift. Her body and her magic suffered, but her mind remained intact. She was still his mother, still Narcissa. This was all he could give her.

"I am a benevolent master," the Dark Lord said, ripping Draco from his mother's head. He hoped their prolonged eye contact had only been seen as a son, looking beseechingly to his mother. Projecting weakness, Draco's trusty cloak. "I will allow you another opportunity, to earn your spot in tonight's sport."

The Dark Lord snapped his fingers. A figure floated from the shadows into the center of the room, bound and gagged. A middle aged witch, her robes filthy and bloodied.

"Do you recognize our guest, Draco?"

Draco shook his head.

"You wouldn't, would you? No respecting son of House Malfoy would study under such an embarrassment. Behold, the *esteemed* Charity Burbage. Hogwarts Faculty, Chair of Muggle Studies." The Dark Lord gave Draco a little incline of his head. "As one could imagine, our new world has little use for such expertise. Kill her."

Draco knew he would fail. This had happened before, each time resulting in a punishment more brutal than the last. He'd never been able to manage the Killing Curse, could never manifest the green light from his traitorous, uncooperative wand. Even *Goyle* could manage it, and he barely had any evidence of a developed frontal lobe. Draco's reticence was an embarrassment, and worse, it put a target on his back and thus on his mother's. Each time he failed, Narcissa was brought in as motivation, put under the cruciatus for as long as it took for the Dark Lord to grow bored and take matters into his own hands.

*Please die quickly*, he silently begged the Muggle Studies professor whom he'd never known. *For you sake and mine*. There was no room for guilt. Just terror, acidic in his throat.

Draco raised his wand.

*"Avada Kedavra."*

Predictably, nothing happened. Lucius snarled, fingering his wand helplessly as Dolohov lazily cast the cruciatus in Narcissa's direction. At his incantation, she began to scream. That was the thing about the cruciatus curse. It never mattered how far out at sea Narcissa was. She always screamed.

"Hurry up," Dolohov snarled at Draco, as if he wasn't actively torturing his mother. "Bloody banshee, she is."

Draco would never forget exactly who'd cut up his face, who'd tormented his mother. Dolohov topped his list of those he intended to exact revenge on. Some hideous force curled inside him—born of the Black side, no doubt—insisted on being let free.

*"Avada Kedavra."*

His curse flared promisingly at the tip of his wand, only to fail. The Dark Lord tutted, sounding amused. The screaming started again

"My, my Draco. Would you really disappoint me again? I'm not sure Lady Malfoy can withstand another attempt. What do you think, Lucius? Should I allow it?"

Draco didn't even look at his father, because if he did, he knew he'd break. *It wouldn't go on forever. His mother couldn't feel it, not really. It would stop, eventually.* This was his mantra. He just had to hold on a few more moments and then he could accept his punishment, take her to her quarters to heal her, as he had all the times before.

“Yes, my lord,” Lucius responded, ashen faced. His whisper only barely discernible over the cries of his writhing wife. “My son will succeed this time, I swear it.”

“Oh, come off it, Malfoy,” Dolohov complained, maintaining the curse even as he spoke. “We all know your whelp is more likely to piss himself first.”

The beastly insistence within Draco pulled at its chains. *Do it, the Black side of him cried. We have been weak for too long. Free us. Spill the blood which threatens our own.* His magic unspooled, buzzing from his throat to his fingertips, with one singular thought: *end this.*

“Finish the muggle loving bitch off for him, Lucius,” Dolohov continued. “I’ll get a headache if your wife goes on like this much longer—”

“*Avada Kedavra!*”

There was a flash of green light, more powerful than anything Draco had ever managed, momentarily blinding him. The screaming stopped. Antonin Dolohov fell to the marble floor, the life wiped clean from his eyes.

The Black side of him roared in triumph, drowning out everything else. How foolish Dolohov had been to threaten a son of House Black, to threaten *him*. Draco felt...exhilarated. Dark magic sizzled on his palms, strangely sweet, more energizing than he could have ever believed. He could do anything now, the magic insisted. This was what he’d been missing, a true source of power, a spring overflowing with eternal strength.

In an instant, Lucius had placed himself in front of Draco, already in a position of prostration, preemptively begging for his son’s life.

“My lord, please. You are merciful. My son is young, his magic is still uncontrolled. He didn’t know, he didn’t mean...” Lucius trailed off at

the look on the Dark Lord's face.

Draco squared his shoulders, the sheer force of his magic rippling from his form, the darkness radiating from him. *The first time is always the worst*, Theo had told him once while drunk. *Like filling your veins with poison*. He'd been so wrong. Casting the Killing Curse hadn't felt like poison. It felt bending iron with his bare hands.

Draco raised his wand once more.

"*Avada Kedavra*," Draco said again, quietly, more in control. The curse he'd been unable to manage burst from him, feeding on the energy left by its predecessor. Charity Burbage went still instantly. Draco would never have been able to manage it, not against someone so benign and undeserving, without the burst of power from his first use of the spell. Somewhere in the back of his mind—the very end of the garden, where the wildflowers grew—he hoped that Hermione could forgive him.

It was, at the very least, a quick, painless death. More than the likes of Dolohov deserved.

"Stand aside," the Dark Lord called, gesturing for Lucius to move. Lucius hesitated, and the Dark Lord drew his wand, sending his father flying against the far wall with a sickening crack. At least one broken bone, if he gauged the sound. In Draco's opinion, Lucius had gotten off easy.

"My, my," Lord Voldemort studied Draco with renewed interest. "Antonin Dolohov was a loyal soldier. Do you think you should be punished for taking him from his servitude without my say?"

"Antonin Dolohov was nothing." Draco did not have to conjure the coldness in his voice. It came naturally. "He had no name. No noble house. He was a dog, my lord. I put him down."

He bowed his head, awaiting judgment. If Draco died now, his last action would have been one of mercy. His penultimate act would

have rid the world of the man who'd carved the scar on his face, who'd cursed Granger, who'd tortured his mother. He made his peace.

"I'd be remiss to discourage challenges between my followers. It keeps you young ones hungry, eager to serve. To *rise*." Lord Voldemort smiled, thin lips pursed into a slope, which either meant Draco's answer was compelling enough to keep him alive, or Draco had mere moments left on this earth. "Your first blood. How does it feel?"

This was the real test, Draco realized. Not managing to cast the curse, but how he reacted to it. Would he shiver for hours, like Theo had? Would he show regret? Would he prove himself remorseful?

He lifted his chin.

"It feels as if I've been made whole, my lord."

The Dark Lord considered him for a long moment before striding away, the snake slithering in his wake.

"Clean that up," Lord Voldemort ordered, gesturing carelessly at Dolohov's slumped corpse. "And prepare yourself. You've earned your place in this fight. Every combat-ready Death Eater lies in wait. Harry Potter dies tonight."

Draco waited until he heard the tell-tale crack of disapparation, the flinch of the wards. Then, he threw up all over the marble floor.

---

The afternoon sun beat down on Draco's shoulders, offering a hint of warmth against the cold winter air. He couldn't tell if it was the violent juxtaposition of temperature or his exposure to dark magic that was making him feel like his veins were simultaneously frozen over and on fire.

“You need to calm down,” Theo said, as they reached the top of the grassy hill, looking out upon the stretch of frostbitten countryside. There was no sign of a dwelling around for miles, nothing to give away the location of the Weasley family home. Whoever had disguised the headquarters had done a more than decent job.

“I’m fine,” Draco insisted, wiping his palms on his trousers. Theo gave him a look of complete and utter disbelief as they crouched in the tall grass, partially obstructed.

Draco was not fine. He was feverish and freezing and overrun with adrenaline. His magic was restless, welling up inside him without any avenue for release. He was relying on occlusion so heavily, he feared it may be permanent, that anything soft and gentle he once called his own might never come back out from the recess of his mind.

How could it after what he’d done? *Remember why you did it*, the Black side of him reminded, in an effort to stem his rising hysteria. *What was your intent?* Did it even matter what his intent was? He’d killed someone. Well, he’d killed two people, but only one hadn’t deserved it. Had Hermione taken Muggle Studies, learned under Charity Burbage? What would she say, when she learned of her death at Draco’s hands? *She won’t want us anymore*, the Malfoy side of him worried, shouldering his Black side out of the way. He wished they’d both shut up.

“It’s supposed to be somewhere here, isn’t it?” Theo muttered. “God knows why they built their hovel in the middle of bum-fuck. How will she even know where to meet us?”

“She’ll know,” Draco said shortly. He would not be divulging how exactly Hermione Granger would know how to find him, how she’d be able to reach out and touch his magic, use it to lead her directly to Draco’s hiding place.

She would know what he’d done, he was sure of it. He wouldn’t be able to keep up his occlusion, not in her presence. Not with his

magic like this, fragile and shaky.

The tall grass rippled, splitting the field and sending veins of movement running through the dead stalks and dry bracken. Before Draco could blink, both his and Theo's wands flew out of their hands and into the grasp of Hermione Granger.

She stepped over the ward line, whisking an invisibility cloak off her figure. Her eyes were gorgeous and warm and brimming with concern. The exact color of Honeydukes chocolate, the kind with honeycomb swirled through.

It was the first time they'd seen each other since *that night*. The thought struck him at the most inopportune time, sending heat flooding into his face.

At the sight of her, a swatch of white lilies sprouted eagerly from the cold ground, in full bloom. Unintentional magic, Draco realized, his own. He might as well have come in his pants.

"Oh, Merlin," Theo groaned, but Hermione didn't pay him any attention. Theo could have been a tombstone, for all she seemed to care.

"Draco," she breathed. "What happened?" She was too far away. "What's wrong?"

What was wrong was that she wasn't in his arms. He opened his mouth to tell her this, but no sound came out.

"What are you are doing here?" She continued, filling his silence with interrogation, as was her way. "I got your message in the diary, insisting on an urgent meeting. You said you'd bring back up, Draco. Not that you'd bring *him*."

"Hello Granger," Theo offered, greeting her without a modicum of warmth. "I'd say it's nice to see you again, but given the circumstances, it really isn't."

Her eyes snapped to Theo, narrowing as she turned her wand on him. "Nott," she gritted out, exuding pure disdain. "On the way to Slughorn's party, I told you about muggle recreational pastimes. What did I mention?"

"Movings," Theo drawled, quickly producing the answer. "Our first date. How could I forget."

"*Movies.*" She corrected, tossing her curls over her shoulder imperiously. Draco loved when they weren't pinned up or subdued in a braid. He should tell her that, the second his voice started working again. "And it wasn't a date."

"Forgive my presumption," Theo replied dryly. "It's been eons."

"Yes, I haven't seen you since you slaughtered our Headmaster." She didn't lower her wand, leaving it trained on the dark haired boy. "If we survive this war, you and I will go wand to wand over that. Not today. Not anytime soon. But one day, Theodore Nott. You might forget, but I won't."

"*Granger,*" Theo said, sounding more than a little vexed with her. She had that effect on people. "We can threaten each other later. Things are very, very bad right now. And they're about to be much worse." He exhaled sharply before continuing. "You have a rat in your midst. The Death Eaters know where the Order headquarters is. The Dark Lord is coming. Tonight."

Granger's pink lips parted in shock, suspicion and dread warring for dominance on her face. She seemed so small against the vastness of the cold-deadened fields. It was wrong, somehow. She'd always been larger than life in his mind, a Pallas Athena.

"Why are *you* telling me this? Why would you ever help us?" She demanded breathlessly. "How do I know you're not lying?"

"Why the fuck would I lie about this?" Theo cried. "You daft bint!"



“Because you’re a *liar*! A sniveling, cowardly, pathetic little—”

“It’s true,” Draco said, his first words since he’d laid eyes on her.  
“They’re coming.”

Hermione searched his gaze and he could feel her emotions under his own— relief, confusion, fear, fear, *fear*—

“Don’t be scared,” he said, taking a step towards her helplessly. The residual dark magic vibrated inside him, itching to be let free, to let him feel in control again. “I can— I can protect you now.”

“I don’t need you to—” she cut herself off, catching the end of his statement. “What do you mean *now*?”

Draco could tell the moment she felt it. The moment his occlumency failed, flooding him with the intoxicating power he’d fought to keep simmering under his skin. Dark and hungry and alive. Her pupils blew, eyes growing shadowed at the sheer magnitude of the feeling.

“*Oh*.” She shivered, a full body tremor, like a stalk of wheat in the breeze. “Oh, god. Draco, what have you done.”

Theo raised his eyebrows at their display, unaware of what was happening under the surface, unable to see the tar leaking in, staining the noncorporeal golden threads that connected them.

Draco had only told him the bare minimum when enlisting his help, and even that was too much. Nights earlier, Theo had stood in Snape’s garden and taken one look at Draco’s arm, before saying two words: *It’s gone*?

*It’s gone*, Draco had confirmed. A question, an admission. *Could I?* Theo had asked, a flicker of something fighting behind the flatness of his eyes. Draco’s heart sunk into his stomach. *Probably not*, Draco admitted, unwilling to lie, even while garnering his assistance. Theo looked away for a long time.

*Do you love her?* Theo had finally managed. Draco hadn't bothered pretending not to know exactly who Theo was referring to, the liquor he'd drank pushing him towards honesty.

*Probably,* he had admitted.

*Then don't say anything else,* Theo had insisted, keeping his eyes fixed on the ground until Draco rolled his sleeve back down. *I'm serious, Draco. I don't want to know. I can't know.*

Theo, for all his strengths and talents, never had a particularly remarkable capacity for mind magic, and ever since he was bitten, his struggle to regulate both his transformations and their accompanying emotional turbulence made occlusion nearly impossible.

Draco had clapped his old friend sharply on the shoulder, and without another word regarding the Mark, they'd devised their plan of action. Others might have protested, insisted on explanation, but for Theodore Nott and Draco Malfoy, the unsaid had always been the preferred method of communication.

"Draco?" Granger prompted, stepping forward. She reached out and touched his face, her hand soft and cool on his flaming cheek.

A small geyser erupted from ground, bubbling spring water at their feet. Theo coughed.

"I can't," Draco shook his head, stepping away from her touch even though every molecule of his body fought him on the decision. "If I start to explain, it'll all crumble. After. I'll tell you after. I swear it."

She must have felt the honesty behind his words, the desperation coming from his side of their bond, because she nodded once, careful and brisk. The look of haunted concern didn't leave her eyes. Draco quietly hated himself, for putting it there.

“When?” Hermione asked, and he could see when her occlumency walls went up, when she went from the Granger he knew— sharp enough to cut yourself on, painfully sultry and inherently good—to something else, something severe and focused, lacking her usual warmth.

“Tonight,” Theo said, beginning to talk very quickly. “Look, you can’t get everyone out. If you evacuate, it’ll be obvious you were warned, and the Dark Lord won’t stop until he finds the leak and publicly disembowels them. Them meaning *us*. We’re telling you this so you can prepare to fight, not run.” Theo considered, frowning. “Well, some of you need to run. Children. The infirm. Potter.”

“Harry won’t go,” Hermione protested. “He’ll never leave the others. He’d find a way back to the fight, it wouldn’t matter what anyone did or said.”

“Then *make him* leave, Granger,” Draco insisted. Of fucking *course* The Boy Who Couldn’t Pick His Battles was going to be a thorn in Draco’s side. “Unless Potter can end it here tonight, kill the Dark Lord, he needs to be as far from this place as possible. The most secure location you can think of.”

“Preferably somewhere with blood wards,” Theo added, feeling for the protective magic around the Weasley’s property until his hands connected with shimmering air. “These won’t hold for long, not against my father. You lot are lucky you made it so long before you were found. Is this unplottable?”

Hermione nodded absently, running his words over in her head. “Your father?” She blanched, clearly reminiscing on what she knew about Tiberius Nott, none of it even remotely good.

“The Notts are the ancestral wardmasters of the Sacred Twenty-Eight,” Theo explained, his chin in the air. Salazar, not this again. “It’s our birthright.”

“And they never let anyone forget it,” Draco grumbled.

“Father will have these in shreds in twenty minutes.” Theo felt for the wards again, considering. “Maybe fifteen. That’s how much warning you’ll get. Use it wisely.”

“Thank you, Nott.” She managed the expression of gratitude with tremendous dignity, even though she looked as if the admission had been clawed forcibly from her throat.

“I’d say it was no problem,” Theo responded, face twisted into his characteristic sneer. “But I’d be lying.”

“I have to report back,” she muttered to herself, slipping into planning mode. “We’ll set up a defense, and get anyone who is underage the safe houses—oh, but what will I do about Harry—”

“You’re not going to do anything with him,” Theo interrupted, checking his wristwatch. “You’re going to delegate, because you’ve got other problems to attend to and very little time to do it.”

“Other problems?” Hermione scoffed. “Other than an impending battle with the most evil wizard alive and the likes of your bloody families?”

Draco’s magic fluttered to life in anticipation, only barely under his control. It had been slightly lulled, soothed by her presence, the familiarity of her magic coaxing his into a deceptive calm. But now the burning sensation was back: he felt like a star experiencing core-collapse, a supernova ready to blow.

“I have to get my mother out,” Draco explained. “To manage that, I have to neutralize my father. Tonight, when no one will be expecting it. And I need your help, because I can’t do any of it myself.” He looked at his shaking hands, willing them to steady. They refused. “I used the Killing Curse for the first time this morning and my magic hasn’t stabilized.”

It was all he could hear, ringing in his ears. *Killing Curse. Killing Curse. Killing Curse.* She wouldn’t want him anymore. *She’ll want*

*you, a new, tenebrous voice in his head insisted slyly, if you are powerful, she'll be unable to resist.*

She gaped at him, her horror knocking his increasingly disturbing thoughts aside, causing a familiar sensation to bubble in his chest: guilt. It gnawed at him from the inside, and his magic reacted instinctively, setting a nearby field ablaze. Theo extinguished it quickly, giving Draco a look that instructed him to pull himself together.

"Not right now, Granger," Theo warned, speaking on his behalf. "He's not in control. Set him off and he might blow up half of Devon."

"Please," Draco begged her, apparently the only word he could manage. "My mother...she can't take any more of it. She's going too far from shore. She won't be able to..." He trailed off, realizing none of this would make any sense to her. "Please, Hermione."

She blinked. Once, twice. A glimpse of understanding, of sorrow, of the look he'd seen in her eyes years ago, when she wiped her parents memories. Then, her walls were back place. Brown eyes unreadable, their light extinguished.

"I don't have much of a choice, do I?" Granger finally said, voice cracking. She touched her wrist absently, the exact location they'd been bound by Dumbledore while making the Unbreakable Vow.

Draco hadn't meant it to all go down like this. He'd meant for the vow to be a power play, a last resort. He hadn't known Dumbledore would actually *die*. He hadn't meant to *force* her. But it was growing more and more apparent that it didn't matter what the fuck Draco *meant*, not when faced with what he'd do.

And for Narcissa? He'd do anything.

"What exactly do you mean by neutralize?" Hermione asked, not the question he expected from her. Draco didn't know why he was

surprised by this; she'd never been or done what he expected, ever since that first day on the train.

“Not what you're thinking, Granger,” Theo added. “We’re not going to kill him. Judge us how you like, but for now, we draw the line at patricide. We're going to oblivate him.” Theo grimaced, looking as if he’d tasted something particularly foul. “And then, you’re going to oblivate *me*.”

---

Oof. This is a heavy one. Our characters are growing up and with adulthood comes serious trauma.

- If you squint, you'll find the underlying reason the Malfoys always particularly hated the Weasleys.

- Last chapter we got a little glimpse of how it feels to cast an Unforgivable for the first time (re: Draco taking Theo's wand so he wouldn't hurt himself or anyone else). This chapter, we get the close up.

- Draco, very unsurprisingly, had a number of PTSD reactions in this chapter (as does Narcissa). It makes sense, why the lure of power that accompanies casting Unforgivables is so tempting to someone who has felt powerless for so long.

- “Do you love her?” “Probably.”

- Want to cry some more? Think about why Draco chose the garden for his occlumency.

[COME CHIT CHAT WITH ME ON TUMBLR](#)

---

# The Flight of Narcissa Malfoy

## Chapter 33: The Flight of Narcissa Malfoy

---

[I'm on Tumblr now!](#) An internet ghost no longer. Come say hi!

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Draco couldn't get over the sheer cognitive dissonance of Hermione Granger being in Malfoy Manor.

Clad in her muggle clothes, looking so very out of place amongst the tapestries and gilded floors, the marble embedded with gold flakes. Like a stroke of color marring the muted work of an old Dutch master, a burst of movement in a shadowed still life.

He could *feel* her discomfort as they slunk through the corridors into his mother's wing: her heart like a sparrow, fluttering in agitation, her breath coming too quick. She was terribly nervous. He couldn't blame her. They had a very small window to flee with Narcissa, and so very much could go wrong.

The wards to his mother's quarters flickered uncertainty at their approach, their thrum like a question. *Strangers? Strangers?* Draco had arranged for them to be added before he left for sixth year; he didn't like the idea of leaving his mother alone in a manor with the Dark Lord's most dangerous soldiers, not in her weakened state. He moved to slice his hand, dribble his blood onto the doorway in order to allow her entry, but to his surprise, Granger stepped right over the wards.

Theo attempted to follow, only to meet the wards' resistance. He looked at Draco and raised his eyebrows as if to say, *oh, so it's like that?*

Draco didn't know how to explain without getting a lecture from the Wardmaster's son: privacy wards, especially on old pureblood estates, were discerning about who they allowed to enter private chambers, highly limited to close blood relatives. The fact that Hermione was allowed through would be taken as very significant, more significant than he wished Theo to be aware of. It was an indication of sharing blood, considered a positively indecent practice outside of the marital vow, reserved for only the most intimate of situations. He might as well fly a pair of Granger's knickers like a goddamn flag.

Draco jerked his head, a silent signal for his friend to stand watch as he and Hermione entered Narcissa's wing. It thrilled Draco, how easily the manor accepted her. How it could feel his blood in her veins, the aftermath of the ritual. It assured the possessive beast in his chest: she carried his claim under her skin and the thought sent a pleased shiver through him. His magic—still tainted and overly reactive from his use of the Killing Curse—responded, sending the windows of his mothers' quarters swinging open, welcoming an unseasonably warm breeze, despite it being the early days of winter.

"Draco?" His mother started at the disruption. Narcissa was in her private sitting room, curled on a wingback chair. Staring at nothing, an untouched calming draught on the side table. Blast, she should have taken that hours ago.

"Mother," he chided gently, crossing the room to press his lips briefly to her cheek. The skin was thin, papery. Without the subtle brush of rouge Draco remembered from his childhood, when his mother was always meticulously made-up. "You haven't taken the potion I gave you."

Narcissa looked confused as she stared at the vial, as if learning of its existence for the first time. This tended to happen after she occluded too heavily, a side effect of the repression of her natural instincts. Parts of herself remained stuck on her occlumency shores, the rest of her only half aware of her real life surroundings. They'd have to be careful not to agitate her, lest her magic react



unfavorably. Draco had seen it happen before: exploding chandeliers when she was upset, holes blasted through the roof when she was overwhelmed. Once, a notable earthquake that had sent all of Wiltshire rumbling.

It was why Lucius had confiscated her wand; it was an embarrassment for a Malfoy wife to be unable to control her own magic. Like a child. Like a *squib*.

Draco felt a pang of compassion emanating through the bond, and glanced over his shoulder to find Hermione watching him interact with his mother, worrying her lower lip between her teeth. He scowled at her, never one to take kindly to pity. He didn't want her feeling badly for him, not when he was responsible for so much of the current fallout.

"Who is this?" Narcissa fixed her gaze on the witch behind him, a hint of shrewdness temporarily returning, before flickering out like an extinguished candle. "Draco, who have you brought with you?" She didn't appear to recognize Hermione nor notice her garb, something Draco was grateful for. The whole situation was difficult enough without having to explain his change of heart regarding blood politics and rationalize why he'd brought the muggleborn he'd been told to murder into Narcissa's private chambers.

"A friend," Draco replied, giving Granger a look that he hoped she'd interpret as *approach with caution*. "She's here to help us, mother."

He needn't have worried. Amidst all the charged intensity of their fighting, thrown curses and sharp words alike, Draco sometimes forgot that Hermione Granger had an inherent gentleness, a soft spot for the hurt and downtrodden. She extended compassion indiscriminately, even for a woman who hated her and her ilk.

Draco had always derided that about Granger in the past—only fools busied themselves with the weak— but now, he watched with fascination as she sank to her knees at Narcissa's side, so that she could meet his mother at eye level. He hadn't known one could be

that way, before her. Both sharp and dangerous and endlessly kind, one set of qualities not usurping the other.

“Hello Lady Malfoy,” Granger said softly, outstretching a hand in greeting. Narcissa, jarred by the unfamiliar presence, took it instinctively and turned it over, palm side up.

“Square palms,” his mother mused. “Thin fingers. Ruled by air. Intellectually curious. A strong presence in your outer Mars. Your head line is rather progressive, isn’t it? Plenty of movement there. But your heart line—” Narcissa pursed her lips, examining Granger’s hand further. “Deep. Abrupt.”

“What does that mean?” Granger gave him a look of bewilderment; he hadn’t warned her of his mother’s favored method of evaluation, mostly because he remembered her derision for divination. Draco didn’t find it an infallible science by any means— at least, this is what he told himself, upon hearing Narcissa’s implicit warning. *Abrupt*. Maybe Granger was right, and it was a load of tosh.

“Nothing good,” Draco interrupted and Narcissa dropped Granger’s hand, having seen enough to apparently get a feel for the witch. “Mother, we’re leaving.”

“Leaving?” Narcissa asked, turning her attention to Draco with a wince. “To the boat? So soon?”

Draco’s heart splintered, watching his mother steel herself for another round under the Dark Lord's wand.

“No,” he said gently. “We won’t be going anywhere near the sea.”

Draco and Theo had figured out the logistics of the plan to evacuate Narcissa *before* they’d known Draco would be tested that morning, and the upset had thrown a real ladle into the cauldron. Originally, they’d planned to apparate his mother out while Lucius and the others were distracted with preparations for the invasion of the Order’s headquarters, framing her disappearance as a suicide.

Then, Draco would obliviate him, superseding his involvement with new memories, featuring a recomposed version of events that removed any hint of Draco's treachery. But given the state of Draco's magic, this now proved impossible. Hence, the need for Hermione Granger, who he'd ripped from her own battle preparations in order to assist with the very act she'd vowed to help him with all those months ago.

Every so often she glanced out the window, or at her silver watch, an heirloom from a house she didn't belong to, and he could feel her gut clench in distress. Granger was not one to sit out a duel; she wanted to be fighting, protecting those she loved, and he'd taken that opportunity from her without a second thought. Knowing she didn't have a choice in the matter. Draco knew how awful it felt, to be robbed of choice, but this was his mother, and she took priority to Granger's stubborn need to martyr herself on Potter's behalf.

(If he were being honest, he was relieved she wasn't there. That she wouldn't be going toe to toe with the likes of the Dark Lord's forces. She wouldn't be *safe* with him, but she would certainly face fewer opponents, and Draco had always been one to consider the odds).

"You feel strange," Narcissa mused, reaching out to touch her son's face. He closed his eyes at the brush of her fingers, instantly transported to childhood. *There, there. Don't cry, darling. It upsets Mummy so.* "You feel like your father."

Draco winced at the comparison. Granger flinched alongside him, undoubtedly able to feel his disgust. It was the lingering effects of the Killing Curse, the hint of copper and coal that emanated from him. Draco remembered hints of it, clinging to his father's robes when he returned from long nights at the gentleman's club. Staining everything he touched.

"You've raised such a wonderful son, Lady Malfoy," She interjected respectfully. "A credit to your name and blood." The overly formal words sounded foreign on her tongue, but she wielded them with enough grace that they seemed to comfort his mother. "Come with

us,” she coaxed. “We’ll be leaving soon and your son needs you to be strong for the journey.”

To his great surprise, Narcissa rose, trembling like a fawn taking its first steps. She lost some of her motor control after an episode, her body struggling with the after effects from the curse her mind protected her from. Granger was too sharp to miss it and he felt her horror at witnessing just how severe prolonged exposure to the cruciatus could be. Shame held his heart in a vice grip: Draco hadn’t been strong enough to stop it all those times before.

She didn't comment on it, only offered his mother a steadying arm.

“Sometimes,” she said, her tone confessional as she allowed Narcissa to lean into her side. “I get quite overwhelmed, after being tucked away in my head for too long. I'm like you, you see. My magic pushes out, it doesn't curl in. When I force it to, everything can become too much. The sounds, the light, the spells. It makes everything so painful and confusing doesn't it? Parsing out what's happening now and what's happened before?”

Narcissa gave the muggleborn witch a very strange look before slowly dipping her head in agreement. It occurred to Draco that no one had ever spelled it out to her so plainly before: the healers all used highly technical terms, skirting around the reality of his mother's fractured mind. How did Granger, of all people, know how to explain it?

“It helps me to count,” She continued gently, now under the full fixation of Narcissa's attention. “Eight counts as I inhale, and then I hold my breath for another eight. When I need to exhale, I do it quickly, in a whoosh.” She demonstrated, breathing deeply. “Like this.” Unconsciously, Narcissa began to mirror her, fluttering her eyes shut as she focused on her breath. “I know it sounds silly, but it grounds me.”

This was not a part of Draco's plan.

"What are you doing?" He hissed out of the corner of his mouth. "You're supposed to remove the *ring*, not instruct her on how to use her bloody lungs."

Granger gave him a sharp look of reproach. It was an expression he'd seen countless times in the last year and a half, informing him that if she was going to be involved, they'd be doing things her way.

Draco glared at his mother's left hand where her betrothal ring, a large emerald cushioned with diamonds, caught the light. Draco felt sick as he watched it sparkle innocuously, like it wasn't the cause of his predicament. As long as Narcissa wore the ring, Lucius could find her, familial blood wards be damned. It was designed so that only his father was capable of removing it, a seemingly romantic pair of shackles. Funnily enough, the Malfoy brides weren't afforded the same opportunity to locate their husbands in such a manner: Lucius' ring was benign, merely a symbol.

Perhaps Granger was right. Perhaps all of his revered traditions were centered on maintaining control: control of the population, of wives and children. More and more, it seemed to Draco as if the only one who benefitted from these supposedly sacred rites were the few elite Lords at the very top of the proverbial tower, and even they had chains of their own.

Narcissa wouldn't be free unless Lucius permitted it, an allowance his controlling father would never grant. But Draco had done enough research to find a singular, grisly exception: a spell invented for situations when pureblood brides sought to flee from violent husbands. A spell that was only ever to be used as a last resort.

"Granger," he bit out. "You have to do it now." They didn't have the time for this. He'd planned to have Granger stun Narcissa and complete the spell while she was unconscious, consequences be damned. Now Hermione was taking a detour in order to teach his mother how to breathe correctly?

"I think she needs to do it," Granger whispered back. "The spell you found is meant to be cast by the witch in question, its built on the very grounds of personal autonomy. It might not work if I force her."

"Her magic isn't stable enough to case a Summoning Charm," Draco protested. "Nor is mine, as you well know." He thought of the lilies he'd made appear when he saw her, and flushed. "Do it, so we can go."

"Too many choices have been made for her," Hermione said quietly, with a sadness that was beyond her eighteen years. Draco got the feeling she was remembering something else, lost in another choice she hadn't been able to make. "I can't just rob her of her agency in the name of protection. I can't just decide what's best and hope her magic understands my intent. I wish I'd realized the dangers of that, before. I wish I'd even *tried* another solution."

*Before...her parents*, Draco realized, thinking back to when Granger had ripped herself from her parent's minds that fateful day in August. Draco hadn't cared for her; he'd despised her and everything she'd come to symbolize, but even then, he'd still thought it the bravest thing he'd ever seen.

Narcissa opened her eyes. They were clear blue, a cavernous mountain spring. More cognizant than he'd seen in months. What strange magic had Granger worked? For Merlin's sake, all she'd done was breathe!

"Draco?" Narcissa said, sounding remarkably like his mother. "Where am I?"

"Mother," he breathed, and before he could stop, he'd flung himself into her arms. His magic swelled dangerously, threatening to crest. "I'm so sorry. I wish I could explain everything; I promise I will one day. But you might not be here for long, and I don't have the time to — you're going to have to trust me."

"Of course I trust you, my darling boy," Narcissa said. Her voice was muffled by Draco's embrace, but even so, he detected the promise of a sob. "My faith in you is above all others."

Draco drew back and grasped Narcissa's left hand, running a thumb over the emerald. "We have to run," he said plainly, watching as realization washed over her expression, a harsh clarity. "Father's gone and we have to run somewhere he won't be able to follow. Like we were going to, after he was sent away."

They'd tried to flee, once before. The night Draco was Marked. The result of the attempt was permanently scarred into his forearm.

"Oh," Narcissa breathed, realizing what her son was asking. All pureblooded witches would: they'd kept this spell carefully maintained, passed from mother to daughter, probably since Circe herself. His mother straightened, a hint of her former dignity emanating through her posture. "I'm afraid I don't have a wand. My... my magic..."

Draco pressed his wand into her hand. Hermione looked away, and for that, Draco was glad.

"I need you to try," he begged. "I know it's difficult for you to cast right now. But I also know you're the most capable witch I've ever met. You could grow an oak on a foundation of pure bedrock. You can manage this spell, just the one. Just the one, and then you'll be free." Draco pushed the lump down in his throat as he shoved his sleeve up, exposing his scarred Dark Mark. His mother examined it with horrified wonder, trailing her hands over the once mangled flesh. "Then, we'll both be free."

"I know he has been a cruel man. A harsh father. But I love my husband." Narcissa stared at her ring finger, her lower lip trembling. "Even when he has failed me. Even when he was lied to me. Even when he has brought me to the precipice of harm. I took a vow, to love my husband through it all," She looked up at him, grim

determination on her face. “No one warned me, that I would love my son more.”

With that, Narcissa murmured the incantation and severed her own finger. There was a cry of anguish and then the Malfoy betrothal ring clattered to the ground, no longer a noose. Simply a piece of jewelry, covered in his mother’s supposedly pure blood.

---

Hermione and Theo took over caring for Narcissa, helping her across the grounds and to the apparition point as Draco made his preparations, enacted the plans that he’d had been wistfully concocting ever since the night he was Marked, unsure they’d ever come to fruition.

He left a note, written in his mother's hand, on the bank of the pond. Detailing her unhappiness, her inability to live in a world without her magic. Draco had Granger transfigure his mother’s severed finger, transforming it into a near copy of her body (of course, Draco had gotten the idea from Granger using her baby teeth to create false remains in the first place). He disposed of the fraudulent corpse in the Manor's pond, to be found when Lucius ultimately dredged the waters in search of his wife. Upon recovering the body, his father would realize his deception fairly quickly—no magic could truly replicate a corporeal vessel and stand up to authentication— but by that point Narcissa would hopefully be fathoms away.

He’d just finished the last of it when he felt something, an urgent tug in his chest that he’d come to know and dread. Granger was in trouble.

Draco's fingers itched for his wand as he ran, his magic rearing its head, begging to be used. *If you have such power at your disposal, it seemed to call. Why hide it away? Why not welcome it? Allow us to be great.*

He skidded around the bend of the grounds, through a thicket of his mother’s roses, their thorns tearing vindictively at his ankles and



calves and he trampled them. He caught sight of Theo at the edge of the grounds, a stone's throw from freedom, holding Narcissa firmly behind him. Any progress his mother may have made was clearly lost; her gaze was vacant, evidence that she was out to sea once more.

He felt Hermione before he saw her. Her righteous fury and acrid fear like a punch to his gut. The bond roared, insistent: it was never louder than when she was in mortal peril, a state he found her in quite often. She was positioned defensively, facing down their opponent, a shield charm rippling in the last of the afternoon light. There was a slash on her forehead, a superficial but sanguineous wound inflicted before he'd found them.

Lucius Malfoy glanced at Draco from his position on the other side of the shield. His blond hair cascading down his shoulders, onyx wand pulled from its sheath.

*Fuck*, Draco thought plainly, all plans of a smooth escape dissipating like mist.

"Son." His father's voice pierced him, more painful than the thorns. "Would you like to explain to me why I found Theodore Nott and the mudblood trying to abscond with my wife?"

Draco had once idolized his father, everyone knew that. But what people didn't know was how closely respect and admiration could border fear and mistrust. If one were to ask the subjects of any revered Dark Lord of years past, Draco was positive they'd agree: to deify someone in the way Draco had with his father was simply the mind's mitigation of the fact that his idol held the power to destroy him.

Draco had learned a difficult lesson, regarding the pedestal on which he'd put his father: not all gods were benevolent ones.

"Let her go." His voice didn't sound like his own; it sounded stronger, like a warning. "There is nothing good for her here anymore. You

have to see it's killing her. Don't you love her enough to want her to be free of all this? Let her leave and I'll do..." He shook his head wildly, breath growing ragged, as desperation crept into his pleas. "I'll do whatever you like. I'll be the heir you always wanted. Just let Mother go, please Father, I beg it of you."

Hermione made a small noise of protest behind him, but Theo hushed her. *Good*, Draco thought. It was best she didn't draw any more attention to herself than necessary.

"Malfoys do not *beg*," Lucius responded, stormy gray eyes a mirror of his own. Azkaban had done his father no favors; Draco had yet to see the color return to his father's face, the few points of softness that he remembered from childhood gone completely. The rare indulgent smile, the approving nod. All wiped away by a year of imprisonment.

"You continue to disappoint me, Draco. You dare implore *me* to consider the harm that has befallen my wife? When it was *you*, who failed to protect her while I was rotting behind bars; I told you to take your rightful position as head of the family, as protector, and what do I return to? A wife that's about as useful as a common Squib. If you're to consider why your mother spent a year under the Dark Lord's wand, remember which of us failed him. Which of us proved himself too *weak* and *useless* to gain any sort of influence. I tried to teach you so many times: there can be no protection without first securing power. And you, my son, have secured *nothing*. Instead, I find you in cahoots with half-breeds and mudbloods. Conspiring against your own line." Lucius spat at his feet in disgust. "You're no son of mine."

Draco felt his father's words hit home, gutting him like a carp. Lucius was right, of course. If Draco had managed it sooner, killed Dolohov the first time he'd raised a wand to his mother, maybe everything would be different. Maybe she would be safe, maybe her magic wouldn't be in the state it was, maybe—

*Maybe he would have never saved Hermione Granger*, the Black side of him added, as the witch in question moved to stand shoulder to shoulder with him, facing down his father like the brave little lioness that she was.

“How convenient,” Granger’s voice rang out, full of condemnation. “That you’ve found a way to blame your sixteen year old son for your own missteps. Where was your power during the last war, Lucius? Where was your power this time around? I seem to remember you being the one who was useless in the Department of Mysteries. Where was your influence, then? Why weren’t you strong enough to save your wife and son from receiving your punishments from the *evil old crackpot* you decided to follow?” She let out a sharp, un-Grangerlike bark of a laugh, too cruel to convey actual mirth. “Even us *half-breeds* and *mudbloods* can bear the weight of our own sins; we don’t blame *children*. And you want to call us weak? How *pathetic*.”

“Granger,” Draco warned, feeling all the blood leave his face as his father raised his wand. “Don’t—”

“Oh mudblood, I should have killed you when I had the chance,” Lucius snarled. “Better late than never. *Avada Kedavra!*”

Draco reacted instinctively, shoving Hermione to the ground, stepping into the curse’s path without a second thought. Her shield was no match for a Killing Curse. The bond insisted: *you will lay down your life for hers*. For once, Draco—the former paradigm of self preservation, prince of egotistic caution— did not disagree, stepping into the light of altruism without pause: *I will*.

Draco expected to feel the collision, the searing moment the curse hit his chest and after, nothing. Whatever came next, a state of being Draco was not confident in. *Worm food*, he’d always figured. But then, Narcissa Malfoy let out a blood curdling scream, releasing an uncontrolled wave of black magic so strong that it tore the ground from under his feet.

His father's curse went over his head. From his fallen position, he turned towards his mother on instinct, calling out a warning that she needed to run, hide, shield herself. But his mother—if he could even call her that, in this state—was burning with intensity, her eyes radiant and completely white.

It was unlike anything he'd seen before during her so-called incidents. Narcissa vibrated with a dark, parasitic energy as the world crumbled in her wake. She stepped towards her husband without truly seeing him, the ground quaking as she went. The inky force emanating from her tore through the Malfoy wards and stone exterior walls, exploding everything from the stables to her once beloved greenhouse.

The traces of Dark Magic in Draco's blood sang in recognition: *this was power and poison, this was familiar, this was what Draco needed— couldn't he see that?*

"Draco!" A pair of small hands frantically grasped for him, running over his chest and neck until they found what they were looking for: a pulse. "How dare you dive in front of a Killing Curse for me?! You're not allowed to die, on my behalf or otherwise, do you understand? Draco? Are you alright?"

"Saved you life," he wheezed. "And you're still yelling at me."

Granger let out a choked sound, somewhere between outrage and relief and tears. She had blood on her face, and he reached up to wipe it away. The combination of Hermione's touch and the concern flooding their bond chased the voice from his head. He could feel her magic: golden, sparkling, powerful brushing against his own, siphoning some of the darkness away.

There was another explosion as the flood of his mother's crepuscular magic collided with the manor. Something exploded; he guessed based on his vantage point, that it had been the drawing room. Narcissa was shuddering now, overcome, as if she were barely holding together at the seams.

“*Mother!*” Draco cried and Narcissa whipped her head around, the unnatural white light fading almost instantly from her eyes. The shadows retracted and she crumpled to the ground, unconscious. Theo made it to Narcissa before Draco did, lifting his mother as if she was no heavier than a stack of library books.

Lucius Malfoy snarled—still alive, but held in place by towering, overgrown rose bushes. The result of Draco’s unstable magic; he’d reacted without realizing, trapping his father in a prison made of thorn and vine. His mother’s winter roses. Every time Lucius thrashed, he was torn into by the thorns. They sent rivulets of blood streaming from him, making their blooms indistinguishable from his wounds. Nearly frothing at the mouth, he screamed as Malfoy Manor crumbled behind him, the protections of his ancestral home overwhelmed by his wife’s show of force.

“You dare— *the Malfoy seat!* Traitorous filth—”

“Would you like me to kill him?” Theo asked Draco, regarding at Lucius’ struggling figure with distaste. “I’ll do it. I’ve had enough of fathers who use their sons as cannon fodder, haven’t you?”

Draco—gods help him—truly considered it. It would be an anvil lifted from his chest. It would be a sword sunk into his heart. Ultimately, it was Hermione who spoke on his behalf, as if she knew inherently that this decision could not rest on Draco’s shoulders.

“You can’t kill him,” she told Theo, although some of Draco’s residual darkness must have made its way into her heart, because she looked terribly torn about it. “He’s a monster, but...it’s his father.”

“Suit yourself,” Theo said darkly, as he turned his back on Lucius’ thorn riddled prison. “But if I ever got a clear shot at old Tiberius, you best believe I’d take it.”

“*That traitorous scum is no son of mine—*” Lucius roared, but Granger had had enough. She strode to Lucius Malfoy’s discarded wand and snapped it with a single stomp of her foot. Undeterred by

Lucius' garbled threats, she whipped out her wand and pointed it directly between Draco's father's eyes. "I'm going to make sure you know exactly who is to blame for this, Mr. Malfoy. All of it. *Obliviate*."

---

They landed in a clearing within an unfamiliar forest, queasy from apparition. Draco, Hermione, and Theo, with Narcissa still asleep in his arms, a bloody stump where her ring finger should have been. She was injured, drained, but she was alive. Any permanent spell damage would only become apparent once she woke.

"Where is this?" Hermione breathed, taking in the unnatural stillness, the soaring limbs of the aspen and the black alder trees. Draco didn't dare answer, busy checking for other magical signatures lurking in the woods, enemies lying in wait. He found none on their side of the wards; behind them, there was a plethora, too many to distinguish.

"Granger," Theo said, still carrying Draco's unconscious mother like a bride. "Did you refer to the Dark Lord as an evil old crackpot back there?"

Hermione reddened, embarrassed.

"Lost my head a bit," she admitted. She was terribly attractive when she was all pink and flushed, not that Draco could enjoy it in their present state.

"You're *insane*," Theo's lips parted in horrified wonder as he shook his head. "I suspected it, but this confirms the fact you've got absolutely *no regard* for preserving your own life. Send me across the globe and I still wouldn't be far away enough from you bloody Gryffindors."

"Theo," Draco reminded, cutting into their inappropriately timed repartee. Nott could flirt with her later, after they were removed from the dangers of the open forest. "The wards, if you please."

Theo gently deposited Narcissa in the soft detritus of the forest floor before feeling for the wards, locating the point of entry after a few minutes of testing. "There," he said, demonstrating the exact spot with a flick of his wand. "Now be a good boy and send me on my way. The sooner I get away from you two, the higher my chances of sustained life will be."

"Nott," Draco said, knowing words would fail him. What was there to be said? Draco had given him his very life to protect—his mother, *Granger*—and Nott had proved both fierce and loyal in his efforts, no matter how much he protested he wasn't. "I can't even...you have my utmost gratitude."

"I don't want your gratitude, tosser," Nott snapped, but there was a pleased twist to his mouth he couldn't hide quickly enough. "I want my debt repaid. Make things even, Draco. Figure out how to get this bloody thing off my arm, and we'll be square." He chuckled his chin at Draco, as if to encourage him to get on with it.

"Time for another memory charm, Granger," Draco said, jerking his head towards Theo. "Send him into the fight."

It seemed unthinkable that miles and miles away, the Order and Death Eaters were clashing, going wand to wand as Draco spoke. That they would have to return to the fray in order to maintain any form of cover, their standing within the Dark Lord's forces.

"About time," Theo gritted, clutching at his arm, and Draco realized for the first time that the dark-haired boy was in apparent pain. The result of ignoring the Dark Lord's summons for so long. "This thing is like hellfire."

"Are you sure?" Hermione hesitated. "Maybe we could—"

"Don't tempt me with a good time," Theo snarled, gripping the point of her wand and directing it harshly towards his own temple. "Get on with it. It doesn't matter what I remember— I know *you* won't forget what you owe me."

She holstered her reservations and acquiesced, removing any trace of the afternoon—of Draco's betrayal, of Narcissa's escape, of her presence in it all— from Theo's recollection. When she was finished whispering directives into his ear, he strode off into the forest without looking back as if completely unaware of their presence, before disappearing on the spot.

Then Draco and Hermione were alone, with only the cold air and rustling trees, mostly empty of leaves.

There were things he needed to say to Hermione. Important things like, *I can never repay you. I owe you my breath, my blood. You are everything good in this miserable bloody world.*

"Where have you brought us, Draco?"

Hermione's hair was askew, strands pulled loose from her pile of curls, framing her face in a disheveled way Draco thought was rather fetching. Her denim trousers were dirty and grass stained. She was shivering, her lips slightly blue, and she'd stood up to his father as if Lucius was nothing, an insect under her heel. She was the loveliest thing he'd ever laid eyes on.

Before he could answer her, a woman stepped through the wards. Familiar, but not. Long dark tresses pulled away from her heart-shaped face, which featured severe cheekbones and deep set eyes, the exact same shade of blue as his mother's.

Their wands were in her hand in an instant. Hermione screamed at the loss, but Draco threw a hand over her lips, muffling the sound.

"Nephew," the woman said, her posh accent projecting simultaneous disdain and authority as she cast her eyes on Narcissa's prone form. Draco detected a flash of concern before they froze over once more, icy mountain streams. "Neither you nor my sister is welcome here. Not with Lucius Malfoy's claim on her finger."



"Aunt Andromeda," Draco replied, dipping his head in greeting. "I would say it's a pleasure to meet you, but I'm afraid it isn't." He lifted his mother into his arms, holding her without difficulty. She'd gotten terribly thin. "My father won't prove an issue. Hermione Granger helped me ensure it."

Andromeda Black's eyes darted to his mother's limp left hand, noting her missing finger.

"I see," she said, looking between Draco and Hermione with newfound interest. "In that case..." She used her wand to create a person-sized hole in the wards. "There's not much room at the inn." She said this as if she'd purposefully made a joke he wouldn't understand, twisting her lips unpleasantly in a manner that reminded Draco uncomfortably of his *other* aunt. "To my dismay, we've found ourselves with a bit of a full house."

"A full house?" Hermione questioned as she stepped through the wards. "Who else is here?"

"Oh," his aunt said, ignoring Hermione's question and stopping Draco before he could follow. "I nearly forgot. You'll need blood to pass, nephew."

Draco had a very strong feeling Andromeda Black didn't *forget* anything.

"Blood?" Draco's brows rose, mind whirling. If there were blood wards on the property, his mother wouldn't be safe here, not if other members of the family could get through. Maybe not Lucius, but certainly Aunt Bellatrix...

"Not yours," Andromeda responded, predicting his line of thought. She pointed at Hermione, who looked unsettled by the woman's attention. "Hers." She tilted her head slyly, meeting Draco's eyes as her tone took on a slight edge. "These wards only respond to *dirty* blood."

Drace smirked, stepping through without resistance. Andromeda's eyes widened infinitesimally.

"My, my," his aunt said, her brows twitching in what Draco thought might be approval. "It seems I'm not the only traitor in the family."

---

---

- \*Clears throat\* would anyone like to hear about my special interest in palmistry? No? Uh, anyway. Wind hands are a marker of analytical tendencies and intellectual curiosity. Outer Mars means uniquely suited to conflict, able to strategize and persevere through time of uncertainty. A progressive head line means open minded about ideology. And a deep, abrupt heart line? As Draco said: it's usually not good.

- I love making up wizarding equivalents to slang/adages. "Throwing a ladle into the cauldron" is my version of "throwing a wrench into things."

- Narcissa is a good mother (all things considered), but telling your child not to cry because it upsets you actually leads to emotional disregulation in adulthood. I, um, might have some knowledge on the subject.

- In mythology, men were pretty fucking terrible to Circe. In my head, the spell Narcissa uses rightfully originated with her.

- Who guessed that Narcissa's magic issues are related to the fact she's an obscurial? 100 pts +

- Draco "But It's My Dad" Malfoy, meet Theo "Considering Patricide" Nott

- Is it a bit too on the nose that Draco's magic subdues his father using his mother's prized roses? The way his father effectively trapped his mother in the Manor? Maybe. Did it still make it into the chapter because ya girl loves poetic justice? You BET.

- Introducing Andromeda Black, one of my favorite characters to write yet. Draco is about to realize just who in the family he really takes after.

I'm sorry this author's note was so long, I just get excited! I love you all. See you next week for Chapter 34: The Casualties of War

---

# The Black Sheep

## Chapter 34: The Black Sheep

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Andromeda Black lived on a second son's estate. That was the first thing Draco realized, as he stumbled after Granger onto the grounds, a mix of adrenaline and dark magic in his veins that left him simultaneously buzzing and numb. His unconscious mother levitated in front of them, held aloft by his aunt's wand.

Draco felt the ancestral call off the grounds, recognizing another Black heir. The house in the middle of the forest clearing was a Bavarian chalet style cottage—on the smaller side, if Draco were being honest—with an attached gazebo style conservatory, its glass windows winking merrily in the low light.

He was beyond exhausted. The days events had pushed his magic to its very limits. The emotional toll of using an Unforgivable Curse and of his mother's escape was wreaking havoc on his already battered psyche. He could barely put one foot in front of the other, much less keep up with the frantic exchange between Granger and his aunt, only catching snippets of their conversation.

“—a variation on ancient family wards, really. Only impure blood allows you through, and only if given intentionally. *Willingly*.” Andromeda explained, as she led them onto the steps of the cottage, periodically glancing back at Draco with a keen interest he found rather worrisome. “Hence my curiosity at how you entered without any bloodletting, nephew.”

He flushed under his aunt's implication, just as embedded with meaning as Nott's had been, when Granger stepped through the manor's wards and into Narcissa's wing. Walking through protections

meant to deter the other pointed to only one thing: shared blood in their veins.

During the unbinding ritual, Granger hadn't seemed to realize the significance of what they'd done, didn't understand that the act of sharing magical blood was reserved for only the most intimate of situations, and even then it was considered shocking. But Draco had most certainly realized, and agonized over the fact for months. At first, it was because he was nervous of what could happen if someone—especially his parents— found out. Blood magic and particularly blood sharing was not only rare, but also highly taboo even in pureblood circles. Improper. Deviant.

That was the turn Draco's own thoughts took: there was something sexual about the fact Granger's magic was in his veins, and his in hers. Something forbidden about his pure blood mixed with hers. Something proprietary, an ancient sort of claiming. Sometimes, at his weakest, he'd gotten hard at the thought of opening his veins for her, smearing his precious blood on wrists, pumping his cock to thoughts of others witnessing it. Potter and Weasley, horrified, as Draco Malfoy sullied their precious Golden Girl. A part of him got off on the idea, wanting others to see the indefensible proof that Granger was *his*. That she'd claimed him, marked him with her teeth.

But now that his aunt and Theo had witnessed their bond, the implications were far less arousing: even if Draco knew the circumstances hadn't been nearly as illicit like what they must have thought—for one, there had been no marriage bond consecrated by blood, or, Merlin help him, any bloodletting during sex— it still left him without a proper explanation, not without revealing how Granger saved his life and bound them together in the first place.

"This is a pureblood manor, isn't it?" Draco blurted the first thought to enter his head, not wanting to encourage Andromeda's inquiries. "A Black manor."

"How do you know?" Hermione turned to him, her amber eyes sparking with curiosity. Her hair swung behind her, curls falling from

her ponytail. A mere look her way made him want to ward them in a room together and sleep for about two days, wrapped around each other so he could be certain of her presence, even while unconscious. But after his mother was proved safe and stable, he'd be forced to return, to witness the aftermath of the night's carnage: an obliterated Lucius, who thought his wife to be dead, a crumbling Manor, and a Dark Lord, thwarted. He wondered if his presence had been missed, during the raid, and if so, how he'd be punished. He wondered what the Dark Lord would do, having failed to secure Potter, and broke out in a cold sweat at the very thought.

"I can feel it, the Black magic. And look," Draco demonstrated, pushing thoughts of his impending return from his mind. Hermione turned to examine where he was pointing at the door and windows. "See those carvings? Those are protection runes. They went out of style years ago, once wards came into favor, but you won't see old Pureblood cottages without them."

"The house was Alphard Black's," Andromeda clarified. "My uncle. Mother blew him off the family tapestry because he bequeathed Sirius some gold and left me this place when he died. It was one of the estates that was supposed to go to cousin Regulus, but Alphard's will was ironclad. He always had a soft spot for us black sheep." Andromeda regarded him coolly. Her eyes lingered on the signet ring he wore on his left hand. The Malfoy ring. The muggleborn blood in his veins. Draco was sure he seemed threatening to her: contradictions always were. "I wonder what he'd have made of you, nephew."

Before Draco could inquire further, the house's door was flung open, and the sheer amount of movement that was emitted nearly bowled Draco over.

*"Hermione!"*

Before he could so much as blink, much less warn her, twin figures flooded out into the entryway and straight for Granger. To his horror, she met them mid-embrace in what appeared to be some sort of

vertical wrestling match. He could only catch snippets of what they were babbling to her:

“—thank Merlin, you’re alright—” This was the Weasel himself, his hands all over Granger in a way that had Draco’s hackles rising, fingers itching for his wand. “—Moody is *dead*. So many people are missing—”

“—Burrow was attacked—” Potter was ranting into Granger’s hair; Draco could hear the Surrey accent. “—wouldn’t let me fight—”

“—barely got him out in time—” The Weasel continued. “—haven’t heard back from the others yet, we’re waiting on—”

They extricated themselves from Granger only to realize who she’d arrived with, identical looks of dismay breaking through their relief.

“*Death Eater*,” Ronald Weasley snarled, and if Draco hadn’t been so drained, both magically and physically, he would have flattened him like a bug just for the sin of touching Granger’s waist.

But as it stood, Draco was barely standing, and so when Weasley cursed first and saved questions for later, Draco was unprepared. He caught the stunning spell in the chest and toppled over to the sound of Granger’s cry of distress. It provoked a familiar insistence within him to fix it, smooth everything over so the world had fewer edges.

*Merlin, he’d gotten sappy. When the bloody hell did that happen?* He wondered, before losing consciousness entirely.

---

Draco woke with a dry, cotton-filled mouth. He was in a small bedroom, its walls bursting with color: Quidditch posters and concert broadsides, ribbons and postcards, photos featuring a young witch with unnaturally pink hair, all tacked up so that there was hardly any space uncovered. He bolted up, reaching for his wand instinctively, only to find it missing.

Where was he? How long had it been since he'd been awake?

"About two days," A voice offered, and he'd realized he'd croaked the question aloud. Andromeda Black was at his bedside in a flash, pulling up a chair and handing him a mug of cold tea. "You certainly took your time—I suppose that's Narcissa's influence. Merlin, she was always late."

Draco didn't care about the temperature—the liquid soothed his parched throat, bringing him marginally back to life.

"Are you injured? The Weasley boy cast before anyone could stop him, took one look and decided you'd brought the Dark Lord's forces along. Didn't even remember the wards—that one won't be winning any critical thinking awards, will he?"

Draco could only numbly shake his head. He conducted a mental check of his facilities; he wasn't hurt, at least, he didn't think he was. Just drained, his magic empty and rattling; no wonder he'd slept for two days after being knocked out. Weasley's stunner had been a mercy.

"I need my wand," he tried, even though he doubted he'd be able to cast so much as *lumos*. Without it, he felt like he was missing a limb. "My mother—is she?"

"Your wand is being held, just a precaution. She's fine," Andromeda assured. "Your mother lost an exorbitant amount of blood. But she will live. We've turned the guest bedroom into a medical bay—you're in my daughter Nymphadora's old room—she's resting there, goes in and out of consciousness. You can go see her in the morning; she's most lucid after sleeping through the night. Naturally, she's been through quite an ordeal, but I think your presence could soothe her." His aunt gave a wry little twist of her lips, more grimace than smile. "She keeps thinking I'm Bella and throwing cups at my head."



Up close, Draco could see the similarities; although Andromeda heavily favored Bellatrix, she had the same cerulean eyes as his mother, the same regal chin. In the warm light of the window, her hair was closer to auburn than ebony.

His mother was *safe*. She was *alive*. She was not fully cognizant, but she was aware enough to throw things, and that itself was an enormous relief, an anvil lifted from Draco's chest.

"Draco," Andromeda said. There was a control to her demeanor that could only have been achieved through years of comportment lessons, the sort Pansy used to whine about when they were children, forced to practice manners instead of playing outside. "I'm sure you're aware of the fact that I left our family under...undesirable circumstances. I was, for all intents and purposes, wiped off the map. How did you find this place?"

"You sent my mother a letter," Draco answered, realizing someone had dressed him in muggle clothing, a soft cotton shirt and joggers. He looked around for his robes, the letter tucked in their pocket. "I found it in a hidden drawer in my father's desk, while he was in Azkaban. It was still sealed, dated from nearly twenty years back, but I opened it and it said—"

"I know what it said," Andromeda snapped, before composing herself once more. "I have not seen my sister in over twenty years, and have not corresponded with her since the day I sent that letter. And on the day of an attack on the Order, the day I offered refuge to Harry Potter at the behest of my daughter, Narcissa's son shows up carrying her unconscious form, missing a finger and her wedding ring. Stepping over blood wards that are supposed to keep him out, without having anyone having spill a drop on his behalf, having seemingly defected. You'll forgive me, but it is imperative that I understand just *exactly* how and why my Death Eater nephew appears to be aiding the Order of the Phoenix."

Well, when she put it like that, Draco certainly appeared to be a sleeper agent, sent to infiltrate a safe house. His mother, a ruse.

There was, of course, a way to prove he wasn't. It just wasn't something he felt particularly comfortable allowing from a woman he'd just met, disowned relative or not. But reformed Death Eaters on enemy territory certainly couldn't be choosers.

"I suppose you have the family talent?" Draco asked his aunt with a heavy sigh, tapping his temple in explanation and resigning himself to the discomfort of a mental intrusion. "The Black sisters all practice mind magic, don't they?"

"I've been known to dabble," Andromeda answered, a sly look on her face. She took out her wand, polished cedar. "Let's see who you take after, then. *Legilimens*."

It felt unnatural to willingly lower his defenses, especially while in such a weakened state. Wand missing, magic drained, in uncharted territory. Andromeda's legilimency was less forceful than Narcissa's or Granger's, rougher around the edges, as if it hadn't been used in a while. Draco offered her selected memories from his garden—it wasn't as if he was willing to give his aunt carte blanche to see *everything* — selecting the ones he thought would be the most likely to prove his innocence.

Narcissa screaming, on the terrible night he was marked. The state of his mother's magic, the uncontrolled explosions. Painful glimpses of her under Dolohov's wand. At Hogwarts, passing information to Dumbledore in exchange for Narcissa's freedom. Colluding with Hermione Granger in corridors. Granger in the potions classroom, during their occlumency lessons. Granger's skin, golden under the moonlight—no, not that one, Draco thought, hastily shoving an incriminating memory of himself in a rather compromising position before Andromeda could see. Instead, he showed her the events that preceded their flight from Malfoy Manor: Draco's successful Killing Curse, Lucius having his mind altered under Granger's wand, his mother severing her own finger.

Andromeda withdrew, looking shaken by her sister's ordeal. She considered Draco with a curiosity and, possibly, a bit more esteem

than before.

"You're like me, then," she said. "An occlumens, and a decent one at that. I thought maybe you'd take after Cissy. Your mother was the legilimens of the family, you know. She didn't like using it, hated the attention it brought her. It was considered a rare trait, especially in a witch; it made her an oddity, and Cissy always so desperately wanted to fit in. Bella was proficient at both, but master of none. I was always the secret keeper, the one with the vault."

"Comes in handy, doesn't it?" Draco said bitterly. "When your life depends on how well you lie."

His aunt studied him, her astute eyes seeing more than Draco would have liked.

"Does your mother know?" She asked, her tone sympathetic. Like she'd recognized some sort of sickness in Draco, one that was sure to be fatal, and was being gentle in how she broke the news to him. "I assume your father doesn't, since you're still breathing."

"Know?"

"That you're in love with the Granger girl," Andromeda said, slowly as if Draco were very stupid.

"I'm not—"

"Of course," Andromeda demurred, lips twitching in amusement. "I wasn't either." She regarded Draco with narrowed eyes, something fox like in the tilt of her head. "Did your mother ever tell you why I was blasted off the tapestry?"

"You ran off with a muggleborn," Draco related, remembering what his mother had told him, when Draco asked if she had any siblings: *that's a complicated question, my sweet*. One sister in Azkaban, the other a blood traitor. "Broke off an arranged engagement to a Rosier, abandoned your family, became a stain on the Black legacy. Aunt

Bella's mentioned you a few times when she's properly pissed. She used...harsher words."

"I'd imagine so," Andromeda pondered dryly. "I always rather liked the thought that I'd become a Black cautionary tale. I suppose it puts me in the unique position of giving my nephew some advice on the topic." Her voice hardened into something impenetrable. "They'll be no going back for you after this, Draco. Not to the cause, or the lifestyle, or the manor."

"Oh, I'm going back," Draco protested, his stomach turning viciously. "It's the only way I can help—help *her*. If I hadn't been privy to the attack plans, she'd be *dead* right now." He carded his hands through his hair, a nervous tick resurfacing at his anxious thoughts. His aunt—an occlumens like himself—was the first person he'd ever told in explicit terms exactly why he'd agreed to do the things he'd done. It was jarring, hearing the contents of his miserable heart aloud. "Without access, I won't be able to protect her."

Andromeda shook her head as if Draco hadn't understood. She took one of Draco's hands in her own, turning it over so it was palm side up, and traced his lifeline with a finger. Her nails were coated in pink muggle varnish, a strange contrast to the jewelry she wore: two ornate rings, crusted with precious gems, obviously goblin wrought. Another, simpler band with a solitary diamond on her ring finger.

"This is your divide, Draco," Andromeda explained, looking up from his palm to meet his eyes. "You've reached the fork."

"You practice palmistry?"

"Who do you think taught Cissy?" She answered, before continuing with her examination. "This split means a choice has to be made, that loyalties have to be declared."

She withdrew her hands, clasping them in her lap. Draco reeled—was she telling him to choose Hermione, to announce where he *really* stood?

"I thought you were a Slytherin," he said, sounding disappointed. "There's no strategy in publicly switching sides. In shouting your vulnerabilities from the roof, giving your enemies a target."

"You're more like me than I thought," Andromeda grimaced, a far away quality to her gaze, as if she'd had this conversation many years before. "I said the same thing to Ted. He asked me to run away with him a hundred times and every time I told him no, that we could carry on the way we were: I'd love him in secret, from afar. *To protect him*. I'd settle for stolen moments, I'd lock my heart behind walls. I told him it was for him, and it was, but not completely."

"What—" Draco paused to clear his throat, fascinated by her admissions despite himself. "What changed your mind?"

"Nothing," his estranged aunt explained wryly. "One day, my mother caught onto my absences, followed me to where Ted and I used to meet in secret. She waited for me to return home, and then tried to force me to marry Evan Rosier at wandpoint, right then and there in the Black Manor's foyer. In that moment, I thought— how much of myself can I give away, in order to protect him? Could I marry another man? Could I bear his children? There'd be none of me left; for all my protection might have afforded, Ted would only love a ghost, never fully corporeal. So I cursed my mother in the back and escaped. I never returned and never regretted it."

"So you chose him, even if it put him in danger?"

"We're not bred for bravery, Draco," Andromeda sighed. "The Blacks are not ones for moral compasses or rights and wrongs. I'd sit this war out without a second thought, if it weren't for my daughter and Ted. It doesn't come naturally for me, the heroics."

This woman—his aunt—didn't know him at all. And yet, Draco had the horrible feeling he'd been given a mirror and forced to examine himself up close, no scar or stain going unseen.

If it weren't for his mother, Draco would be halfway across the globe. If it weren't for Granger, he'd be stuck at the Dark Lord's side, scrambling for purchase. It was an ugly realization, one that sent a strange wave of shame down his spine.

"But then, I fell in love with a muggleborn and realized that no secrecy or subterfuge would be enough to protect our union from a world that wanted to crush us under its heel. I learned that sometime, one has to fight. That the world responds to displays of strength, not strategy." Andromeda smirked, dark and dangerous, a flash of Bellatrix across her expression. "I proved just how strong I could be."

Draco considered his aunt, the witch who'd defied the most notorious wizarding dynasty in Britain and lived to tell the tale. There was something to be said, he thought, for the power of a clean break.

"Is she here?" He asked. "Granger?"

"Oh, yes," Andromeda replied, already standing and collecting the empty mug of tea. "She's been asking me if you were awake every thirty minutes for the past two days. A real pain, that one."

Draco smiled, unable to help it. His soft, stupid heart insisted on being seen. He ignored his aunt's amused look.

"Yes," he said. "She certainly has that effect on people."

---

Draco sat up in bed and waited for what felt like hours, but was likely only a few minutes, until there was a tentative knock on the door and Granger's face peeked through hesitantly. He waved her in and suffered through her fussing— *Was he hurt?* No. *How was his magic feeling?* Like shite. *How much did he remember?* Everything, and he was going to kill Weasley—until she got close enough to the bed for Draco to reach out and grab her by the waist, pulling her into his lap so he could press his cold lips into her neck.

"*Draco*," She scolded in protest and he blinked at her with false innocence. "Must you always manhandle me so?"

"Just getting my bearings," he explained, keeping her pressed against him. She smelled intoxicating, like lavender fields. Sweet and herbal, with sharp green undertones.

"We need to talk," she insisted, worry lines on display as she furrowed her brow. "The Order suffered a significant blow. The Death Eaters burned down the Burrow, we're still getting a handle on who is dead or missing or captured. It's been...well, it's been horrible, but I haven't felt like I was allowed to say that because I wasn't there to help."

"Granger," he soothed, attempting to stymie the guilt she was radiating through their bond. "Enough. Leave the soldier at the door, would you? It's just us. I've been unconscious for two days, you know. I heard you've been asking after me."

"I may have inquired of your survival once or twice." Granger blushed like this was the most embarrassing thing she could possibly admit, like they hadn't seen each other naked before. "It would be terribly inconvenient if you died."

She twisted in his lap so she could face him, repositioning herself on the mattress. It gave him the tremendous good fortune of being under her, her thighs on either side of his pelvis. She was wearing muggle denims—Merlin, he loved how all their strange clothing seemed to be nearly painted on—and a jumper made of itchy burgundy wool.

"Hmm," Draco hummed, slipping his frozen hands under her jumper until she hissed, running a thumb against the soft skin of her stomach, tracing the slope of her waist. "Andromeda told it differently."

"Do you want—" Her breath became slightly more ragged as she grew more and more affected by his touch. "I can get someone to

take you to see your mother, or if you need to talk to Andromeda—Christ, your hands are *cold*.”

He'd snaked them around her, pressing his palms beneath her shoulder blades, spanning her back. Using the leverage to pull himself up, face inches from hers. He watched as her throat bobbed, as she turned her head in order to glance nervously at the unlocked door.

“Granger,” Draco said, interrupting her protests. “I should, by all accounts, be dead.” He sent a wandless muffliato charm at the door, locking it for good measure. Nothing complicated, but enough to give them a semblance of privacy. “I'd not seen you in months, and when I finally did, it was under threat of torture and death.” He swallowed, struggling to keep himself from admitting how he'd thought about her, constantly and without reprieve. “I bloody missed you, all right?”

She looked surprised by this, her lips parted ever so slightly. Before he could say anything else, her hands were in his hair, her lips pressed to his. He groaned into her mouth, pulling her closer, closer. She tasted like winterberries and mint, an intoxicating combination that had him chasing her tongue with his own. She kissed him like she needed it just as badly as he did, like maybe, she'd missed him too.

“We probably shouldn't—” she managed, a half-hearted protest as Draco used his mouth to explore her jaw, her throat, the shell of her ear. She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, lashes fluttering. “It's inappropriate. People are in mourning. Harry and Ron are downstairs, and Tonks and Lupin, and your aunt—”

“We're at war. People are always going to be in mourning. We could all die tomorrow, and if we do, I don't want to regret wasting a damn moment,” he growled, pressing a thumb into the hollow of her collarbones, where she had a tiny constellation of freckles. “And I certainly don't give a fuck about being a good houseguest, not when you're in a *bed*, looking like this.”



“Like what?” Granger breathed, as if she didn’t realize how tempting she was. During those last few months at school, it took all his self control not to ravish her every time he saw her across the fucking classroom. He’d had to avoid her a bit, to stop himself from getting on his knees and begging.

“If that Killing Curse had hit me,” he murmured, looking into her eyes so she knew he wasn’t lying, wasn’t spinning sweet nothings in order to simply get under her robes. Draco had never been very good at that anyway; he was lucky he was handsome. “I would have been happy knowing you were the last thing I’d ever see.”

Okay, he was no poet. But he certainly had his moments.

In glorious response, Granger pulled off her sweater and undid her bra, allowing both garments to fall off the bed. His mouth went dry at the sight of her hovering over him like Venus reincarnate, all smooth honeyed skin, her pebbled nipples begging for his mouth. He reared forward to close his lips around one, sloppily mouthing at her tits until she pushed him away.

“I assume we have about fifteen minutes until someone comes up to make sure you haven’t murdered me,” Granger said, his protests cutting off abruptly as she removed her wand from her back pocket and pressed it to her abdomen, hastily casting the contraceptive charm. “Make it count.”

The last time, it had been exploratory. This time, it was frantic. They both stood, nearly tripping over themselves in urgency: she stumbled as she shucked her jeans and he removed his pants in record time. He lifted her back onto the bed and positioned her under him. Pressing her into the mattress, so he could feel the entire expanse of her bare skin against his. When he pulled her knickers to the side and swiped at her cunt, he found her soaked; it made him feel a deadly combination of smugness and arousal.

She gasped at the feeling, bucking her hips into his hand in search of more fiction. He withheld it, pressing a hand to her pelvis, holding

her still.

"*Hush.*" He smirked as he thumbed at her clit, keeping his pace steady despite her little noises of insistence. "Do you want the others to hear?"

Last time, he'd seen her body back lit only by the flickering glow of the fire. But now, with daylight illuminating every inch of her, he could indulge in admiration. Her chestnut curls splayed out on the pillow like a halo. Her pink cheeks, dotted with freckles. Her cupid's bow lips, spilling breathy encouragements. The peek of her tongue, inviting him to envision her mouth wrapped around his cock. The graceful slope of her waist. The purple scar that stretched from her sternum to her breasts.

Suddenly, Draco realized: he'd *killed* the man that did that to her. The thought sent a vicious thrum of satisfaction through him, and he pressed down on her clit in response.

She reacted so beautifully, her cunt growing slicker with every increase in pressure. She could probably come like this if he let her, riding his hand until she dripped down his wrist. In turn, he'd wager he could get off just by staring at her, glistening as she bore down on his fingers.

Mercifully unaware of his depraved thoughts, Granger whimpered. The sound made Draco painfully hard, his cock rubbing against the mattress, stiff and leaking.

"Please," she whispered, making an effort to beg quietly, and that was the limit of Draco's self control. "*Please.*"

He gave in immediately: hovering above her as he spread her thighs, positioning himself between them. Gods, she got so fucking wet for him. One day, he thought, he'd take his time with her. He'd tease her for hours, have her soaked and writhing before he so much as took out his cock. But today, Draco was alive and they were in a bed and he would take his mercies where he could find them.

Draco lost himself in the exquisite feeling of pushing into her. The scorching heat, the slick pressure. He moved slowly, long measured thrusts that had them both trembling. She held onto him, squeezing his bicep in a silent request for more, harder, faster.

But for once, Draco didn't want it fast and hard. He was delirious, riding the remnants of the terrible, exhilarating uncertainty of doubting whether he'd live to see sunrise. Fucking her felt like the first time he'd done proper magic, like the realization of possibility, of something sacred. He wanted to draw it out. He wanted to stop time, so he could bask in it. His heart, still beating. Her cunt, fluttering around him with every stroke.

But time wasn't a luxury they currently had; Draco already felt as if they were committing a heist by allowing themselves this moment, however fleeting. Like Prometheus stealing fire from the gods. And he couldn't drag it out, not when she was lifting her hips, wrapping her legs around his waist to pull them closer.

He lifted one leg to rest on his shoulder, changing the angle so he could slide deeper—*fuck*, she took him so well, all the way to the hilt—and her amber eyes flew open at the revelation. Draco supported himself with one hand, using the other to grasp her jaw, keep her from turning her face. He didn't want her to look away when she came: a star exploding, back arched, a hand over her own mouth the muffle the sounds. When she finally stopped quivering, he managed a few more hard strokes as she smiled heatedly up at him and bit her lip as if to say, *go on then*. He could feel his magic swell to life, revitalized, setting his nerve endings on fire as he came.

After several eternities, Draco thought that maybe she'd like the breathe at some point and he rolled off her, simultaneously spent and invigorated. Granger stood and busied herself with cleansing charms, keeping her gaze hidden behind lowered eyes. She seemed nervous as she tied up her mussed curls, dawdling as if preparing herself to say something. How strange it was that when they were naked and rutting, they could say nearly anything to each other, free

and unencumbered. But as soon as they were clothed again, that assuredness waned.

“Are you alright?” Draco asked, sitting up on the bed to examine her. She handed him his joggers, but he discarded them, preferring to take her wrist instead. He guided her hand to his face, where he leaned into her touch. *Look*, the gesture seemed to scream. *You have me*.

She brushed a thumb along his cheekbone, impossibly tender. With her standing and him perched on the mattress, they were at eye level, emotions excruciatingly on display.

“Are you going back?” Her eyes were shrouded again, none of the light he’d pulled from them mere moments ago. “To your father? To the Dark Lord?”

Draco considered what his aunt had said, about the importance of making his choice known. He knew he was not always a good man, that he more than likely didn’t deserve her. But if she was going to allow him a place in her life, no matter how small, she shouldn’t have to maintain—to her friends, to the rest of the world—the assumption that he thought her inferior and wanted her dead. She should be allowed to step into the light.

Maybe he *could* keep her safe, by returning to the Dark Lord’s side. He could pass her information, protect her efforts, steal moments in safehouses like this one. But— didn’t she deserve more? She was so willing to give herself up; didn’t she need someone by her side, watching her back, making sure she didn’t give away too much? Couldn’t that be Draco?

“Do you want me to, Hermione?” He asked, with the uncanny sensation he was offering himself up, placing his heart in her hands. “Do you need that from me?”

“No.” She answered and even thought her tone was decisive, it sounded like a plea. “I can’t—when I don’t know if you’re safe, I can’t

think straight. When you pushed me out of the way of that Killing Curse, I thought—" She shuddered, unable to finish her sentence. "I don't want you tossing yourself onto the fire for me, Draco."

She blinked rapidly, as if she were on the verge of tears. He couldn't stand for it.

"I won't go back," he assured, aiming for comfort. "I was a shit spy anyway."

Granger garbled a laugh, still choked up but no longer threatening sobs. "You weren't shit."

*Liar*, Draco thought, with embarrassing fondness. He'd proved marginally helpful, but he certainly was no Snape.

"I'll stay with you," he promised, going deadly serious. He tucked an errant curl behind her ear, leaning forward until his forehead rested against hers. "As long as you want me."

Andromeda was right: Draco was no lion, never predisposed to a hero's acts of bravery. But he'd long mastered the art of sacrifice: he knew what it was to give himself up in pieces, trade bits of his soul for those he loved. He wasn't sure about how to do the opposite, how to save himself on someone else's behalf.

But when she kissed him, half dressed and lovely, he realized that for some reason, Hermione Granger considered him as something worth saving.

Draco had long thought that the world was vicious and cruel, hell bent on returning its inhabitants into ash and dust. That romantic love as the scholars and poets spoke of it was just a concept, a pretty facade used to disguise their more honest, more human realities: desire, hunger, pleasure. That everything good in the world came at the price of blood, and to live was simply to mitigate how much of it one was willing to let from their veins.

But now...Draco was starting to have doubts. It was quite possible, he realized, that he'd been wrong. About all of it.

---

- Andromeda Black is one of the most fascinating characters to write. She fell in love with Ted and cursed her own mother in the back in order to be with him. She's not got a single altruistic bone in her body. And yet, she loves her husband and daughter so much she's willing to harbor the most wanted teenage wizard in Britain.

- One of the important themes of this chapter is how sacrifice on others' behalf, while noble, often takes away their agency.

-Draco Malfoy desecrating the childhood bedrooms of other people since 1998. I mean, who can resist some "thank fuck we're alive" sex, especially after last chapter?

- Ah yes, the spy fake out I've been waiting to reveal! Draco: I'm going to be a spy. Draco, three chapters later, after having sex: Uh actually, I something to live for, so...

- [Chit chat with me on Tumblr, where I love talking about this fic ad nauseam!](#)

- [Smoke Signals has an official playlist!](#) Go give it a listen for some dreamy, dark vibes. Like fog surrounding a cold, cliffside beach

- See you next week for the aftermath: Hermione, explaining \*this\* to the wonder twins aka Harry and Ron. In the meantime, if you'd like a bit of smut to tide you over, I wrote [Do No Harm](#), a filthy little story following Healer!Hermione and Vigilante!Draco as they desecrate St. Mungo's.

I love you all, readers old and new, silver and gold.

---

# Days of Disquiet

## Chapter 35: Days of Disquiet

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The days Draco spent at Tonks House were an absolute fever dream, as if he'd stepped through a portal into someone else's life. There was a surreality to it that he couldn't shake: he'd escaped the Dark Lord, only to find himself in *very* close quarters with his long lost aunt and her family, his former werewolf Professor, his two sworn Gryffindor nemeses, and his— his— well, the witch he was sleeping with. *Had* slept with. Twice. Not a fluke, but not yet anything established either.

Granger, okay? He was stuck in the house with Granger. And his *mother*.

Narcissa was at her most lucid in the mornings, the time of day she was most likely to blink awake and offer him a *hello darling*, looking around the guest bedroom with startling clarity and asking if they were visiting Uncle Alphard.

To Draco's great dismay, these moments were few and far between: it was uncertain whether Narcissa would ever fully recover from her explosion of dark magic, the inky force that had corrupted her very magical core. There were no records of such things that Draco could find in Tonks House's limited library; the closest he came were stories of muggleborn children who'd burned their villages to ash with accidental magic, and frankly, he wasn't sure he wanted to make the connection between those events and his mother.

It was a small comfort to him that away from Malfoy Manor and the horrors it housed, Narcissa was showing slow, but perceptible progress. On good days, she'd draw the curtains and sit in the winter sun, enjoying its rays on her face.

On bad days, she called him Lucius; those days, Draco struggled to keep his composure, barely holding it together until he could into his borrowed room and break things that didn't belong to him. And on very bad days, Narcissa didn't speak at all, eyes vacant as she paced the shores of her occlumency sanctuary, trapped in her own head.

Despite Draco's protests that they get a healer for her, security protocols be damned, his aunt was of the opinion that the best way for Narcissa to heal was to allow her time.

"It's not even been a week, Draco," Andromeda urged as they stood at his mother's bedside while she stared off at nothing. It had been a particularly dismal morning; when Draco had greeted her, Narcissa had looked right through him as if he were made of glass. "You have to be patient with her. With the right care, the mind repairs itself. Humans are quite resilient that way."

Patience had never been one of Draco's strong suits. He didn't want to be told everything would right itself, one day. He wanted evidence, protocol: as if life were arithmancy, do  $x$  and  $y$  will follow. He certainly didn't want to rely on factors as ephemeral and flighty as *time* and *space*.

"And sometimes, with the right care, it doesn't," Draco snapped, rubbing his face in irritation. "Or did you forget what your own sister did to the Longbottoms? What's to say my mother won't end up drooling in St. Mungo's when all this is done? She doesn't even know my bloody name, and you're telling me I should have hope in the fortitude of humanity?"

His voice grew harsh, raised far above the standards of what was considered polite. Draco knew he was crossing a line, knew he should be grateful to the woman who'd take them in, but he couldn't stop himself. Unfortunately, he'd always had a tendency of testing those who'd shown him kindness.



Andromeda raised a single brow, a challenge Draco was not eager to meet. His aunt was nothing like her sisters. Andromeda did not rant and rave like Bellatrix, nor was she a proponent of Narcissa Malfoy's signature passive-aggressive silent treatment. No, Andromeda communicated her disapproval with withering exaction, armed with a razor-sharp tongue and ice blue eyes that conveyed her scorn at levels that rivaled even McGonagall's.

"Do not mistake my optimism for foolishness, Draco," Andromeda warned coldly, opening the door of Narcissa's guest bedroom in a clear indication he was no longer welcome there. "Do you truly think I am naive to the realities of war? That I'm unaware of the possibility that my sister could very well never recover? Perhaps I do not voice these thoughts with you, nephew, because you are barely of age and I see no gain in adding to your misery, when there is currently plenty to go around. Remember that, next time you struggle to hold your tongue."

Draco didn't have to be told twice. He bowed his head in contrition and left the blast radius of his aunt's quiet fury with a strange sense that he'd been completely and utterly chastised into submission. Such was the power of the middle Black sister.

In his first month, his interactions with the house's other occupants were less common, albeit just as fraught. During the initial days, Draco was confined to his cousin's old bedroom as the Order figured out what they were going to do with their newest and most notorious houseguests. He was firmly barred from both the Order meetings Lupin presided over in the dining room and the hushed rendezvous that the Gryffindor trio were constantly having behind closed doors: when Draco wasn't with Narcissa, he was shut away in his room like someone's Squib cousin, only leaving in order to visit the loo or the kitchen.

Worst of all was the fact that without his wand, Draco was left to his own devices, and quickly learned they were completely useless. He was even stuck making his tea the muggle way, with the soggy little sachets Granger favored.

"You've got to boil the water separately, lad," a Welsh accent corrected from over his shoulder, while Draco was messing with the kettle in an attempt to concoct something that would be remotely drinkable. That was how Draco met Ted Tonks, his de-facto uncle, the man Andromeda had abandoned her family for. He was a stocky, dark-haired man with olive skin and a face full of crinkled smile lines.

"Why've you *opened* the bag?" Ted vanishing Draco's miserable attempt for him, the mess of tea leaves and tepid water disappearing into thin air. "All you have to do is dunk it in the water."

"I've got it," Draco snapped, even though he very much didn't.

"Draco, is it?" His uncle grinned, something fond and reminiscent in the expression. Draco nodded stiffly as the man pocketed his wand and took the kettle from him, filling it with water from the tap. "Andy didn't know how to do anything the muggle way either when we first started up. Couldn't even fold socks without a wand, bless her."

"She's a witch," Draco answered tightly. "She wouldn't have to, would she?"

"That's exactly what she said," Ted replied with a laugh, a warm, effusive sound that made him instantly, annoyingly likable. "But there's more than one way to skin a kneazle, ain't there? And one day, you might find yourself without a wand, in need of a cuppa. Feeling stupid, because you don't know how to boil water without magic."

Ted set about lighting the stove with a match. Despite having a wand, he was doing this the muggle way, clearly demonstrating it for Draco. If Draco was mentally taking notes, well. That was his prerogative.

"You holding up alright then?" Ted asked, leaning on the counter as they waited for the water to heat. Draco scowled, not eager to have some sort of miserable heart to heart with his freshly instituted, painfully good-natured uncle.

“I’m shut in a room all day without a wand, because you lot don’t trust me not to murder you in your sleep,” he answered, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “But yeah, besides that I’m swell.”

“Your aunt told me you got through the wards without a drop of blood spilled. Funny thing, that.” Ted smiled, sending the corners of his eyes crinkling. Draco got the uncomfortable sense that behind Ted’s easygoing exterior, there was a keen eye and a sharp mind. The question was implicit, although Draco was certainly not going to answer it, and Ted didn’t press, just continued with his explanation.

“You know, I thought those wards were archaic, when Andy proposed them. This was back when we were first married, when her sister was hellbent on hunting us down, making an example of me.” He paused to clarify. “Er, the other one, not your mum.”

“I assumed,” Draco said dryly. Narcissa was many things, but murderous was not one of them.

“Right. Andy wanted to use them to keep her sister—and any like-minded ilk—out, to make it so you needed muggleborn blood in order to enter. Only if given willingly and with good intent, otherwise her sister would show up with some poor muggleborn hostage in order to get through. I didn’t like the idea much. Thought it was a slippery slope from distinguishing muggleborns to that *only the purest blood runs through our veins* shite. See, my mum was Romani, dealt with all of that inferior genetics shite even in the muggle world, and when I went to Hogwarts and learned about blood status, I thought, *oh hell, here we go*. I didn’t want another bullshit classification separating me and Andy, because if the wards could tell who was pureblood and who was muggleborn based on a single drop, that inferred there was an intrinsic difference between us.”

Draco had never truly considered this: blood wards were just something the Malfoy estate had always upheld, a protection passed down from his ancestors. He’d never seen it as an instrument of prejudice, it was just a *tradition*. And yet...so many things on the

Malfoy estate were cursed to repel muggleborns, specifically. What protective efforts did they entail?

“So why use them, then?” Draco asked, turning the idea over in his mind.

“Because I learned that what the wards are picking up on isn’t really blood status, not in the physical sense,” Ted continued. “There’s no physical difference between your blood or mine. With family blood wards, the wards don’t know whether wizards are related because of shared genetics, they know of relation because of shared *magic*. A drop of blood is just a conduit for that, a magical signature if you will. When the Blacks used ’em to keep muggleborns from their properties, what they were really doing was discerning magical signatures: muggleborns like myself don’t have generational magic in them, not like you and Andy do. It’s not to say that it makes you any better or stronger; it’s just different, innit?”

Draco furrowed his brow, wishing he could pick Theo’s brain on the subject; his pureblood friend would wholeheartedly disagree, wouldn’t he? Draco had been taught there was a tangible difference between Granger’s blood and his own— *mudblood*, he’d called her—and although he’d overcome ideas of superiority, he hadn’t fathomed that there wasn’t an inherent difference between them.

“It’s the ephemeral that matters with blood wards,” Ted continued, Draco’s mental turmoil unbeknownst to him. “Your magic and your intent, of course. If you think of yourself as a pureblood, know yourself that way even if you’ve got some distant muggleborn relative, then the wards will treat you as such.”

“The Death Eaters have half bloods amongst them. What’s to keep them out?”

“All the other protections in place, lad. Blood wards aren’t infallible. When we put these wards up, we weren’t trying to keep out an army; we were trying to keep out the Blacks. There was no thought to allowing in the Order or keeping out the Death Eaters; blood magic

doesn't care about your allegiance either. When that Ron Weasley showed up, I had to prick a finger, even if he's as much of a blood traitor as they get."

"And yet, *Weasley* isn't locked in a room, wandless."

"Weasley wasn't a Death Eater," Ted reminded him, as if Draco needed reminding. "Lupin and Potter don't trust you. They don't put much stock in the wards, probably because they haven't bothered to understand them. But for what it's worth, the way I see it is that you're the Malfoy scion, as pure as pure can get, and the wards let you right through. That means *something*."

"What about Andromeda," Draco argued, skirting Ted's question. "Can she come and go as she sees fit without you splitting your wrist open?"

The kettle began to whistle. Ted extinguished the flame and filled two cups with boiling water before plopping in the sachets, allowing them to steep for a big, before removing them entirely. Draco took a mental note; to his mortification, he'd been boiling the contents of the bags in the water as if making a particularly disgusting form of soup.

"She can," Ted replied after passing him a cup. "And that's made possible by reasons that will stay between me and her."

"*You're* married," Draco stated, brows raised, the implication hanging between them. "Traditional ceremony, was it?"

Ted picked up on what he was suggesting—the insinuation of rather *improper* blood sharing required by ancient marital ceremonies—and shook his head, grinning the whole time.

"*You're* not," his uncle countered, raising his cup to his lips. "Unless you'd like to tell me of some recent nuptials, that is. Who'd you come in with again lad? The Granger girl, was it?"

Draco made a noise of displeasure and Ted winked knowingly.

“How about we let sleeping crups lie, huh? Enjoy the cuppa.” He gave Draco an overly familiar pat on the shoulder, as if they were really family, just an uncle and a nephew having a chat in a kitchen. For the entirety of his life, Draco had his mother and father, but no siblings or cousins to play with, no aunts or uncles to confide in. And now, without any warning, he was connected to this man. His aunt’s husband, a Welsh muggleborn with broad shoulders and a warm laugh. It was bizarre.

“Thank you,” Draco said stiffly, taking a sip. It wasn’t great, but it wasn’t as terrible as his own attempts had been. “For the tea. And for...allowing my mother and myself to stay.”

“Didn’t have much of a choice, did we? You’re family, aren’t you. Blood or not, we take care of our own,” Ted said kindly. “You’ll have your wand back in no time, lad. You’ve just got to prove to them what you already have to your aunt and I.”

Without the means to *prove* his loyalty, Draco spent his days amusing himself with whatever reading he could find. He practically memorized the book he’d borrowed from Nott estate, which he’d carefully kept on his person ever since. Its pages were filled with the most ancient and gruesome of magics, the kind Draco had only heard as whispers and warnings: instructions for necromancy, enslavement bindings, instructions of splitting one's soul in order to obtain immortality. Even spells that claimed to corrupt magical cores, leaving their recipients as powerless as muggles.

Draco wasn’t sure why Granger had requested this book, especially in its forbidden first edition, but he had a terrible feeling about it, one that urged him to chuck the text into the fireplace. He couldn’t ask her either; ever since their brief albeit heated *reunion*, Hermione and Draco were being kept notably apart. His only comfort was that he could be consistently kept abreast of her emotions through the bond; to his delight, she was mostly annoyed, the natural state of anyone stuck with Potter and Weasley for prolonged periods of time.

When they did manage to steal a minute or two together, lingering in the hall or passing in the kitchen, there was hardly a moment for a brief greeting, much less enough time for what he really wanted to ask: *Why do you need a book hell bent on raising the dead? Did you really mean it when you said you wanted me to stay?* But Dim and Dimmer was always hot on Granger's heels, like a pair of the world's least subtle guard dogs. Draco wasn't given a particular reason for their separation, but he could certainly guess: exposure to the Imperius curse could take up to a month to shake off fully, and the Order was taking care to ensure that if Draco had managed to get Hermione under the curse, he wouldn't be given the opportunity to regain control. He was almost flattered by their faith in his wandless abilities— if only they'd seen him, floundering at the thought of casting an Unforgivable for an entire year.

His house arrest was finally lifted one morning, when his reading—he'd moved onto a hefty Muggle novel of Ted's with pages and pages of irritating endnotes— was interrupted by a young witch with a heart shaped face and short pink hair. Andromeda's daughter, the metamorphmagus he'd seen months ago in the Hospital Wing.

"Cousin," she greeted, sticking her head into the bedroom without knocking, a twinkle in her eye. He had a feeling she'd been sent as an emissary to collect him. "Enjoying my old room?"

"Nymphadora," he answered politely, hoping she hadn't realized that he'd broken a lamp, amongst other items, in fits of irritation. "It's... very much adequate."

"Ugh." The witch stuck her tongue out childishly at the greeting, revealing a curious flash of metal. "For Merlin's sake, don't call me that."

"What, your name?"

"Yeah, makes me think I'm about to be scolded. It's Tonks to you and everyone else besides mum, and the only reason I don't make a fuss is because she picked the name, didn't she? Plus, I'm scared of her."

Privately, Draco agreed with this assessment: Andromeda was tough as runestones and could strike faster than a pit viper when she wanted to. Sometimes—although he'd never tell either witch of this thought, even though it came from a place of embarrassing warmth — she reminded him of a rather mature version of Pansy.

"If you insist," Draco responded, frowning. Although she resembled neither of her parents, his cousin had her father's demeanor: friendly and clever and annoyingly cheerful. She certainly hadn't gotten it from Andromeda.

"C'mon, then. Your presence has been requested."

Tonks steered him through the halls at a brisk, albeit jaunty clip. She'd clearly gotten injured in the battle at the Burrow, walking with a stiffness Draco knew personally as the aftereffect of recently reset bones. But the fact that she was walking at all was proof that the Order must have put up a decent fight.

"Remus is holding an unofficial-official Order meeting. He has... questions for you," Tonks informed him, as they descended the stairs. There were gilded pictures on the walls: all solely of the three figures who made up his aunt's family, no ancestors in sight. "About, er, if and why you defected. Potter and company, too."

Draco groaned. He'd been expecting as much, but that didn't mean he was looking forward to being questioned by the werewolf and his least favorite classmates.

"Mum will be there to back you up," Tonks added, a hint of sympathy in her tone. "She said she vetted you. And given that she's got those mind tricks that make veritaserum seem like pumpkin juice, I trust her judgement."

"And you? Do you use those...mind tricks?" Draco asked, before he could stop himself. He didn't want to encourage his cousin's interactions any more than necessary, but at the same time, he'd



never had extended family before, and harbored an unfortunate little desire to discover how much they shared.

"I should bloody think not," Tonks shuddered at the thought. "I know it's useful and all, but Merlin, it gives me the creeps. Luckily I was a complete dud at meditation, not that mum didn't try. She forced me to practice visualization and all sorts of tosh for *years* before declaring me a lost cause."

His cousin brought him to the dining area, which appeared to be transformed into a de facto war room: maps covering the surface areas, glowing lists suspended in the air with three glowing columns: Confirmed Living, Missing, and Dead. Draco turned away quickly, loathe to stumble upon the name of someone he knew, from either side.

The house's other inhabitants were already seated, clearly waiting for him. A beleaguered Lupin, dressed even shabbier than usual. Ted, with his arm slung around the back of Andromeda's chair. He felt Hermione through their bond before he saw her; she was vaguely nauseous, nervous but not scared, as if she were bracing herself to withstand something unpleasant. She sat between her two bodyguards, hair still damp from a shower, looking quietly devastating. Rounding out the tribunal were Potter and Weasley, wearing matching expressions so poisonous, one would have thought Draco shagged their mothers.

"Why don't you have a seat, Draco," Lupin said, gesturing to one of the open chairs next to his aunt. "We'd like to speak to you, collectively. The Order doesn't operate on hierarchy, we all get to have a say in strategic decisions. Hermione has told us of the events that led you here and Andromeda confirms her account, but there is still much to be discussed regarding your...position amongst us."

*No wonder they were so damn ineffectual, Draco thought uncharitably. Trying to turn an army into a democracy.*

"My position," he said dryly, taking the seat as directed. Tonks plopped down beside him, shooting him an encouraging wink. He tried not to roll his eyes; why was this side of the family so terribly *expressive*? "Rather strange way to describe being shut up in a room, but I'll bite."

"It's been brought to my attention that it was you, who warned Hermione of the forthcoming attack on the Burrow," Lupin asserted, paging through what appeared to be notes of testimony. "Your intelligence saved numerous lives. For that, you have our thanks."

"Correct," Draco confirmed, his tone clipped. Lupin scribbled something on the parchment. *Awfully organized*, Draco thought, *for a bloodthirsty dark creature*. He'd have to tell Theo he wasn't the only swotty werewolf in existence, providing Draco ever saw him again. A sobering thought.

"Hermione also said your association began this past school term under the guidance of Albus Dumbledore," the bloodthirsty dark creature continued, sliding off his reading spectacles. "Tell me how that came to be."

Draco sighed heavily, fighting the urge to make things difficult for everyone involved, as was his specialty. He looked Hermione's way and when she gave him a little dip of her chin in confirmation, Draco delivered a highly edited version of the circumstance of his change in alliance: starting at the beginning of the prior year, when he'd made an agreement with Dumbledore, helped pass information regarding the Death Eaters' movements in exchange for a guarantee of his amnesty and his mother's safety.

It would have been easier for him to simply roll up his sleeve and show them tangible proof he'd turned against Voldemort, but Draco was well aware that could err into dangerous territory—questions would certainly lead to the ritual they'd completed to remove it—and if the Order found out about their bond, Draco had a grim certainty that they'd not hesitate to use it in their favor. And Draco was quite tired of being used as a weapon.

So instead, he spun a tidy little story, one that omitted Hermione's involvement as much as possible and clearly left Lupin and his acolytes, Potter and Weasley, unsatisfied.

"So Dumbledore *knew*?" Potter scoffed when he finished, wasting no time to get on Draco's nerves. "Awfully convenient, given that he's dead now that your *friend* murdered him."

"Nott's not my *friend*," Draco corrected, rolling his eyes. "He's my burden. You know, like Weasley."

Potter turned an unflattering red, his temper threatening to burst forth. Draco had never met anyone with less self control, and found it amusing that the Chosen One had anger issues that made Draco look like a pious monk.

"Harry," Lupin warned, a long suffering patience in his tone. "Remember that we're here to listen, not make accusations."

Honestly, everyone treated Potter like he was made of fine china, not realizing that the boy was in fact the bull, smashing everything to bits in the shop.

"I've corroborated the boy's account, Lupin," Andromeda interjected. "Ask Draco what you really want to and get on with it."

There was a palpable thread of disdain in her tone; Draco got the impression his aunt did not like Remus Lupin, not even slightly. Next to Draco, his cousin squirmed with discomfort, as if her mother's interaction with Lupin was physically painful to her.

"Yes, thank you, Andromeda," Lupin replied stiffly.

"Mrs. Black," his aunt corrected, with a smile that did not reach her eyes. If Draco were Lupin, he'd be begging the gods to undo whatever he'd done in a past life to earn the misfortune of a Black sisters ire.

"And thank you for that information, Draco," Lupin continued, looking a bit frazzled. "Beside your own testimony, Mrs. Black and Miss Granger have both delivered accounts on your behalf and given the evidence that's been presented, I am inclined to believe them.

"*What?*" Potter cut in loudly. Beside him Weasley scowled in confusion, as if this was not going remotely like he'd thought it would.

"Evidence?" Weasley scoffed, gesturing widely in his direction. "All I see is a Death Eater in sheep's clothing. C'mon, in what reality would *he* have a sudden change of heart."

Draco had tolerated a great many injustices since arriving to Tonks house; he drew the line at having his character judged by a Weasley.

"Oh, it wasn't sudden," he snarled. "The Dark Lord hasn't been a proponent of the Malfoys, not for some time. My father made a series of rather crucial errors, and while he was locked away in Azkaban, his family was made to pay for them. I had to stand by for *months* while the Dark Lord tortured my mother to the brink of insanity. Do you have any idea what that's like, Weasley? Have you ever been made to watch as someone you love was hurt so badly they lost themselves, all while you're powerless to stop it?"

"Actually," Weasley said, narrowing his eyes in Draco's direction. "I have. Second year, when my sister was possessed by the fucking Dark Lord himself because of a diary *your father* gave her."

Draco fought the urge to flinch, his father's misdeeds like an infection he'd never quite be free of.

"Then you know the lengths someone would go, in order to save them," Draco answered, straightening his posture and looking Weasley in the eye. "You know why I made a deal. Why I want them to pay. You know why I had, as you so ridiculously put it, *a change of heart.*"

Twin expressions of hatred and comprehension fought for control of Weasley's face, as if he couldn't tell whether he wanted to swing at Draco or commiserate with him.

"That's a great explanation, Malfoy, very compelling," Potter piped up, ever the thorn in his side. "Just one thing— where did Hermione factor into this? Why involve her?"

"Let's not veer from—" Lupin started, but Tonks shook her head, warning him to stay out of it.

"They're going to have it out either way, Remus," his cousin muttered, from beside him. "Best it happens under relative supervision."

Privately Draco disagreed: the best way for them to have it out would be with a wand in his hand and a curse on his lips, but he supposed conversation would have to do.

"Why involve her?" He repeated Potter's words, bemused. "Have you *met* Granger? As soon as she clued into what was going on, she involved herself!"

"You knew?" Potter turned to Granger with betrayal in his eyes: in turn, Hermione shifted in her seat, sending stray sensations of guilt and worry through the bond.

"I—well, yes I—Harry, you have to understand, you're not an occlumens. It would have been dangerous to—"

Her hand was circling her wrist, the wrist where they'd bound themselves together in Dumbledore's office under the Headmaster's wand. All at once, Draco suddenly realized why she'd been so uncharacteristically quiet.

"You knew he was working with Dumbledore and you didn't tell me? Even when I begged you to explain what the bloody hell was going on? I thought I could trust you!"

“Of course you can trust her, you idiot,” Draco snarled, very much displeased by the tone Potter had seen fit to take with his—with Hermione. “She didn’t not tell you because she was lying. She didn’t tell you because she swore an Unbreakable Vow. If she’d told you the truth, she’d have *died*.”

Granger stared at him, surprise flooding their bond. Beside her, the two Gryffindor boys let out sounds of shock and dismay.

“I’m going to make myself quite clear,” Draco started, folding his hands on the table in front of him. “I don’t give a damn about the Order of the Phoenix. I’m only tolerating this, willing to aid in your efforts, because we share a common enemy. I came here because I want the Dark Lord’s head on a spike. My reasons for that shouldn’t matter; they’re certainly none of your business, but since you seem to require a rationale—” He lowered his voice, until he sounded deadly, cold as impermeable winter— “I may have *left* the Dark Lord’s army because of my mother, but I could have run anywhere in the world, could have waited this war out, could have sabotaged his efforts on my *own*. But I’m *staying* here, willing to help the Order, because of her.”

He lifted his chin in Granger’s direction, his eyes darkening as her cheeks steadily grew pink at his words, all flushed and lovely.

There were a variety of reactions to this declaration: Potter blanched, looking a bit sick. Weasley’s jaw hung open, giving him the appearance of a large mouthed river fish. Andromeda looked far too pleased for Draco’s liking. Lupin ran a hand through his graying hair slowly, muttering under his breath. Draco caught bits that sounded suspiciously like *Dumbledore...romantic...megalomaniac*. They seemed shocked by the intensity of his response; none of them had entertained the possibility that Draco was *quite* serious when he charged into the Hospital Wing in search of her. That he’d claw and fight and scrape to keep her.

He almost felt disgruntled— did they really not realize that Granger was valuable enough to warrant a pledge of his *life*, much less a

change of loyalty? Didn't they realize how powerful she was? If she fluttered her lashes at him, Draco would have probably followed her over a bloody *cliff*.

Potter was, unfortunately, the first to speak.

“Are you seriously saying that you’re willing to help us take down Vol- Riddle because you’re...*seeing each other?*” His tone was baffled, as if he couldn’t imagine a single universe where Draco cared about her. He couldn’t even see what was right in front of his face, what had been there for months now, if Draco was being honest.

“Let’s put it this way,” Draco responded, speaking very slowly and exactly, as if he thought Potter a complete idiot, which he did. “If Granger is here, I’m here. If Granger decides to fuck off into the woods, that means I’m going camping. If Granger wants to leave all of this behind and cut her losses, if she says *Draco, I don’t want to fight*, that means I’m getting her out and you can say your fucking goodbyes. But yes, I suppose that means I’m seeing her. You *dolt*,” he finished with a snarl.

Granger looked stricken—perhaps he should have asked her if they were seeing each other. It just seemed like such a useless clarification, after the first handful of times they’d saved each other’s life. Also, perhaps Draco hadn’t wanted to hear her say, *I only wanted a shag, tosser*.

“Hermione?” Potter prompted.

Granger bit her lip, looking guilty. “Er, yes,” she managed. “Suppose we are.”

From down the table, his prim and proper, pureblooded aunt cleared her throat, sounding suspiciously like she was choking back a laugh.

“Must you always complicate things, Malfoy?” Granger muttered in Draco’s direction. She sounded irritated, but Draco felt something

quite different through the bond: she was *pleased*. Even buried under all the annoyance—of which there was plenty— she still couldn't hide a little flickering flame of satisfaction that informed him she'd very much *liked* what he'd said.

"I told you I'm not going back and I meant it." Draco spoke directly to her as if the two numpties by her side weren't there. "What other reason do I have to hide my intentions?" He scanned the table, curling his lip. "I assume *you* lot don't have any issues with mixed blood."

"No," Ted Tonks replied, jaw twitching in poorly suppressed humor. "It's rather encouraged, in this house." Andromeda swatted her husband, muttering something about not egging on the children.

"No it's not," Potter interjected hotly, as if Draco cared. Frankly, Potter's dismay over the whole thing made Draco even more invested. "This is most definitely not encouraged, not by me."

"Rather close minded view for the Chosen One," Draco drawled. "Aren't you a half-blood Potter? Do you know how half-bloods come to be? I assume you're too stupid to manage any semblance of true hypocrisy, so I'll explain: it's when Daddy Pureblood and Mummy Muggleborn like each other very much—"

"God, do you ever shut up?" Potter interjected furiously, disrupting Draco's monologue just as he was picking up steam. "I don't mean because of blood status, you *twat*. I mean because it's *you*. You're a vicious bully at best and a murderous cult member at worst; it's not a shock I'm going to be opposed to you suddenly declaring you fancy one of my best mates. We all know you're a slippery son of a bitch, Malfoy. How do we know you're not just manipulating her? Let's assume you really have turned over a new leaf— what's to say you're not only using her because you broke with Voldemort and now need to save your own skin?"

"What an utterly shite theory," Draco scoffed, looking at Potter as if he had dragon dung for brains. "Not to mention horribly insulting. Do



you *really* think I'd be able to trick *Hermione Granger* into courting?"

From the corner of his eye, he could see as Weasley turned to Granger in disbelief and mouthed, *courting?* Granger's cheeks went from pink to scarlet. Weasley tilted his head towards the heavens, like he was questioning some cruel god.

"Well—"

"Have you considered, Potter," Draco interrupted The Boy Who Barely Survived with vitriol. "That Granger knows me better than you do? That she might have reasons to trust me that she didn't share with you, because she knew *this* was how you'd react?"

"Hermione wouldn't—"

"Perhaps Hermione can shed some light on her *own* thoughts and choices, instead of being talked about as if I'm an inanimate object," the witch in question cut in, steel in her voice.

Draco smirked at Potter, as if to say, *told you so*.

"It isn't anyone's business who I'm seeing, nor am I interested in anyone's opinion on the matter, because it in no way affects my efforts to end this war. If you have concerns—" she directed this at Potter and Weasley, a dangerous look of warning in her amber eyes, "—you are welcome to air them to me in private, with your voice lowered appropriately, and I'll address them as I see fit."

Granger raised her chin haughtily. "Is that understood?" She crossed her arms, as if the matter was settled. Unfortunately, it was not.

"Oh no," Weasley groaned, like he'd finally realized something important. "You are shagging him." He shook his ginger head in Granger's direction. "First, my best mate starts up with my sister, and now this? What's next, is someone going to tell me Percy is shacking up with You-Know-Who?"

“That’s not—of course you focus on the most irrelevant—” Hermione stammered, looking to Draco for help, only to find him radiating smugness. “Private information—did you even hear a word I said?”

“Are you fucking kidding me, Hermione?” Potter was shaking his head, his shaggy black hair sticking up wildly. “You’d really betray everything you believe—”

“Piss off with the dramatics, Potter,” Draco spat. “Is it a *betrayal*, every time you stick your prick in Weasley’s sister?”

“Oi!” Weasley roared as Potter nearly vaulted the table to get at him, only to be thrown back into his seat by a burst of magic. When he or Weasley tried to get up, they found themselves stuck to their chairs, effectively immobilized.

Hermione pocketed her wand.

“Enough,” she insisted, sending Draco a flurry of warning through the bond. He put his hands up like a good boy in the universal symbol for surrender. “Draco is staying, do you two understand? He’s a valuable resource and we should utilize him as such. If you can’t trust him, fine. But if you decide you can’t work with him and decide to throw him to the mercy of the Death Eaters, I swear on my *parents*, Harry— I’ll never forgive you for as long as I live. For being so stubborn and selfish that you can’t even *try* to understand. If you don’t even try...well, then we aren’t much of friends anyway, are we?”

Weasley and Potter were both struck dumb and Draco wasn’t sure if Granger had silenced them, along with her sticking charm.

It wasn’t a sappy declaration of love, it was something else, something Draco could respect: a threat. On his behalf.

A triumphant, writhing pride twisted its way through Draco’s gut, soaring through the bond freely. For once, Draco didn’t care. He

wanted her to feel that he was *proud*, to be defended as if he were hers.

Ted Tonks let out a low whistle, looking between Hermione and Draco as if he'd seen a ghost. He nudged his wife, who raised her eyebrows in response, as if to say, *I told you*. His uncle turned to Draco, addressing him directly.

"She's got you by the throat, doesn't she, lad?"

"If I'm lucky," Draco drawled, not earning himself any favors.

Nymphadora took advantage of the lull, clearing her throat before anyone could kick off again.

"Shall we, er, return to the matter at hand?" She offered. "Remus?"

"Yes, this has gone on long enough," Lupin interrupted, sounding exhausted and vaguely embarrassed by having to overhear discussion of his former students' love lives. He steepled his fingers under his chin, the gesture of a long suffering man. "I believe you, Draco. Not because I am swayed by emotional testimonials, but because I knew Albus Dumbledore for nearly the entirety of my life. I didn't always understand his decisions, but I trusted them. And I am inclined to trust you, because Dumbledore named a fourth recipient in his will in a previously sealed addendum that appeared in my possession the same day that Draco and his mother did."

"Dumbeldore left *me* something?" Draco asked incredulously.

"What?"

Lupin regarded him with interest, studying his face as if it was a particularly difficult map, before reaching into a burlap bag hung on the back of his chair and pulling out something long and unwieldy and placing it on the table, where it caught the light magnificently.

"No," Potter said immediately. "No way."

“That can’t be,” Granger breathed, leaning in to get a better look. “I thought it was locked away at Hogwarts...it’s the school’s property, how can he...we’ve been looking for ages...” She lifted her gaze, eyes owlsh, to Draco’s stunned face. “Did you know?”

“Did I *know*? That Dumbledore bequeathed me the bloody *Sword of Gryffindor*?” He reached out, wrapping his hand around the hilt, expecting it to be severed. But the sword’s magic hummed in response, encouraging him: *lift me, wield me, use me for good*.

“No,” Draco managed, his voice cracking. “I certainly didn’t.”

---

---

- On the surface, this is a kind of "bridge" chapter, but underneath there are so many important character developments, especially with Draco in regards to his idea of family and belonging.

- Ted Tonks gets so many headcanons in this: he's Welsh-Romani! He's a cheeky chap! He's a golden retriever husband! If you're like "well this isn't in the canon," you'd be right.

- The conversation between Ted and Draco this chapter is very much inspired by a dear reader, tartarosechoes, whose comments last chapter left me ruminating on blood magic! Thank you all so much for your comments, I try to respond as much as possible, but know that even if I don't, your words truly get me thinking and inspire me so much!

- Can you guess which muggle book Draco is reading (and hating)? Hint: it came out in 1996, two years prior.

- [Smoke Signals has an official playlist!](#) Go give it a listen for some dreamy, dark vibes. Like fog surrounding a cold, cliffside beach

- PSA: I will be going on a brief hiatus for the month of July. I'll be traveling and although I want to maintain my posting/editing schedule, I know I'll get overwhelmed, so for me it's better to pre-

announce this break! Everyone has been really lovely about such things in the comments so far, and I very much appreciate your understanding and support. See you in August! xo Blue

---

# The Mirror of Erised

## Chapter 36: The Mirror of Erised

---

Dumbledore meddles beyond the grave. Draco gets an unexpected lesson. Hermione plays a game.

---

---

Welcome back dearest readers, old and new! Since it's been a little while, I'll leave a few refreshers here at the top to take or leave as you see fit.

- It's December of 1998, and The Gang is currently locked down at Tonks House, staying with Andromeda and Ted.
- Last chapter, Draco told the Order in no uncertain terms that where Hermione goes, he follows. Although this was wonderfully dramatic, the two of them have yet to define the relationship with each other.
- Around Chapter 26, Draco had been brought into the fold and let in on Snape's plan to mercy kill Dumbledore (alas, Nott got to him first). Draco was also being groomed to replace Snape as a spy, although we never knew why Dumbledore trusted him that much...until now.
- Also, Draco learned Dumbledore left him the Sword of Gryffindor in a secret addendum to his will.
- This chapter includes a Draco POV flashback to events that happen between Chapter 20-21. Might be worth a quick refresh but basically, Draco and Hermione kissed for the first time in the Room of Requirement after an argument, and Draco was more than rattled.
- There's a reference to a game of "Let's Pretend We Aren't at War" Draco and Hermione play in Chapter 30, before they have sex for

the first time.

- [Smoke Signals also has an official playlist!](#)

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Draco had always thought himself fairly attuned to the motives of those more powerful than him. It was an awareness that came from being Lucius Malfoy's son, raised on his father's signature backroom deals and thinly veiled use of blackmail from a young age.

When Draco had negotiated his services as a spy in exchange for his mother's safety with Dumbledore, he thought he saw through all that *you must earn your redemption* bullshit. He understood the Headmaster's intentions, lurking under kind words and seemingly compassionate actions: Dumbledore, like all powerful men, saw some people as necessary sacrifices, and Draco was both desperate and doomed enough to offer his life up as collateral.

But the moment Draco touched the Sword of Gryffindor, he realized that perhaps, he'd never understood Dumbledore at all, because why in Merlin's name would he leave him— *him*, Draco Malfoy— the weapon of the Great Defender? The symbol of all that was stalwart and brave? What exactly was he supposed to do with it, challenge Voldemort to a clash of steel?

He simply couldn't make any sense of it. He also couldn't sleep. The night he received the sword, Draco lay awake into the early hours of the morning, fitfully examining his occlumency garden, sifting through his memories of the deceased Headmaster in search of some potential answer.

*The second to last time Draco had spoken to Dumbledore was a tense affair, one that he remembered with the strange, crystalline clarity that often followed death. The mind's attempt to make sense of final words, to find hidden warnings.*

*It had not been a planned visit. Draco's sanity had been very much derailed by certain events that had transpired between him and Granger in the Come-and-Go Room. Mainly the fact that he'd lost his head and kissed her.*

*Granted, she'd started it—didn't she always?— by pressing her lips against his for a half-second in an attempt to rattle him. It was so pathetically lackluster, and she was so close he could count her eyelashes, and before Draco knew it, he had her face in his hands and he was kissing her and kissing her.*

*To be fair, it was a bit more than kissing. Draco had gotten carried away; by the time Granger pulled back and they realized what they were doing and with whom, he'd somehow gotten her up against the door with a thigh between her legs, marks all over her neck. She was so much sweeter than he'd imagined, softer and more responsive under his touch than he'd dreamed. He would have kept going, would have fallen right over the edge of her without a hesitation.*

*This was when Draco could no longer deny that he was doomed. That there was no going back; somehow, when he wasn't looking, Granger had become a part of him, like a wasp nesting in a fig. And the darkest, most wicked voice in his head could not help but wonder if it had been intentional. If she'd been a trap laid by someone with a predilection for pulling invisible strings.*

*After nearly fleeing from the Come-and-Go room, Draco had stormed into Dumbledore's office, where he lobbed accusations at the Headmaster like crumpled balls of parchment, certain this turn of events was somehow a part of the grand plan to ruin his life.*

*"Has something happened, Draco?" Dumbledore asked, irritatingly gentle in the face of his anger.*

*"You planned this, didn't you?" Draco snarled, pacing in front of the Headmaster's desk. "You knew what would happen to me, being around her."*



*In his agitation, he upended a cup of tea, its brown liquid soaking the wood floor. From its perch, the phoenix was giving him the usual beady stare; the stupid bird had never liked him.*

*"It wasn't enough to force me into this Occlumency mess, was it? No, you wanted me in shackles," Draco rambled. "You chained me to Granger, and then you put her up to this, instructed her to...to seduce me!"*

*At this accusation, Dumbledore raised his eyebrows disapprovingly. Draco's face flashed scarlet, knowing he'd gone too far. A part of him—the rational part, which had been decidedly absent when the kissing had occurred and in its aftermath— recoiled in embarrassment. But unfortunately, Draco was already far too off-kilter to entertain rationality.*

*"That is an allegation I shall caution you not to repeat," Dumbledore replied with a slow shake of his head. He looked sickly and pale, as he usually did during those dwindling days, his disappointment adding to his already drawn countenance. "If perhaps, you are harboring feelings for Miss Granger, I assure you I have no interest nor participation—"*

*"Feelings!" Draco spat, looking wildly around the office for something to throw. He didn't have feelings for Granger (this, of course, was his mantra for ages now, as he leaned heavily on his old friend, denial). "How dare you—"*

*"That's quite enough," Dumbledore said, authoritative despite his frailty. He stood in a sweeping movement and waved his wand to vanish Draco's discarded tea. "Come with me, Mister Malfoy."*

*Dumbledore led him unexpectedly to a cabinet on the far side of the office, which the Headmaster promptly opened and stepped through, gesturing for Draco to do the same. Having a passing familiarity with magical cabinets, and very little regard for his own safety, he followed.*

*Instead of a wooden interior, Draco stepped into a room with marble floors and a sole object in its center: an enormous, gilded mirror with wrought letters inscribed at the top that read ERISED.*

*The Headmaster faced the glass, his face graced by a strange, rueful expression Draco hadn't yet seen him wear: regret.*

*"Join me." Dumbledore nodded for him to come closer, indicating that Draco should look at himself in the glass. Despite privately thinking the barmy old codger was off his rocker, Draco acquiesced, only to feel his stomach plummet as if he'd been dropped from a great height.*

*In the reflection, he saw himself. Standing on a smoky battlefield, wand out and ready. Except, he was several years older. Handsome, of course, like his father had been as a young man, but notably scruffier than Lucius at that age.*

*At his side was a witch: together, they stood triumphant and alone amidst debris. On the ground surrounding them were the misty outlines of fallen foes.*

*He'd recognize those curls anywhere. It was Granger, only slightly older. She had all the recognizable features— riotous chestnut hair, freckles on the bridge of her nose, a mouth like a cupid's bow— but she'd somehow gotten even prettier with age, and evidently, also more dangerous. Draco couldn't help but note the exaggeratedly feminine curve of her waist, the maturity in her bone structure. The brightness of her eyes, sparkling with intelligence. In the mirror, Granger had blossomed into something so breathtaking and deadly it nearly hurt to look at her.*

*They stood together, young victors. With their wands out, they radiated strength and sharpness: formidable alone, deadly as a pair. Older Draco positioned himself close, a menacing threat over her shoulder, giving them the air of a powerful young witch and her vicious attack dog.*

*“What’re you playing at?” Draco cried, tearing his wild gaze from the mirror to question Dumbledore. His heart pounded in his ears, distorting his voice. “What is this?”*

*“The Mirror of Erised is an ancient, highly powerful, charmed object with a simple purpose,” Dumbledore replied. “It shows you a reflection of your own desires. Your truest, innermost wishes.”*

*“Trust me,” Draco scoffed. “No part of me wants to fight a war.”*

*Dumbledore’s eyebrows rose in surprise, as if he hadn’t looked into the same mirror.*

*“You... You don’t see it?” Draco questioned, his voice breaking under the strain of his uncertainty, as he pointed at the figures in the glass.*

*Under his returned attention, the vision twisted into something new: a ceremony being held within the clearing of a forest. The wind whistled through the trees as Older Draco placed his cloak around Granger’s shoulders in fulfillment of the ancient marital rites, looking at her like she was personally responsible for each and every star in the galaxy. Older Granger did the honors, slicing open her palm and the his. They clasped hands, mixing their spilled blood and she kissed him hard, under the canopy of leaves.*

*“Now— now, it looks like I’m getting married.” He shuddered performatively, ignoring the unexpected hunger he felt at the sight.*

*“Scenes of war and marriage are a very interesting combination indeed. As you’ve learned in Divination, the conjurings of our desires are not always literal: war carries connotations of power or victory. The defeat of helplessness, the reclamation of agency,” Dumbledore responded, considering him with intrigue. Draco fought the urge to slouch while under assessment, forcing himself to remain steadfastly upright. “Marriage often symbolizes stability, family, rebirth...dependent, of course, on whom you are marrying.”*

*Dumbledore's lips twitched, as if he wanted to continue, but to Draco's relief did not ask any more patronizing questions, mercifully declining to push the topic.*

*"You said it has ancient, powerful properties..." Draco idled, trying not to sound too hopeful as he struggled to phrase his question in a way that would not expose his raw, terrible heart. "Circe was long rumored to have a mirror of prophecy, wasn't she?"*

*Dumbledore took on a knowing smile, one that told Draco his efforts to conceal his feelings had been entirely in vain.*

*"To wizardkind's collective dismay, the Mirror of Erised is not prophetic. It does not offer potential outcomes, only the hopes housed in the depths of one's very animus. If, say, Lord Voldemort was to peer into this glass—" Draco winced at the easy use of the Dark Lord's name, but his affectation went largely unnoticed, "— I would imagine he'd see himself as a ruler over all, wielding magic as a weapon like no wizard before him. But desire is by very definition intangible, thus why the Dark Lord has never cared for objects that cannot be used bluntly."*

*Draco's quiet, unruly hope dissipated, as he realized the scene was not a prediction of his future. For a second, he'd wished for his life to look just like the sweet impossibility before him: a version of himself who was too powerful to subjugate, striding into the light at Granger's side, claiming her in the most sacred of ways—*

*"What do you see, then?" Draco blurted, not caring that the question was inappropriate, as he sought to derail his own, treacherous train of thought.*

*In turn, the Headmaster gazed at the mirror with a resigned melancholia.*

*"When I peer into the glass, I see only a life, long lost to the sands of time. Understandably, when faced with the grim realities of my current state, it is hard to believe that I too, was young once,"*

*Dumbledore admitted, his tone wry, as he gestured demonstratively with his deadened hand.*

*“In my youth, I developed affections for someone the world deemed...unsuitable. Someone powerful and magnetic, with aspirations for the world that were so lofty they nearly reached the clouds. I did my best to resist, endeavored to bury my feelings, and when that failed I attempted to punish my heart by refusing to do its bidding. I was a young man with the tremendous burden of family and legacy on my shoulders, with singular ambitions and enough self-regard to sink an ark. Like most young men, I was selfish; I saw the world through only my own triumph and, more often than not, failure. For many long years, that was also how I saw love: as a failure of willpower. Only once in my life did love extend a hand to me, but being fearful and foolish, I fled from its grasp. Today, the Mirror of Erised has shown me a version of that young self who was brave enough to accept it.”*

*Dumbledore exhaled heavily, as if these confessions were causing his lungs tremendous strain. Draco fought the urge to assist him, suspecting it would be better to leave the old man what was left of his pride, and averted his eyes to the mirror.*

*There was Older Granger, giving an address at a podium with Draco, chin raised imperiously, at her side. Granger, in some sort of silky nightgown, sliding under starched sheets to join him in their bed. Granger, sitting at an official looking desk with her legs indecently spread, Draco kneeling between them in worship.*

*He flushed with embarrassment, hoping the Headmaster would interpret his coloring as driven by anger rather than ravenous desperation. It was too much, far too much. Draco wished he'd never seen it, all while knowing it would undoubtedly be the subject of his wanking for the rest of his miserable life.*

*Why wasn't the mirror showing him his own triumphs and successes? Draco wondered. How could all of his desires be wrapped up in someone he barely knew? Someone with whom the*

*gross majority of interactions were made up of arguments and insults and the clashing of fundamentally incompatible worldviews.*

*But the other times...a voice reminded him. Like when she'd stripped him of his cursed Mark, when she'd stopped him from bleeding out in the snow, when she'd risen from the Prefect's bath like a siren hellbent on taking him to his watery grave. At the Christmas party, when she'd worn a dress that turned her into a column of sheer candlelight and told him he was good. In those moments, Draco had felt more alive than he'd ever thought possible, like he'd been plunged into a bracingly cold spring.*

*"Why show me this?" He asked, turning to Dumbledore, who was seemingly lost in thought, peering into the mirror with a misty look in his eyes. After a long silence, the Headmaster spoke.*

*"Long have I declared love as the purest form of magic," Dumbledore finally answered, cryptic as ever. "As my life dwindles into its final twilight, I can confirm my suspicions that love cannot be earned or given or taken. It is not a product to purchase or a law to enact. It simply is a force in itself, a force we can resist and struggle against, or throw open our gates and welcome in as an honored guest."*

*Dumbledore clapped him gently on the shoulder, a gesture far more paternalistic than Draco thought he had any right to use.*

*"I cannot use love—or desire, if that is how you prefer that I refer to it — as a weapon against you or anyone else. Although, I have certainly tried and for that, I will spend any afterlife I am bestowed in penance." Dumbledore turned fully to look him in the eye and Draco took a step back, alarmed by the intensity in the old wizard's gaze. "I can only caution you of the courage that is required to take the proverbial outstretched hand. I fear that after my death, history will omit the truth: that often, I was a coward. Despite what the founders would have us think, bravery is not an intrinsic trait. It is a muscle that requires training. It grows with us, strengthens the more we use it. Do you understand what I'm saying, Draco?"*

*"No," Draco replied bluntly. "Not at all."*

*"You will," the Headmaster mused. "In time, you will."*

*Weeks later, after returning home at Easter and seeing his father at his most crazed and his mother under the madman's thumb; after dreaming of Granger, strange amalgamations of the older version from the mirror and the Granger of reality, sweet and bitter in equal intoxicating measure; after hearing the Death Eaters make threats against her and all who shared her blood, reveling in their plans for total destruction; after all of it, Draco returned to Dumbledore with another proposition.*

*"I'll do it. I'll fight for your side, save the muggleborns, whatever you want to call it. Just— let me see it again," Draco demanded of the Headmaster, who looked even frailer than before. Surely not long now, before the curse would take him. "I want to see the mirror."*

*Dumbledore met his demand with silence for a long, stony moment and Draco felt the press of legilimency at his garden gate. Have at it, he thought savagely, forcing a breathtaking wake of emotion from his garden, pushing it in the Headmaster's direction.*

*"Ah, but I am afraid you no longer need Erised's gift," Dumbledore finally said, when the pressure of his legilimency had subsided, sounding irritatingly satisfied. "You know exactly what you want, Draco." He smiled, stroking contemplatively at his beard. "I dare say, I do relish in an unlikely hero. Don't I, Severus?"*

*"Enough of your riddles, Headmaster. I have six cauldrons in need of my attentions. Wolfsbane does not wait for even you."*

*Draco startled at his godfather's voice as Snape, having seemingly emerged from the shadows, appeared in his peripheral vision. He gave Draco a curt nod before pointing his withering glare in Dumbledore's direction.*

*“Thank you for joining us, Professor Snape,” Dumbledore said, eyes glinting rapidly, like twin candles and the ends of their wicks. “I dare say it’s time for Draco to take his seat at the table, don’t you agree?”*

---

Personally, Draco thought enlisting in the Order would be a bit more dramatic. He’d envisioned battles, bloodshed, injured fighters brought in on stretchers. Missions to collect intelligence, prisoner swaps, jailbreaks. Apparently, all of that was indeed happening—only elsewhere in the country, as the Order fought to keep Death Eaters far from the precious cargo that was Harry Potter.

Apparently, Potter was going to save them all. But as far as Draco could tell, the Chosen One’s mission to vanquish the Dark Lord mostly consisted of holing up with Granger and Weasley in one of the bedrooms with the door silenced and locked. A mission that Potter was stubbornly reticent in allowing Draco any participation.

Draco felt useless, which put him in a right foul mood, something only levied by blowing off steam via unofficial target practice. His cousin caught him practicing curses in the frozen garden under a warming charm, a one sided duel that had no apparent winner. It was snowing lightly, fir trees taking on a dusting of flakes, and Draco could see every exhale leaving his mouth like plumes of steam.

“Cousin,” she greeted. “Have the trees offended you in some way?”

“You lot are acting like it’s not a war,” he seethed, firing off severing curses in rapid succession. Tree boughs fell to the snowy ground, incapacitated. “Meanwhile, the Death Eaters are training recruits as young as sixteen. Showing them more than just stunners, too. And I’m just supposed to sit here and juggle my wand, while I wait for the Anointed One to parse out a prophecy, or whatever the fuck he’s doing while he’s locked in the study?”

“Want some pointers?” Nymphadora asked, as she removed her hood and shook out her hair, long and powdery blue for the day. With



her delicate bone structure and strangely colored locks, his cousin looked otherworldly against the snowy backdrop of the house.

“If you must,” he said in a clipped tone. He didn’t want her to think he was encouraging her—or gods forbid, trying to bond— but he did know his cousin was an accomplished Auror and thus, more skilled than he when it came to combat.

“You’re putting all your weight on your front foot. Try falling back a little, it’ll make you faster.” She pursed her lips at him in implicit critique of his stance and he adjusted his footing until she gave a sharp nod of approval.

“Do you mind?” Tonks pulled a pack of cigarettes from her coat as he practiced. Draco’s little exhibition, it seemed, was not the only reason she’d come outside.

“It’s your house,” Draco shrugged. While the Pureblood Slytherins wouldn’t admit to having tried muggle cigarettes under threat of death, that didn’t mean Blaise hadn’t procured them, or that Draco hadn’t tried a few for the thrill of it.

“Remus put me onto them and now I’m hooked.” She lit one, the spicy scent of cloves mixing with acrid smoke. “It’s a rather apt metaphor for my life.”

Draco said nothing, only practiced hitting the same knot in a fir tree over and over, hoping to improve his aim. Out of five shots, he only missed once.

“Missed one,” Tonks said, and Draco huffed out a breath in annoyance. “Keep your elbow closer to your body. It’ll make your lines more fluid and give you a bit of stability.”

To his chagrin, his cousin proved more helpful than he could have anticipated, offering him critiques on stance and aim. When he’d finished with his own exercises, she joined him, teaching him the drills she’d remembered from Auror training. They finished with a

quick sprint and calisthenics, a grueling and frankly unnecessary number of crunches and press ups.

“We’re fighting a war,” Draco wheezed, collapsing in the snow. He could feel the blood coursing through his body, angry at the combination of cold and exertion. He recast his warming charm, begrudgingly extending it to include his cousin. “Not training for the bloody Quidditch Cup.”

“You’d be surprised how many times brute force ends up being the only thing it comes down to,” Tonks advised, flopping down beside him. “Moody always told me that. He was my mentor.” She sighed heavily, wearing the expression of someone much older than their early twenties. “He’s dead now. Dunno if you heard.”

“I did,” Draco admitted, biting his tongue so as not to pour salt in the wound. Ever since the grizzled old Auror had transfigured Draco into a ferret, he’d never liked the man, even if it wasn’t technically him who did it. “My condolences.”

She lit another cigarette and hesitated, looking back apprehensively in the direction of the house, before offering it to him. He took it, inhaling quickly, praying he wouldn’t cough. He didn’t want to seem wet behind the ears in front of the Auror that had lapped him twice while sprinting, even if she was his cousin.

He passed the cigarette back, noting the funny look she was sending his way.

“What?” He snapped. “Got a problem?”

“Christ, you’re snippy,” she responded, her lips twitching upwards. “You just reminded me of someone. With your cigarette and your scowl and that *fuck the world* attitude, I could swear for a moment that I was looking at the second coming of Sirius Black.”

“The mass murderer?” Draco questioned dryly. “Lovely, thanks. Do me a favor and don’t tell Granger that I remind you of a raving lunatic

who'd been locked up for life, yeah? I reckon she's already put off, what with Potter and the Weasel in her ear, moaning about how I tripped them in the corridors."

"Are you kidding?" Tonks snorted, inelegantly. "She'd love it. She might seem all books, but behind the exterior? She's a bit of a thrill seeker, our Hermione."

"Don't I know it," he grouched, stretching sore muscles. If they hurt now, he knew they'd be hammered by tomorrow. "A headache and a half is what she is. Feels like I spend half my waking hours just trying to keep her alive."

"I'm sure she's returned the favor," Tonks grinned, clearly having inherited her mastery of the double-entendre from her father's side of the family.

"Those in glass houses," Draco sniped back. "Don't think I haven't noticed whatever is happening with you and Lupin. Hard not to, what with the way Andromeda guts him with her eyes every time he walks into a room. Isn't he a bit old for you?"

"Oh, not you too," she groaned, rubbing at her temples as if warding off an impending headache. "I get it enough from mum, I don't need another lecture on my love life from my snotty pureblood cousin." She shot him a sly look. "Sorry, formerly snotty."

"Recovering snot," Draco agreed, and she laughed, a light tinkling sound that reminded him of wind chimes.

"Anyway, he's gone on one of his precious missions now," she said bitterly. "Mum'll be over the moon, no pun intended."

"Bit shit of him, to leave you behind on Christmas."

"It's not like that between us," Tonks sighed, running her fingers through her sky coloured hair. It changed before Draco's very eyes, going brown and mousy as she spoke. "Started off as a few drunken

one-offs, when I was lonely and he was missing someone else, and then it just...kept happening. it was like I'd fallen into a well or something. We're not serious, he's made that perfectly clear. I don't think he can do relationships, to be honest. He's so tethered to the past, sees having a future—with me, with anyone— as a sort of betrayal to the dead. Suppose that's what happens when everyone you love gets killed and you're the only one left standing."

"Suppose so," Draco said noncommittally, thinking of Granger. Of how she sliced out a part of herself, her own family. How she carried her perpetual grief over the loss, but never let it dim her light or steal her kindness. "Still not a reason to drag someone else into it, though."

Tonks raised her eyebrows, disbelievingly.

"Are you...trying to give me romantic advice?"

"Merlin's taint," Draco groaned, swearing creatively. "I make one, innocuous comment in this blasted house and everyone thinks I'm helping them or trying to be *friends*. Your lot wouldn't last a second in Slytherin."

"Mum was a Slytherin," Tonks said darkly. "No one thinks she's trying to make friends." With this, Draco could agree.

They sat in companionable silence as the snow stopped, the light fading from the overcast sky, indicating the afternoon's turn to evening.

"You know, you're a half-decent duelist," Tonks commented. Her hair turned pink somewhat half-heartedly, a light peony color. "Keep it up and you could be a great one." She took on a cocky expression and the pink intensified. "You know, like me."

"Yeah?" Draco scoffed. "How'd you get so great then?"

“I had a good teacher,” Tonks replied softly. Her eyes looked perilously full, but to Draco’s relief, she blinked rapidly, looking away until they were only a bit misty. “Suppose I could pass the torch,” she added. “If you like.”

“Not much else to do.” Draco shrugged, as if it didn’t matter to him either way. “Suppose you’re a half-decent instructor.”

He decided then and there: under his cousin’s tutelage, he was going to become great. He’d had enough of strategy. Enough of trying to appear weak, of placating Dark Lords, of espionage and political games. Something inside him insisted: never again, would Draco Malfoy be considered weak. A pawn. No, he was going to become something *dangerous*. A threat his enemies could no longer deny, the dark horse they never saw coming. Once they realized, it would be too late.

He stood, brushing the snow off his weatherproofed trousers, and extended a hand to help his cousin up. She batted it away, scrambling to her feet uncoordinatedly.

“Race you to the house?”

“What, like we’re *children*?” Draco asked disbelievingly, his disdain evident in his tone. “Why would we—”

“On your mark...oh, fuck it. *Go!*” Tonks took off at breakneck speed, sprinting towards the door, and what choice did Draco truly have but to follow?

---

As the specters of Yule snuck up on them—faster that year, with the war eclipsing any of the usual cheer and celebration—the question continued to besiege Draco: what did the sword *mean*?

Everyone had their own theory about the purpose of his inheritance. Mealtimes, as could be expected, were particularly conducive to

such discussion. And by conducive, Draco meant irredeemably chaotic.

“It’s a symbol of unity, of course,” Granger theorized as they sat down for supper. “Dumbledore’s messages were always figurative in nature. Bestowing the sword upon a Draco is emblematic of bridging divides, calling into question the complex ties between Gryffindor and Slytherin, exploring the potential of a harmonious joining, an intermarriage of the two houses.”

Draco watched, eyes narrowed, as Potter filled Granger’s plate whilst she spoke, seeming to intrinsically know just how many potatoes she liked and which bits of roast she’d favor.

*What next*, Draco thought uncharitably, growing annoyed for reasons he couldn’t quite pinpoint, *was Potter going to feed it to her off his fork?*

“Ah yes,” Weasley agreed between mouthfuls, elbowing Potter to ensure he was in on the inevitable joke. “A harmonious joining, of course! The sword is an allegory for when Godric Gryffindor buggered Salazar Slytherin with his big old lion cock—”

Potter snorted, sending bits of chewed carrot onto Draco’s shirtsleeve. He looked down at the stain in pure disgust before jinxing The Boy Who Couldn’t Chew Properly’s fingers together, rendering him unable to lift a utensil.

“If you act like an animal, you’ll eat like an animal,” Draco warned, only for Potter to shrug, completely unbothered, and begin using his fused fingers as a sort of shovel to scoop dinner into his mouth.

“No jinxes at the table!” Andromeda scolded, shooting Draco a reproachful look, before adding a sharp, “Manners!” in Potter’s direction, as she separated his fingers and levitated a fork to bat him upside the head until he seized it. Finally, she focused her ire on Weasley, who went pale at the attention. “And you— what have I said about discussing carnal acts during meals?”

Andromeda turned to her husband expectantly, in search of backup; unfortunately, her hopes were dashed when Ted shot Weasley a wink.

“Right, save the bugging for the bedroom, lad.”

The cheeky comment left Ted dodging rolls that’d been sent in his direction like projectiles, courtesy of his wife’s wand.

“Oi! Hit me with another bit of flying bread and I won’t be responsible for how I’ll get even tonight, Lady Black,” Ted threatened, smirking suggestively in his wife’s direction.

“Pass me the rolls, Potter.” Andromeda met her husband’s challenge, smirking as if she’d already won. “Ted’s clearly forgotten who was Slytherin’s star chaser for three years running.”

Potter, looking at Andromeda with a newfound sort of hero worship, acquiesced.

The relationship between Draco’s aunt and uncle seemed completely foreign to him: a married couple who acted decidedly improper, who after decades together, could still rile the other up until sparks flew. They were always embracing, light little reassurances throughout the day: Ted’s hand, brief at Andromeda’s waist; her fingers, quickly smoothing through his curls. To Draco’s confusion, they were also always *flirting*, as if they were still Hogwarts students snogging in corridors, and not fully mature members of society.

It was a far cry from his own parents, who for the entirety of his life, had slept in separate wings of the Manor, and that was taking into account the fact Lucius and Narcissa were widely considered a love match. In comparison, Pansy’s parents couldn’t even coexist under the same *roof*.

Tonks made a disgusted noise, pushing her plate away. “This is why I bloody moved out in the first place,” she confided loudly in Draco,

who privately agreed he would not enjoy watching his parents flirt incorrigibly.

“Don’t pretend *we’re* the reason you procured that terrible little flat, Nymphadora,” Andromeda warned her daughter, before looking around the occupants of the table. “Speaking of, where is the werewolf? Off draining another fresh, young—”

“*Mum!*”

“I was going to say lamb, darling. His kind favors sheep, do they not?” Andromeda finished, although it was abundantly clear what she meant.

“He’s on a mission, as you very well know,” Tonks sniped, ready to delve into her and her mother’s favored point of contention. “Risking his *life*.”

Lupin had left the safehouse shortly after the bestowal of the sword, insisting that he spend the full moon before Christmas parlaying with the werewolves, even though this of course ensured he wouldn’t be able to return, not with Potter’s safety at risk. It was a decision his cousin seemed quietly bitter about; in contrast, Andromeda regarded the werewolf’s flight with open disdain.

“Such valor.” Andromeda performed a delicate eye roll. “Spending his weekends running around the woods with degenerates and criminals—”

“They have a *disease*,” Tonks cried, turning beseechingly to her father. “Please tell your wife she’s being a bigot, *again*.”

This was not a conversation Draco wanted to be within a mile of, much less participate in. Luckily, on the younger side of the table, Granger was scolding Weasley, which happened to be one of Draco’s favorite mealtime activities.

“I didn’t mean ‘unity’ *sexually*, Ronald!”



Draco could feel her embarrassment, always so sweet through the bond. It made him half hard just to think of her, blushing despite her resounding lack of innocence. He reached under the table with his foot, brushing it against her ankle teasingly.

“Not everything has to be— would you stop that?” She broke off, flustered, and rounded on Draco, who'd moved on to caressing her calf.

“Stop what?” Weasley asked suspiciously, looking under the table. “Oh, now I'm really going to boke. It's bad enough knowing you two are—” Weasley, ever the creative, mimed vomiting, or perhaps what he thought an orgasm looked like, having clearly never seen one. “—Whatever you are.”

Hermione did not meet Draco's gaze. Neither of them had addressed the manticore in the room, that she'd said they were *seeing each other* to a committee of Order members without them ever previously discussing the subject. She'd gotten quite skittish about it, kept finding reasons to avoid the conversation; for his part, Draco was reluctant to parse out what exactly they were to each other, lest he scare her off by revealing the enormity of his need. The idea of *dating* seemed too pedantic a way to explain the urgency he felt in her presence, the desperation that scalded him every time he watched her so much as take down her hair.

He'd not gotten to be with her *privately* since that first time—a quick revel in being alive— when they'd only just arrived. He was getting dangerously close to coming in his pants just from seeing her exiting the shared bathroom, damp from a shower and covered only by a skimpy towel.

After dinner, Draco reached out through the bond to find her where she was curled up in an oversized armchair in front of the study's crackling fireplace. He paused in the doorway, taking in a rare undisturbed moment to look at her. Dressed in a too-big jumper that eclipsed a tiny pair of boxer shorts and a quill tucked behind her ear

for emergency annotations, she seemed completely unaware that she was the loveliest thing in the world.

Hermione was nose deep in her reading— undoubtedly research on Potter's behalf—when Draco padded in quietly behind her chair, snatching the book from her hands.

"Wha—Malfoy!" She cried, startling at his sudden appearance. She scrambled at her feet and swiped at him in an attempt to take the book back, but Draco was faster, leaping away from her grasp. "I was reading that!"

"Malfoy, now, is it?" Draco questioned, making a show of paging through her book, which to his surprise was an old collection of children's fables, tales his mother had undoubtedly told him before bed. Not quite the treatise on the bloodiest uses of Dark magic that he'd been expecting.

"What would you prefer I call you?" She quipped, reaching for the book on her tiptoes. Her jumper riding up to expose a strip of creamy, caramel skin on her upper thighs that he desperately wanted to run his tongue over.

"I certainly have a few ideas," he murmured, watching in fascination as her eyes darkened, like watching up close as autumn slipped into winter. "Perhaps you can start with Draco?"

A pulse of heat seared through their connection and he thought back on the months they were separated, all those times he felt her desire and wondered the cause. Now, he reveled in the fact it was a reaction just for him. Wanting another, he dangled the book in front of her nose. "What's with the fairy tales?"

"*Fairy tales*," she sighed. "Dumbledore gives you a great bloody sword—that he had no ownership of, mind you, it belongs to the school—and he leaves me *fairy tales*. Seems a bit sexist, doesn't it?"

“This is Dumbledore’s copy?” Draco asked in surprise. “I should have tossed it into the fire while I had the chance.”

Hermione took advantage of his distraction to snatch back her stolen property.

“No book burning,” she warned. “Even though it’s terribly vexing, it has to be important. I just haven’t figured out how.”

“I’d never burn your book, Granger. If I did, you’d be terribly cross with me.” He moved into her space, reaching out to play with the tie of her little shorts. “And then, you wouldn’t let me do this.”

Draco pulled, yanking her close and she inhaled sharply, resting a hand on his abdominals to steady herself as he bent to kiss her soundly. To his relief, she responded in kind, tilting her head for better access.

She tasted like peppermint tea and lip balm and fresh snow. After so many days of near proximity, finally being able to take his time and kiss her properly was completely intoxicating. A flagon of whiskey on an empty stomach.

It took a small eternity before Granger pulled back ruefully.

“Draco,” she said, breathless. “We should talk.”

“I suppose we should,” he sighed, releasing her and settling into the armchair she’d occupied. They were long overdue for this discussion, but that didn’t mean Draco wanted to have it. He’d much rather keep kissing her: her lips again, and then down her neck to her breasts, and finally, when she was desperate and squirming and tugging at his hair, her cunt.

She moved to conjure another chair, but he leaned over and stopped her with a light touch to her wrist, guiding her into his lap instead.

“Indulge me,” he said softly. “I hardly get to touch you. We can talk like this, can’t we?”

“Fine.” She perched, slightly awkward, on his thighs and he looked at her in disbelief.

“Not like I’m a ventriloquist,” he scoffed. “Like this.”

He pulled her closer and arranged her so that she could rest her head on his chest, his arm wrapped supportively around her waist. Draped her bare legs over him, so her feet dangled off the chair’s armrest.

“Stop looking at me like that,” Granger insisted, which is when he realized he was staring. “We won’t get anywhere if you’re giving me those—” she flushed, averting her gaze, “—those bedroom eyes.”

“Bedroom eyes?”

“You know. *Come hither*,” she sighed, long-suffering. “They’re incredibly distracting.”

Draco held her gaze until he could feel her interest heightening through their bond— handy, when it came to riling her up— and then blinked very slowly, fluttering his lashes.

Granger squirmed futilely in his lap, but he held fast, stilling her before her movements rendered him too excitable.

“You’re one to talk,” Draco admonished. “Lounging around in that fuck me sweater.”

“*Fuck me sweater?*” Her expression turned incredulous as she examined the offending article of clothing in rebuke. “This is a perfectly normal jumper!”

“If you were wearing it with trousers,” he offered magnanimously, as he traced down bare skin from the jumper’s hem all the way to her ankle. “And not the world’s smallest shorts.”

“I used to wear this in the common room all the time,” she informed him, which obviously made Draco suddenly and viciously envious of the boys in the Gryffindor Tower. “I sometimes forget that you didn’t ever see me like that. Getting ready for bed or first thing in the morning. The normal moments.” She tilted her head, turning contemplative. “Do you think that’s strange? That before this month, we’d seen each other in nearly every state of emergency, but not in pajamas?”

“I don’t think the normal moments are our strong suit,” Draco offered. “You and I both tend to thrive in hostile conditions.” He’d meant it as a joke but to his chagrin, it came out devastatingly honest.

“Yes,” she agreed quietly. “We’ve skipped a few steps, haven’t we?”

If Draco were being truthful, he’d have to admit that he’d thought about it, the steps they skipped. What this could have been like, had he not wasted so much time believing all the shite he was told about who he was supposed to be and who he was supposed to hate.

He could have spent the last year winning her affections, a proper courtship. Jewelry and floral arrangements, arriving in the Great Hall at breakfast. Escorting her to her classes, shouldering her ridiculously overpacked school bag. Quidditch games, with her wearing his jersey, a lone green flame in a sea of scarlet. Illicit meetings in broom closets, which they’d leave pink-cheeked and rumpled. Long, pining letters, sent while they were parted during holidays.

Instead, he’d entrenched himself in denial, agitated her constantly, blackmailed her into healing him, and pawed through her mind during occlumency lessons. Not to mention the fact they’d been stuck, fighting for their lives, on opposing sides of a war.

Now, every moment with her was stolen, urgent. It created a strange state of heightened intimacy, without any of the foundational work required to support it.

“I’d have—” Draco cleared his throat, words caught, and looked at her knees. Dainty, the right one marked by a childhood scar. “I’d have gone about this differently. You know, if there wasn’t a war on. I’d have done it properly.”

Draco traced the scar gently and she shivered slightly, a mere tremble, something he’d never have felt if she hadn’t been in his lap. It was one thing, to feel her reactions through the bond. Quite another, to experience them physically.

“If there wasn’t a war on,” Granger repeated, the ghost of a smile on her lips. “I seem to recollect the last time we played that game. Remember?”

Draco gave her a pointed look. How could he forget the night at the second son’s estate, when she’d asked him to pretend with her, and they’d ended up having sex on the floor. It was, without contention, his favorite night of his life.

“Fondly,” he said. “Constantly.”

“Shall we play again?” She rested her head at the hollow of his collarbone, her body fitting against his as naturally as breathing.

“Dunno if the rug is as soft, here,” he replied. “The friction might leave burns on your lovely arse.”

She laughed, only mildly scandalized. “Not that part. I mean, if there wasn’t a war and we were at Hogwarts for Christmas, what would you be doing?”

“Classes would already be out,” Draco started, drumming his fingers absently on her thigh. “It would be our last few days at the castle, before leaving for home.” He felt her stiffen at the word *home*, and hastily plowed forward, not wanting her to be reminded of painful memories. “I’d take you flying out over the lake.”

“I despise flying.”

"I know." Draco smiled wickedly at the thought. "But I'd bother you incessantly to finally convince you the view would be worth it. The whole castle from above, dusted in white. You'd say the grounds looked like sheathes of new parchment and I'd call you a swot. Then you'd take me to the Come-And-Go room to get warm and I'd make it up to you, very slowly." He craned his neck so he could whisper into the shell of her ear, and relished in the goosebumps that bloomed on her exposed skin. "In a bed, where I could take my time."

"After," he said more softly, thinking of the way Potter minded her plate. "I'd feed you bits of gingerbread."

"We'd get crumbs in the sheets," she protested, and he could feel her smile against his shirt. "What else?"

"Well, I'd probably ask if you'd be willing to meet my parents at the train station, so I could introduce you as my intended. They'd be beastly about it, of course, but I'd threaten to drop the family name to keep them in line. Then, I'd give you your Christmas presents and kiss you goodbye in a way that wouldn't be considered remotely acceptable for a public station."

"Intended?" She fiddled with the buttons of his shirt, something that had been borrowed from Ted and hastily transfigured to fit his taller frame. "That's rather serious for you pureblood types, isn't it?"

"Yes," Draco confirmed, his throat tightening. He hesitated, before adding, "Would you mind that terribly?"

"No," she said with no hesitation at all, twisting in his lap so she could meet his eyes. He could feel her heart pounding as if it was in his own chest. "I reckon I'd be quite serious about you, too."

They were no longer playing the game, which had only ever been a safety net to say the things they couldn't bear to share aloud without being certain that the other felt the same way. They'd skipped learning how to have those discussions with each other, those first

few declarations of intent: he never got to ask her to Hogsmeade, to clarify that yes, he meant as his date. He never got to admit his burgeoning feelings over butterbeers, never learned how to tell her how he felt normally, without the world ending in front of them.

“Hermione,” he said, brushing his knuckles across her soft cheek, captivated by the way he could make pink bloom on her skin wherever he went. What had happened to him? When had she stopped catching all the light in a room and simply become the sun itself? “You should know that I—”

“What would my presents be?” She interrupted hastily, cutting off the admission that threatened to tumble out of him. She bit her lip, a telltale sign of nerves.

“Your presents?” Draco asked lightly. He took her hand and rubbed his thumb soothingly over her palm, hoping his body language would dissuade the anxiety that had begun to seep through the bond. For once in his life, Draco did not push. It was too warm, too sweet in their pretend world to entertain fear. “I’d choose something traditional, of course. Jewelry is customary and I quite like the thought of you in nothing but my necklace.” He pulled aside the collar of her jumper to trace a line down her sternum, lingering when he reached the valley between her breasts. “A pendant, hanging right...here.”

“That seems more for you than for me,” she murmured, staring at the place his finger pressed, her breath catching audibly.

“It would be.” He removed his finger and she arched slightly at the loss of contact, as if chasing his touch. *Needy*, he thought, with a dizzying amount of affection. “I’d get you something else though, something that was completely to your taste. A Hippogriff sanctuary, perhaps.”

“A whole sanctuary?” She teased reaching up to thumb at his collar, brushing the sensitive skin of his throat. “My, that’s a very serious gift indeed.”



“I’d want you to know that I meant it. That I’d never put you through it all— the difficulties of being with someone like me, from a family like mine—if I didn’t mean it, truly and entirely.”

Granger’s quiet intensity felt brighter than even the fireplace’s crackling flames, and through the bond, Draco could feel her arousal blooming amongst sharp pinpoints of anguish, only to be overshadowed by something more profound, an emotion he couldn’t quite place. More tender than joy, more possessive than affection. She slid her hand from his collar and cradled his face.

“I can’t say it,” she whispered, her eyes growing glossy. “It’s like when I sent my parents away. Loving them put a target on their back, so I had to remove myself. And now, I feel like if I tell you, you’ll be taken from me. If I say it aloud, the world won’t let me keep you.”

“Granger,” Draco said firmly, resting a hand on the left side of her chest. “You don’t have to say anything.” He pressed lightly and felt her pulse jump underneath his touch. “I can feel it.”

She looked up at him so tenderly it almost burst his heart.

“Kiss me,” she whispered and he obeyed. Kissed her, first sweetly and then with urgency. She met his ferocity with her own, cold hands sliding under his shirt and climbing his ribs. In turn, he yanked at her jumper.

“Take this off,” he instructed, gravel in his voice, as he cast a wandless locking charm on the study door. He’d commit murder if Weasley or Potter got to see her like this, accident or not.

“It’s a week from the twenty-fifth,” she teased, playing with the hem. Killing him, and surely aware of it. “Shouldn’t you wait to unwrap your gift?”

“I’ve been waiting all night. Do I look like a patient man?” He responded, sliding under her waistband and into her knickers to stroke her, reveling in her answering gasp.

When he withdrew, she twisted from his lap, scrambling to pull off her jumper and wiggle out of her little shorts.

"That's the right answer, clever girl." He praised, before sucking his fingers into his mouth, his eyes going dangerously hooded at the taste of her.

When she was done, she perched completely bare on the edge of the armchair, clearly awaiting direction.

"Spread your legs," Draco instructed, descending onto his knees and smirking up at her. She parted them insufficiently, which was fine with Draco, because it meant he got to be the one to pull them wider apart, got to be the one to open her up.

He licked his lips at the sight and she let out a pained noise.

"Don't worry, Granger," Draco soothed, blowing gently on her center until she threw her head back in distress. "It's the season of giving, isn't it?" He kissed up her inner leg, smiling into the crease of her thigh. "Let me show you a little generosity."

---

- Blown away by the incredible comments I received while I was on break! I'm trying to catch up, but know even if I haven't responded yet, I've definitely read and re-read your comment. [You can also always chit chat with me on Tumblr, where I love talking about this fic ad nauseam!](#)

- This chapter is really about Draco becoming someone different away from the societal pressures he's used to. The scene of him looking into the Mirror of Erised is deeply tied to his own developments in Tonks House, particularly in regard to agency, power, and love.

- Which brings me to another point: in this story, Dumbledore never saw himself in Harry. He saw himself in Draco. Both Pureblood, both with a father who goes to prison and ruins the family's reputation,

both left caring for an unwell family member dealing with unstable magic. Both involved with the dark arts as teenagers, both academically intelligent with a hunger for power. Both fall in love with someone highly ambitious, on course to change the world (for better or worse).

- Ever think about how Nymphadora and Draco were both isolated only children? When they should have grown up together, with Tonks as the cool older cousin? Yeah.

- Try not to give Hermione too hard a time for not being able to say \*it\* yet. The circumstances have been extenuating and she's so scared to love him, only to lose him in the war.

- Believe it or not, I cut like 5,000 words, which means next chapter, you're getting Christmas, plotty Horcrux info, AND a reckoning between Draco, Harry, and Ron. Plus! More cousin bonding! Sweet holiday moments! And of course, in the distance...chaos and terror.

- Update schedule will return to every two weeks, unless I miraculously have a slow start to the semester (I'm dragging myself through my Ph.D., thank you for your patience).

---

# If We Make It Through December

## Chapter 37: If We Make It Through December

---

The occupants of Tonks House have what can only be described as a chaotic Christmas.

---

---

CW: Talk of pregnancy and abortion. Not graphic, not a main character.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Yule fell upon them and with it came the strange specter of false normalcy, as the occupants of Tonks House prepared for what would certainly be an austere Christmas.

It was Draco's first without access to generational wealth; there was no leaving the wards and thus, sending away for parcels via owl post or shopping in Diagon Alley. Presents were limited to what one could scrounge, regift, or transfigure. Draco—who'd never given a "creative" gift in his life—struggled, wishing selfishly for the creature comforts of using unlimited galleons in unconscionably expensive shops.

When his mother woke on Christmas morning, Draco was waiting with her present in his hands: a bouquet of conjured winter roses in one of Andromeda's crystal vases. It was the closest he could manage to her own rosebushes, the ones that bloomed in the Manor's garden. He hoped that they would ground her, remind her of happier times in a place she once considered home.

“Happy Christmas, Mother.”

Narcissa blinked in confusion, before slipping into something warm and fond.

“Darling,” she murmured. “You’re home from school?”

Draco’s heart sank. It was not going to be one of Narcissa's good days, the ones in which she knew where she was and the events that had occurred in order to transport her there. No, this would be one of the days that she reached for her wand, growing furious and panicked when she couldn’t find it, her unstable magic sending shocks of lightning, fizzling around the room, until she could be wheedled into taking a calming draught.

Trying to maintain a facade of casualness, Draco preemptively cast a nonverbal spell, pouring a tippie of the potion into her tea along with a bit of honey and lemon. He placed the roses onto her side table and levitated the cup into his mother’s hands with a flick of his wand.

“Sweet boy,” Narcissa said softly, taking a sip as she admired the roses. “Doting on your mother so. I suppose you get that from your father.”

Draco felt as if he’d taken a dozen stunners directly to his chest. He’d tried his best not to think about his father in that context: Lucius as the man who, despite his temper and ambitions, loved his wife. How could it be the same wizard who’d left her in the clutches of the Dark Lord? Who’d willingly delivered his only son to the sacrificial altar? Who’d tried to kill one of the only people Draco truly cared about without hesitation?

Narcissa glanced around her, her expression slipping into the fog that Draco had seen her use as a shield for the better part of a year. He knew she wasn’t here, not really. She was aware of his presence, but it was as if her mind couldn’t process the rest of the setting, troubled by the cognitive dissonance of her new reality, and so it compulsively ushered her into the hazy state of half-being she so often occupied these days.

“I haven’t gotten you anything?” She peered up at him in confusion, more of a question than an assertion. Draco, eager to keep her as far from distress as possible, did what he did best: he lied.

“Don’t be silly, Mother,” he scoffed, gently tucking a bit of lank blonde hair behind her ear. “Of course you have. The cufflinks are splendid, but I must admit you’ve outdone yourself with the broom. As if I needed another Firebolt!”

These were the types of presents he usually received from her: an heirloom of some sort, a gift fitting of the Malfoy heir, and something else, just for Draco.

Narcissa nodded indulgently, soothed by the mistruth. “Only the best for you, darling.”

“Mother,” he prompted. “Why don’t you go back to sleep while the elves fix luncheon? Merlin know you deserve it, after all the planning you’ve done for the celebrations.”

“I—” Narcissa hesitated, her eyes narrowing as if pinpointing some falsehood in his tone, but not quite being able to name it. “Surely, your father will—”

“He’s been called away on business,” Draco invented. “He won’t be back until supper.”

“Business,” Narcissa scoffed, her disdain as warm and familiar as a fur-lined cloak. “On Christmas? Is nothing sacred?”

“Rest now,” Draco assured, as the potion took hold, making it harder for Narcissa to hold her eyes open. “I’ll wake you on his return and then we can all be together.”

He felt horribly guilty for drugging his own mother, and on Christmas at that. For taking that last lingering bit of autonomy from her, ripping the agency afforded by consciousness away. He had no right.

But Draco was more afraid than he was ashamed of his actions, terrified that another accident could be the thing that ripped Narcissa's sanity from her completely, or worse. He knew that there was something very wrong with his mother's magic, that it had somehow twisted and turned inward.

He knew this state of potion-induced calm wasn't sustainable. He simply had no other options.

In a miserable mood, Draco went downstairs to find the house's occupants had awoken and were already tucking into a breakfast of freshly baked scones with clotted cream, undoubtedly Ted's doing. Draco dithered in the hallway, not wanting to interrupt what was surely one of the few merry moments any of them had experienced in months.

Despite the festive efforts, he found his mood darkened, bogged down by memories of holidays past. He thought of Lucius in rare good spirits, showing his son how to ride a broom for the first time. Draco remembered the frozen wind in his hair as he showed off his newly mastered dives for Narcissa, who watched from the Manor's grounds while dressed in furs, snapping for the elves to bring cocoa and hot toddies.

He couldn't stay hidden for long; sensing his distressed presence through their bond, Hermione's head swiveled in his direction, her warm butterscotch eyes beckoning. The golden thread between them lit up and pulled taut, insisting he go to her, just like it used to when she was on the other side of a classroom. Screaming for him to be closer, to touch her, to ensure she was safe. What choice did he have but to obey?

"Happy Christmas, Granger," he managed roughly, taking the seat next to hers as he nodded to his aunt's family. He even offered a stiff jerk of his head to Weasley and Potter, who was looking terribly glum, pushing bits of jam around his plate and refusing to make eye contact with anyone. At the very least, Draco wasn't alone in his reticence.

It seemed that the Chosen One had also been struck by a case of the holiday blues: Draco noted Potter scowling and muttering to himself more often lately, a familiar darkness to his aura that Draco could not quite pinpoint. Even more jarringly, Potter had also been sleepwalking, a development Draco only became aware of when he heard his door knob rattle in the dead of the night, the telltale, scrabbling sound of someone trying to get in.

Draco had leapt to his feet, his wand in hand and a curse on his tongue, before Hermione wrapped a hand around his wrist in warning. She'd been consistently sneaking into his room after dark, slipping under his sheets and pressing her perfect, warm body against his. It wasn't as if everyone in the house didn't know, but still, she'd insisted on some semblance of propriety.

Luckily, she'd been there to stop him from blowing Scarhead into smithereens, instead carefully lead an unconscious Potter back to bed. The sleepwalking had been happening more and more lately, something Granger attributed to Potter's frequent nightmares, brought on by the stress of the mounting war and the guilt he felt for not participating directly in it. But Draco wasn't so sure: the following night, he heard it again, the telltale sign of Potter's heavy footsteps, pacing outside his door.

"We'll do presents after dinner," Andromeda was explaining at the head of the table. She was wearing regal robes made of indigo silk, her hair pinned up in some sort of complicated braid. Ted, on the other hand, was in garish Muggle clothing and had bewitched a sprig of mistletoe to hover over his head. He was using it to his best advantage, stealing kisses from Andromeda every few minutes, insisting they weren't to break with tradition. For her part, Draco's aunt was pink cheeked, unsuccessfully feigning reticence. His cousin looked a bit sickened, and dramatically excused herself to the loo to vomit.

Draco realized that despite their small family size, the Tonks' had their own traditions, born out of the isolation of being disowned. Some muggle and some pureblood: his aunt Andromeda made a



familiar tasting mulled wine from what was supposedly an old family elf recipe—Draco tried very hard not to smile as Hermione blanched at the implications—and Ted used a sort of sleek gramophone to blare Christmas music on shiny, circular disks, with a particular preference for some muggle group called WHAM! whose songs Draco found to be unbearably catchy.

Even his cousin dressed for the holiday, wearing her ever-shifting hair long and blood red. When she returned from the loo, she clapped him on the back to indicate it was time for their training session and invited the table's occupants to join them, if they wished. Shockingly, there were no other takers; Draco whined about it thoroughly, insisting it was barbaric for him not to have a break on Christmas of all days, but Tonks stood firm.

“Moody made me fight a manticore on my own birthday,” Tonks sniped as she led him out into the snow. The wind nipped at his extremities, promising eventual numbness. “A real manticore. He said he’d arranged it as a *treat*. ”

They shot spells back and forth and Draco dived and parried fluidly, putting Tonks’ shouted suggestions into effect immediately with a minor degree of success. Although he’d never admit it to her, she was the best duelist he’d ever seen: sharply intuitive and dangerously creative, paired with brute physical strength and a clean, whip-like casting style. Before her instruction, Draco hadn't known there was an art to dueling: it was a bit like a dance, albeit a vicious one, where both partners were out for each other's blood. So yes, not unlike a waltz between spouses at any given Pureblood ball.

“It’s getting a bit demoralizing,” he snapped, after Tonks blew him backwards, hitting him with a knockback jinx combination right where his shield was weakest. “Being bested by a moose.”

“A moose! They’re supposed to be reindeer antlers,” Tonks grumped, adding a few ornamental baubles to her prongs for good measure. Suddenly she doubled over and Draco got a shot in from the ground, bowling her into a snowdrift.

“Point for me,” he gloated, the smugness slipping quickly from his face when he realized the Auror wasn’t springing to her feet for another round. Instead, Tonks was on her hands and knees, a panicked look in her eyes as she spewed the meager contents of her stomach into the snow.

“Are you alright?” He asked worriedly, quickly vanishing the mess. “Merlin, I didn’t mean to hit you that hard, it was just a *flipendo*. Let me get Andromeda—”

“No!” Tonks managed hoarsely, a wildness to her jerky movements as she pulled herself up unsteadily. Draco offered an arm and she took it, wincing as she stood. “I’m fine, really. Just don’t say anything. You know how my mum gets. She’ll have me bedridden for two weeks at the slightest hint of the bloody flu.” Tonks forced a laugh, a staccato sound like rain on a tin roof. “No need to fuss, really.”

Draco looked at his cousin critically, his eyes narrowing as the pieces came together. She wouldn’t meet his eyes.

The gray skies started to open up, sending flurries down to land on their shoulders and add yet another layer to the frozen ground.

“Oh fuck,” Draco said, with the dumb shock of a man who’d been bludgeoned over the head. “Tonks, you’re not...” He trailed off awkwardly, feeling much younger than usual, fully unequipped for this conversation. He’d heard snippets of it before: mostly from Daphne and Pansy, gossip about which pureblood girl was being married at wandpoint to escape the scandal of a bastard, always with the same delighted accusation: *how could she let it happen?*

Draco knew exactly how. He knew what it was to get carried away. To be so consumed in another person that you lost any semblance of sense, sanity devoured entirely by need.

His cousin finally met his eyes. To his horror, hers were brimming with unshed tears, and her antlers disappeared with a small pop, all

former cheer forgotten. Snow collected on her fiery hair, dampening it so it was plastered to her skull.

Draco's stomach roiled, and suddenly he thought he too might lose his breakfast, albeit for very different reasons.

"Don't say anything," she begged. "Please, Draco. If you've any good will towards me at all, you won't say a word. Swear it on your house."

"I won't," he assured, frowning. "I swear on House Malfoy I won't breathe a word. But Tonks...it's not like the others won't realize."

"I know."

"We're in the middle of a bloody war. How could you let this happen?"

His cousin gave him a cold look, her gaze shuttering instantly. Draco instantly regretted saying it: after all, he'd also been born in the middle of a war, albeit to married parents. Still his concern wasn't exactly misguided; Lupin and Tonks weren't stable on a good day, much less ready to welcome a child into the world.

"Funny how it's always the witch's fault," she spat, a distinct lack of humor to her tone. "God forbid your lot take any accountability. Wizards have wands, don't they? They can cast the contraception charm just as well."

"Well, why didn't he?" Draco muttered, trying not to get ill at the thought of his cousin and the werewolf *together*. "He's about ninety years old, he should bloody well know it by now. And if he had any sort of honor, he'd do the right thing and marry you. Is this why he ran off on that bullshit mission?"

"Remus doesn't know," Tonks responded, scrubbing her face with her hands. "I've only just realized myself. And you can save the lecture. I know, okay? We were drunk and irresponsible and it's not like—I didn't mean for it to happen—and he certainly doesn't want

—” To Draco’s horror, her shoulders began to shudder, little unmistakable spasms. He could practically hear Hermione’s voice in his head urging him towards action: *go comfort her, you dolt*.

He did not know his cousin well. To Draco’s limited understanding, she seemed quite ridiculous, annoyingly bighearted with a crass, bawdy sense of humor. She was far too good natured for his taste; Draco didn’t trust people who didn’t have a bit of darkness, a bit of anger peeking through their publicly presented veneer.

But then, he’d seen her during his lessons, when she transformed into a thing with razor sharp edges, with a blade’s blunt force and general’s capacity for strategy. And she was generous, painfully so: taking the time to teach him, to *know* him. It was more than anyone besides Granger had done for Draco in a long time. And—the sudden realization stunned him, the raw honesty of it wholly unfamiliar—Tonks was family. Sometime during the days he’d spent in the forest cottage, Draco had unwillingly started to consider her a part of him. Or perhaps, he’d become a part of her. He couldn’t figure out which possibility was worse.

Carefully, he approached her and put a frozen hand on her stooped shoulder, patting gingerly, as if she were a hippogriff ready to take off his fingers at the first wrong look. For someone who’d been shoving his emotions deep into a locked basement for years, it was the extent of his capability for physical comfort.

“It’s going to be fine,” Draco offered, hating how unsure he sounded. “Lupin will come back.” He grimaced before adding on, “I’ll talk to him, if no one else will. As strange as it sounds, I’m the eldest wizard of the Black line, so it would traditionally fall to me to sort this out. I’ll inform him about what is proper and right in this situation, and he’ll do it, at wandpoint is necessary. We can have you married in a fortnight.”

Tonks sobbed harder, shaking her head.

“You're an idiot.” She gulped air in between sobs. “I don't—I don't want to marry him, especially because of *this*! I love him, I really do. But whenever I try to think about it, I can't imagine a life with him without having bits of myself chipped away, like I'm trying to force a square to fit into a circle. And I don't want to— I can't be a mum. Not now, not during a war. For fuck's sake, I'm a soldier; I trained my whole life to fight. And now, when I'm needed, when I can actually make a difference, I'm not going to sit at home changing nappies.” Her voice steadied as she composed herself with great shuddering breaths. “I know that makes me a shite person—”

“It doesn't.” The vehemence in his voice surprised him, as if he were realizing his belief in his words as he said them. “In my book, not wanting to bring a child into a war is a *noble* decision.”

Tonks looked up at him with wide, uncertain eyes. Draco met her gaze, blinking away the flakes that landed on his lashes, tactfully pretending the tear tracks on her face were just melted bits of snow.

“No one else sees it that way,” his cousin responded bitterly, wiping her nose in the crook of her sleeve. “They'll think it's awful.”

Draco helped her to her feet unsteadily, clapping her rather gruffly on the back before giving her a bit of space in case she needed to boke again. He'd comfort her, but he drew the limit at vomit on his trousers.

“The way *I* see it,” he offered quietly. “Is that it's no one's business but yours.”

Tonks scoffed, shaking the snow from her shoulders and hair in a rather canine fashion.

“Bit of a problem with that whole independent mentality. I got an P on my Potions O.W.L., and I said it was because Snape *hated* me, but really it was because I'm pants at anything requiring a cauldron. So even if I had the ingredients for the potion, I couldn't brew it to save

my life." She let out a big, shuddering sigh. "I'll have to go to the apothecary at Knockturn."

"That's a death wish," he scoffed, shooting down the harebrained idea immediately. "You'd be killed on the spot if you're found out, and even metamorphmagus disguises aren't infallible."

"I don't have any other choice, do I?" Tonks retorted angrily, blowing a damp bit of hair from where it was adhered to her forehead.

"Well," Draco said. "You may have gotten a P in Potions, but your smarter, better looking cousin got an O."

"That's why Hermione likes you, isn't it? You're a swot," Tonks groaned as if she were annoyed, but her relief was exposed by the tension quickly leaving her shoulders, allowing her to stand straighter again. It always amazed Draco how she only came up to his shoulder, built like a pixie and still able to disembowel him at a second's notice.

"Are you sure?" She added, keeping her expression flat and guarded. "That you want to help me with this?"

"Don't go making something of it. But yes, I'll brew it."

"Really?"

"I already said yes, didn't I? Don't get all sappy on me now," he scoffed, ignoring the heat blooming in his cheeks. "I'm simply paying back a debt. Now you can forget about invoicing me for all these dueling lessons."

---

Christmas dinner was not nearly as splendid as it was at Hogwarts, but the modest spread of roast chicken and mince pies still invoked a bittersweet homesick feeling in Draco that he'd not expected. It followed him to the sitting room, where Andromeda had put up one of

the fir trees, brought in from the surrounding forest and decorated with strings of cranberries and tinsel.

Draco had always been a materialistic person, a tendency his father encouraged and stoked with abandon, insisting that Malfoys deserved the best of everything by right of blood. He'd always had the newest broom, the finest cashmere, the most expensive dragonhide. Furthermore, his full coffers at Gringotts had always allowed him the satisfaction of *giving* the best presents: in the Slytherin dormitory, they were usually the first torn open, the most coveted even amongst his wealthy friends: afterall, there was pureblood wealth, and then there was *Malfoy* wealth.

But this Christmas, Draco only had access to whatever he'd brought with him when he'd fled: the contents of his cloak's secret extendable pocket, which housed only the most precious and useful essentials on his person.

One of them had been his broom compass, which he gave to Tonks. A special model, designed to monitor not only direction but also altitude, temperature, and inclement weather. For Ted, he'd struggled to transfigure one of the empty Muggle notebooks lying about into a handsome leather journal for him to record his recipes, charmed to automatically convert measurements into the user's preferred metric, both muggle and magical.

For Andromeda, he'd transformed one of his cufflinks into a crude silver ring, engraved with a slightly crooked letter T. Draco was no jeweler and secretly, he hoped she'd put the hideous bit of jewelry back in the box and never look at it again.

Unfortunately, upon opening it, Andromeda covered her mouth. Her eyes welled up, obviously brought to tears by its hideousness.

"Give it here," Draco said, embarrassed, reaching to wrench the little box from his aunt's hands. "I know it's awful, so just let me get you something else when we can go to the banks again. I've got some

pieces in my vault—” He cut off, realizing Andromeda pulled back, unwilling to surrender the ring. The wetness in her eyes spilled over.

*Oh excellent*, Draco thought with savage misery. *More tears from the Black family.*

“You made a signet ring,” Andromeda said. “A Tonks family signet ring.”

The sounds of tearing paper and profuse thanks stopped, leaving only the crackling of the fire.

“Ring is a rather strong word,” Draco interrupted, suddenly uncomfortable with having the room’s undivided attention. “It’s just a bendy bit of metal, really. Used to be a cufflink. Oh, don’t—”

It was too late for his protests; Andromeda had pulled him into a bone crushing hug, the likes of which he’d certainly never extricate himself from. Certainly he’d die like this, suffocated by his aunt. Ted clapped him on the back firmly, muttering something about how he was a good lad. Across the room, his cousin’s eyes were shining and Draco raised his eyebrows as if to say, *really again?* Tonks returned the sentiment with a watery grin and mouthed the word, *hormones*.

“All right, no need to carry on,” Draco muttered, pulling away from the Tonks’. He strategically ducked his head so no one could see his pleased flush.

The gifting resumed, with a slightly more desperate hint of sincerity, as if Draco’s clumsy ring had unlocked a strange earnestness, a desire to show appreciation and affection more intensely while under the shadow of wartime.

Andromeda, more affected than most, handed out terribly sentimental presents: a fine set of dress robes she’d once worn to her own Yule Ball for Hermione, tailored to her size. A rare guide to advanced Legilimency and Occlumency that was assuredly illegal in



Britain for Draco. A pocket watch for Weasley that was charmed to remind you of any pending.

Having developed a bit of a soft spot for Potter, Andromeda gave the boy a messy looking notebook filled with neat cursive writing and complex dioramas that moved about the page.

"Er, thanks Mrs. Black," Potter said, confusion evident in his expression. "I love it. It's—"

"My quidditch playbook," Andromeda replied, more softly than she usually spoke. "I detailed every game I played as captain in Seventh Year."

She took the notebook, flipping to one of the latter pages.

"This one cost me the Cup against Gryffindor." She pointed at the diagrams, tapping a finger on one of the labeled dots that was whizzing around the page, presumably scoring goals. "See? We lost because of a pesky third year chaser I'd underestimated." She smiled gently at the boy, who still looked puzzled. "His name was James Potter."

Potter—who'd spent the last week looking so miserable one could have confused him for one of the gargoyles guarding Hogwarts' buttresses—let out a choked sound and put his head between his knees.

Draco looked around wildly to find each occupant of the room frozen, unsure of what to do. Granger wrung her hands helplessly as Weasley slowly turned redder until his face matched his horrible hair.

"Well, don't stare at the boy," Andromeda snapped, gesturing for them to continue. She put an arm around Potter's shoulders and whispered something into his ear that had him nodding in agreement, his head still obscured.

Draco realized, with incredible discomfort, that Potter and Andromeda had both lost the entirety of their families. That both winced when a voice was raised too suddenly, indicating a longstanding fear of being shouted at. The lump in his throat intensified—guilt, obtrusive and unwanted—and he washed it down with some mulled wine.

He felt a small hand slip into his. Hermione was looking at him with quiet understanding, having undoubtedly felt exactly what he was experiencing as it happened. Under the heaviness of his own emotions, he could feel hers: a burning love for Potter, a desire to comfort and smooth. It would have made him jealous if it wasn't so filial in nature.

"Here," he said, clearing his throat and offering her a small package.

Draco had anguished over what to give Hermione from his meager reserves, unwilling to offer her something lackluster on their first shared Yule. He remembered the previous holiday when she'd unknowingly given him both a gift and a curse: at Slughorn's stupid party, when he'd seen her in a golden gown and lost his capacity to breathe. Unable to help himself, he'd danced with her like a fool, and promptly returned to his dormitory in order to wank furiously under scalding water to a fantasy, where he slipped her dress off and learned whether the rest of her was as soft as the center of her back, the delicate bit of skin he'd brushed when they'd danced. He'd come with her name on his lips and told himself it was fine because it wasn't real, just an attraction to a witch in a pretty gown.

*Look at me now*, Draco thought, with no small degree of triumph. She was wearing a Christmas themed jumper with a fuzzy Father Christmas that Draco thought particularly hideous. Naturally, he wanted it off as soon as possible, with a preference for him being the one to remove it. Now, she was *his*.

Hermione revealed his gift with confusion, feigning an overly eager grin as if he couldn't feel exactly what she did.

“Oh, it’s beautiful!” She said, tilting the box so that the single emerald dangled from the delicate gold chain, catching the light. “And it’s, er, green. For Slytherin. Like you.”

He rolled his eyes fondly as she pretended to admire it.

“Come off it, Granger,” Draco said, taking her hand in his so he could press her thumb to the stone. “You didn’t think I’d only gotten you a little bauble, did you?”

Under her touch, the necklace began to change, shifting into something far uglier and older: a bronze amulet, inscribed with runes.

“This is what we used when...” Hermione gasped, cutting herself off when she remembered that her words were audible to the others. He nodded, careful not to betray the reality of what happened that fateful day when he’d shown up at her doorstep.

“Auja for containment,” she whispered with the sincerity of a prayer. “Lapu for privacy, laukar for obscurement.”

“Fifteenth century,” Draco smirked, feeling rather proud. “Figured it be handy, to be untraceable. Especially since no one breaks the law more than you do.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. Having apparently found no sufficient words, she simply moved the hair from her neck, presenting herself so that he could fasten the necklace. He lingered at her neck, tracing the nape with a finger as he looked over her shoulder and admired the glint of green sparking at her collarbones. He willed himself not to get hard in public at the thought of seeing her in nothing but his necklace, just as he’d insinuated a few nights prior in the study.

“It’s nothing big,” Granger cautioned as she handed him an envelope with an opened, unfamiliar seal in turn. “A bit presumptuous actually, I hope you won’t be cross.” She bit her lip in a way that had him

wondering how quickly they could get through gift giving so that he could get her upstairs and give her a different sort of present, one they'd share in enjoying.

As Draco opened the envelope, he felt little pinpricks at his cuticles, informing him she was picking nervously at her fingernails.

"Stop that," he instructed, unfolding the parchment inside. He had no idea how she'd managed to receive any post, but before he inquired further, he began to read.

*Dear Dr. Granger,*

*Despite the political dangers rampant in the United Kingdom at the moment, I am pleased to inform you that given your diligent documentation and petitioning, your patient Narcissa Black, has been accepted for treatment at the MACUSA National Healing Association's Center for Magical Abnormalities in New York, New York, under the Emergency Political Refugee Act of 1845. Enclosed are a series of documents—*

Draco tore his eyes from the paper, unable to read any further.

"What—" he rasped, clearing his throat repeatedly. "What the fuck is *this?*"

"Well, when you explained what was happening with your mother's magic last year, I started doing a bit of research." Hermione began to talk very quickly, her voice pitched much higher than usual. "Her symptoms sounded terribly like what sometimes happened to muggleborn children who were forced to keep their magic from manifesting. They're called Obscurials, and unfortunately most don't make it to the age of eleven, often accidentally killing themselves during outbursts. But there's been no recorded case of Obscurial magic in a witch older than fifteen until...well, until now. Given the abnormality of the situation, I looked into whether your mother would be eligible for an experimental treatment. It obviously couldn't be here, so I petitioned the American healing organization—the NHA,

they're light years ahead Mungo's, but horrifically privatized and very selective— and granted, I lied a bit, told them I was her doctor—”

She cut off uncertainly at the look on his face.

He pinched the bridge of his nose so that the pressure behind his eyes wouldn't manifest. He would not be the third Black of the day to cry. He would *not*.

“Is this real?” He finally croaked, once he'd used his occlumency shutter his emotions safely back in his garden. “My mother...they'll help her? The American healers can bring her back?”

“Well, they can't promise anything,” Hermione hedged. “Especially when it comes to restoring a magical core. But they're making enormous strides, so it really does look promising they can at least have her stable and healthy and fully cognizant, which would certainly be an improvement in my opinion.”

Draco dropped the letter. He was distantly aware that there were other people in the room, but his hands were moving before his thoughts could catch up. He lifted her by the waist so that her legs went automatically around his hips and she squeaked, surprised at being suddenly aloft.

He kissed her, long and hard, in front of everyone.

“I can't believe you,” Draco whispered after finally pulling away, setting her clumsily back on her feet. “You're unreal, you know that? You crafty, genius, *beautiful* —”

“Riddle me this,” an unpleasant voice piped up. Weasley, who looked inexplicably sour, spoke with his arms crossed at his chest. “You're willing to do all this, put us all in danger by breaking the wards to send mail, for a woman who thinks you're undeserving of *life*? You did all this for him, for his mother? What about Bill?” Weasley's timbre began to rise, growing louder and louder. “He's permanently

scarred by a bloody werewolf, have you looked into sending him to an overseas clinic? Have you?”

Hermione looked stunned, the elation she'd previously worn slipping from her face.

“Well,” she answered slowly. “No, I haven't. But you have to understand, Ron, that werewolf scars are treatable here in Great Britain and Narcissa—”

“You're willing to do all this for him! For his family!” Weasley was shouting now, and Draco had his wand out instantly. “What about your family, Hermione? What about us? Who sat with you when you were petrified? Who had you over for every holiday, every bloody summer? Who loved you no matter what your blood status or your social standing?”

“Ron,” Hermione said, looking paler by the second. Draco's hold on his wand tightened. “Ron, of course I love your family—”

“THEY'RE YOUR FAMILY TOO!” Weasley roared. “AT LEAST I BLOODY THOUGHT WE WERE, BEFORE YOU CAST YOUR LOT IN WITH HIM AND THAT EVIL BITCH UPSTAIRS—”

Draco snapped. Before he could so much as blink, he was dueling, sending wicked spells ricocheting around the sitting room, each more vicious than the last. Weasley was no match for him, but his anger contributed to the sheer force of his spells, while also undermining his aim, leading to the destruction of most the furniture. He laughed cruelly as Weasley clumsily tried to decapitate him with a wild slicing spell that sent the Christmas tree crashing to the ground. Potter was up in a flash, trying to throw up shields between them, with more focus on shielding Ron from Draco's assault than the other way around.

For a second, there was the roaring chaos of a fight, all light and shattering glass and rips in the wallpaper, and Draco was winning, a

better fighter than either of them naturally, and even more improved thanks to his training.

He could end it right here, he could send Weasley to his *grave*, and for a terrifying moment, he fully intended to.

Before he fully knew what was happening, Draco was thrown to the floor. When he tried to move, he found himself paralyzed, stuck in a formidable body-bind. If he turned his head, he'd find Potter and Weasley in the same position among the strewn detritus around the floor. Somewhere, that stupid WHAM! song started up again, as the muggle singer lamented about Christmases past.

"We are at war," Andromeda's icy voice splintered through his heart like a stake. Draco suddenly felt incredibly ashamed. "You foolish, foolish boys. Do you not have enough enemies, without turning on each other? Did you really have to take any semblance of joy from this house, because your fragile egos have been bruised by who got the better present?" Andromeda scoffed, and Draco heard her footsteps approach. "Weasley— it's beyond childish to go tit for tat, whenever any of your friends show someone else a modicum of affection. And Potter, what are you doing jumping to his aid? Is your loyalty really so blind?"

Finally, she turned to peer down at Draco with unmitigated fury. Draco, still paralyzed, mildly wished his aunt had just killed him instead.

"No nephew of mine will be casting to maim or kill in my home." Draco fought the urge to shrink, to make himself smaller under her disregard. "Do it again, and I'll see that you never grace the threshold as long as you live. Don't test me, Draco. You won't like the lengths I go to, to maintain my family's safety."

*My family.* It hit him like a million shards of glass: Ted and Tonks were Andromeda's family, not him. He was an intruder. A broken, feral thing they'd taken pity on, fed and nursed back to full strength, only for him to turn around and bite at their hands.

"I won't hurt your precious family," Draco spat, his hurt distressingly audible. Andromeda scoffed loudly, unwilling to take the bait.

"That includes you, you stupid boy," she said. "You could have just as easily gotten yourself killed, and then what would I do? What exactly would I say to your mother, Draco? Who else does she have?"

Draco cringed and shut his mouth, sufficiently chastised.

The former merriment was replaced with a stale silence as the room emptied; Andromeda was the final one to leave, canceling their bindings as she exited.

"Clean this up," she said, in a low, dangerous tone. "If I see so much as a single pine needle when you're done, you'll sleep in the forest tonight, Death Eaters be damned."

---

Draco quickly learned that doing household chores with Potter and Weasley was, in fact, the worst torture that could ever be thrust upon him: manual labor with loathsome company. He found himself equal parts furious and annoyed, as he racked his brain, trying to discern exactly how one was supposed to mend cushions and wash windows without leaving streaks. All in the sullen company of his mortal enemies.

Well, perhaps not *mortal* enemies. But certainly gormless, idiotic louts. Especially Weasley, who'd started it in the first place.

They worked in silence to set the demolished room straight as Draco quietly stewed. This was the worst punishment Andromeda could have devised solely because of how much Draco loathed feeling inept. He had never washed a dish in his life, hadn't even bothered memorizing any scouring spells, much less practicing them, and thus struggled to hide the fact he was at an utter loss. He tried to copy what Weasley was doing, watching his wand movements out of the corner of his eye, hoping neither of the shiteheads noticed.



They noticed.

“Haven’t figured out a basic scouring spell?” Potter taunted, although the insult seemed rather weak, the delivery half-hearted. The boy looked exhausted: blue-purple circles lingered under his eyes, and his face looked drawn and pale. The darkness Draco had noticed was there too, a whisper of doom that seemed to emanate from him. Whatever was sending him on his nightly jaunts to Draco’s room was also clearly affecting his countenance.

“I’m not a House Elf,” Draco replied. He sneered at Weasley, who was studiously ignoring him despite the reddening of his neck. “I’m not so destitute that I have to indenture myself for a sickle and a knut. Why the bloody hell would I know how to clean the floors?”

Potter muttered something that sounded an awful lot like *wanker*, and Weasley shot his friend a look of mutual dislike. Draco clenched his fists in response, furious he’d been made out to be the villain in their miserable little lives. *Again*.

Apparently, cleaning took forever, requiring one to crawl around on hands and knees like a beast, shooting scouring charms into the baseboards. After a quarter hour, Draco’s muscles were already indignant from the stooped position required for close range wandwork, and he stood feeling stiff and achy. Why on Salazar’s green earth wasn’t there a charm that did it all at once?

Somehow, despite his relative uselessness in every other capacity, Weasley was proving far more proficient than Draco in their endeavor, finishing his side quickly and moving on to wash and polish silverware.

“Missed a spot,” Weasley crowed from where he was sitting at the table, looking far too gleeful as he observed Draco’s misery. Draco shot him a rude hand-gesture in response.

For reasons he couldn’t possibly fathom, Potter had forgone a wand for his task and was on all fours, using a scrubbing brush and a

bucket.

"Is there a reason you're not using your wand?" Draco asked, arching an eyebrow as Potter scoured the baseboards meticulously, as if he was going to be graded on the level of cleanliness. "Got fond of scrubbing cauldrons without magic in your detentions? You know, the ones you got for attempting my murder at the Shrieking Shack?"

"Believe it or not, Malfoy," Potter said, curling his lip. "Having never cleaned a thing yourself is the exception, not the rule. Most of the people in the world clean their homes without using magic, you privileged *fuck*." He accidentally swiped some soap into his inky hair as wiped at his brow, his face taking on a stormy expression. "It's what I did when I lived with my aunt and uncle. Reckon it relaxes me, now. Makes everything feel simple again."

"Sorry, did you say it *relaxes* you?" Draco replied, shaking his head in disbelief. "This? It'll take you a century to finish at your rate. How've muggles got time to do anything else if they have to do all their cleaning by hand?"

"A fair few of them do what your family does," Potter explained. "They have household help."

"Like elves?" Draco asked doubtfully, noting this information away into his mental dossier of information he kept for moments when Hermione referenced something he didn't understand.

"Not like elves, you dolt. No, they just hire other muggles," Potter continued, looking at Draco strangely, as if this was not the reaction he expected. "Lots of muggles do it like this too, just split up the tasks amongst their families." He grimaces, remembering something unpleasant. "My aunt and uncle weren't nearly as egalitarian. They didn't like me very much, so I did most of the housework. They'd take meals away if I left anything dirty, so I got quite competent."

Draco thought of Andromeda's gentle handling of Potter, her inherent sense of his mistreatment. He faintly remembered teasing Potter for

his threadbare appearance and Muggle relatives during school, but he hadn't known they treated Potter particularly poorly. Draco had thought they were just...poor.

He'd thought that of all muggles back then, because he'd been told they were destitute and filthy and lived in mass slums. When he'd seen Granger's house, on the fateful day they'd obliterated her parents, he'd been shocked by its respectability. It was no manor, but it was neat and well-kept and filled with strange, expensive looking art. It had been the first time Draco had any inkling that he was *wrong*.

Draco looked at the floor, pretending he was examining its shine, and blamed his sudden bout of misery on excessive proximity to Granger's bleeding heart.

"Not all of them are like that, though," Weasley cut in, giving Potter a pointed look before jerking his head in Draco's direction. "C'mon mate, we don't want him thinking muggles are all child enslavers or something. He hates them enough as it is, best not give the racist tosser any more ammunition."

"I don't hate them," Draco snapped, suddenly unable to look at either Gryffindor. He knew what they had heard him say when they were children: all the vitriol he'd parroted, the senseless hatred against a people whose only sin was the absence of magic. For the first time, Draco felt terribly embarrassed of his views.

With Granger, he had felt penitent, ashamed of the things he'd said about her. Now, in front of Potter and Weasley, he just felt stupid.

"I don't hate them," he said again. "Anymore."

They fell into a tense silence. Draco could feel the intensity of Weasley's gaze on his back as he finished with his portion of the floor and started up flicking his wand to mend the wallpaper and remove the mulled wine stains from the walls.

Finally, when he'd hit his limit on rude staring, Draco snapped.

"Just say it. Whatever it is you want to say to me," he spat savagely, bracing for a fight. "Go on, air your grievances over me defiling Granger, or whatever other shite you've been harboring against me. No wands, no fists. Stand behind your fucking words for once, like adults. You two had a lot to say on the topic the other day. Still think I've got her under the Imperius?"

Weasley regarded him coolly from his seat at the table, where he'd worked his way through the silver. He gave Draco a long, up and down look, noting his rumpled state: shirt sleeves rolled up, wet patches on the knees of his trousers from kneeling on the damp floor. Draco, who like any respectable pureblood wizard, prided himself in his appearance, fought the urge to straighten his harried state with his wand.

"I shouldn't have cursed you, Malfoy," Weasley finally said with a heavy sigh, as if it pained him immensely to admit his wrongdoing. He put down the silverware to fold his arms across his chest. Draco reeled back in surprise, shocked by the easy admission. "If you'd called my mother a bitch, I'd likely have reacted the same way you did."

"Come around to reason, have you?" Draco sneered performatively, not doing himself any favors. "Figured out I'm not trying to murder you lot in your beds and steal Granger away to put in my dungeon?"

"Oh, piss off," Weasley said, waving a hand in irritation. "I can buy that you're not pure evil, alright? Dumbledore left you the sword, so you must have some redeeming quality hidden somewhere under that nasty shite-smelling expression. I don't doubt that you got in over your head with the Death Eaters and fled the forces of darkness or whatever, and now you want You-Know-Who to kick the bucket." He paused, narrowing his eyes in Draco's direction. "But that doesn't mean I want you anywhere near her."

“Luckily,” Draco drawled, shooting daggers at the ginger with his eyes. “That’s none of your fucking business.”

“That’s what you don’t get about this,” Weasley continued. “I meant what I said. Not the part about your mother, the other bit. Hermione’s lost her parents. Do you know where she’s called home since that happened? My house, the one your fellow Death Eaters burned down. Where she stayed on holidays and summers? My house. She’s even got her own bed in Gin’s room. We’re her family, Malfoy. So yeah, I reckon her well-being is my business, and seeing her do something so generous for you set me off, because frankly? You don’t deserve it.”

“I know that,” Draco said plainly, and it was Weasley’s turn to look surprised. “I know I don’t deserve her.” He ran his hands through his hair, not realizing he’d raked droplets of cleaning solution through the strands until it was too late. “I—I’ve not been kind. Especially to her. I’ve not earned anything, certainly not what she’s done for my mother out of her boundless empathy.” He grew frustrated, and with frustration came the accidental trickle of honesty, flowing through his words. “But I’m trying to, don’t you get that? Earn her. Why the fuck else would I be here?”

“I get that you fancy her,” Weasley cleared his throat uncomfortably. “We’ve all seen that, alright? But who’s to say that when the war is over, you won’t change your mind again? Who’s to say that when your neck’s not on the line, you won’t go right back to your Manor and your friends, go right back to spitting on the mudbloods and the filthy blood traitors?”

Draco winced at the slur and fell silent. He wouldn’t go back, he knew that. He could never go back. There was only the slightest part of him that wanted to, wanted the proximity to power than accompanied being at the upper echelon of society. But not if it meant losing her.

“Listen,” Potter added brusquely from his position on the floor. He appeared to stew over his words, before choosing them carefully. “I

shouldn't have said that stuff about you putting her under the Imperius. Hermione is clever as all hell, too clever to be manipulated by the likes of you. And you're not—you're no saint, alright? But you're not *evil*." He let out a heavy sigh, moving the brush back and forth against the floor as he spoke. "Hermione's got a tendency to shoulder problems that aren't hers to bear in the first place, I know that better than anyone. She's one of those people who give. And you're one of those people who take. That's a bad combination, Malfoy, and you know it. If you care about her as much as you say, maybe you should just leave her be."

There was a painfully awkward silence as Draco fought the urge to curse their tongues to permanently affix to their teeth. This was not the unbridled vitriol he expected from the pair, especially given Weasley's poorly hidden crush on Granger and Potter's predilection for preachy soliloquies and throwing muggle punches. This was far worse. A brutal and honest exchange born on the only common ground they had: Granger's wellbeing.

*Just say it, he told himself. Shut them up.*

"I can't," Draco responded simply. "I can't just leave her be. I've tried, Salazar knows I've tried. I lied to myself for a long time, told myself I didn't like her. I insisted I just, er—" *wanted to bury myself in her cunt*, he thought truthfully— "fancied her. And even after that, I dug my heels in and resisted as much as I could."

"Clearly," Weasley responded with visible distaste. "You didn't resist hard enough."

"You have no idea," Draco replied, thinking back to the origins of his infatuation, primarily the blasted occlumency sessions that almost sent him to St. Mungo's loony bin.

Even before Draco had developed romantic feelings, forcing himself into Hermione's mind had been an excruciating experience. Through her memories, he was made to witness her exposure to the great cruelties of the wizarding world, cruelties Draco had never once

experienced himself. Strangers mailing her bubotuber pus, adults in government positions firing curses at her, aiming to kill in Ministry corridors, and of course, all the hissed comments and slurs.

It had the unfortunate effect of forcing him to realize that despite her blood, Granger hadn't *done* a single thing to merit any of it. She'd merely existed. Draco was certain this realization had been a trap, part of Dumbledore's ridiculous plan to convert him, but that didn't change the fact that he'd consistently left their lessons feeling queasy and vaguely feverish, ill in a way he couldn't quite verbalize.

Between the unsavory moments, he caught little glimpses of her in her mind, undone. The moments he'd never be allowed to see otherwise: Granger, soft and smiling, brushing out her curls before bed or tanning her long legs on a dock. A reckoning had come when he witnessed her recollections of the Yule Ball. Weasley's bumbling attempts at expressing interest; Krum, the Bulgarian menace, trying to seduce her at barely fifteen. Taking her first kiss, her first curious touches. Worst of all, a memory of her, fidgeting in the mirror of the girls' powder room, in quiet awe of her own appearance. Draco remembered how she looked that night; back in fourth year, he'd seen her and hated her, for daring to be beautiful on top of everything else.

When he'd freed himself from her head and she'd shown up during classes covered in ink stains, with her wand stuck through her impossible hair, it had been a relief. This Granger, he could handle.

As it turned out, he couldn't.

He hadn't anticipated that he'd start to find her erotic in the strangest of ways. Growing aroused by the wisps of hair at the nape of her neck; the translucent skin of her wrists; fuck, even her knees, peeking out between the hem of her skirt and the start of her high socks.

But he'd surely rather die than tell Potter and Weasley any of *that*.

“Did she tell you that when we were at the Manor, my father found us before we could escape?” Draco started, folding his hands behind his neck in resignation as he remembered Lucius’ efforts to stop his wife’s escape. “He tried to kill her, you know. Aimed an *Avada* right at her, and I didn’t think, I just stepped in front of the curse. Scared the shite out of me, not because I was frightened of dying, but because I *wasn’t*. ” He swallowed, avoiding eye contact. “Like any sane person, I used to be afraid of pain and death and now...Forget self-preservation, I’m actively double-crossing the Dark Lord and diving in front of Killing Curses.” He let out a mirthless laugh. “You know, I’m sure my life would be far simpler if I’d never met Hermione Granger.”

The pair of Gryffindors were silent in response, regarding him as if he’d grown a second head.

“It would be simpler,” Draco repeated quietly. “But it’s quite possible that it would not be worth living.”

Weasley looked simultaneously disturbed and deeply uncomfortable, as if Draco had ripped off all his clothes and started yodeling in the nude. Potter was watching him from behind his spectacles with that bottle-green, unblinking stare, as if he was waiting for something *more*.

Draco clenched his jaw and met his gaze.

Without breaking eye contact, he walked over to where Potter was sprawled. Draco didn’t say a word, just sent his wand clattering noisily to the floor in an unmistakable statement. Then, he snatched the scrubbing brush in Potter’s grasp, and began scouring the floor by hand.

It took him a ridiculous amount of time. But when he was finished, sweaty and smelling unpleasantly of cleaning solution, Weasley and Potter were still there. They exchanged a look, a silent passing of intentions, before Weasley piped up, addressing Draco directly.



“Alright, posh boy,” he said, with only a hint of reluctance. “We get it.”

---

Hermione cornered Draco in his room after he’d had a shower and gotten ready for bed.

“What did you say to them,” she hissed, shooting an accusatory look in his direction.

“Hello sweetheart,” he murmured. “Sorry about all the fuss. As I’m sure you’ve realized, Weasley is a brainless shithead and I’ve very little self control.”

“You will be sorry,” she warned darkly, and Draco’s cock twitched in misguided interest. “Answer me.”

“Say what and to whom?” Draco questioned, pulling her in by the waist so he could kiss her.

Her hair was half-down, a few loose curls framing her face. He contemplated dropping his towel, but decided it would be too forward. Witches could do such things as they wished, but who wanted unsolicited nudity from a wizard? Pansy had taught him that lesson with a curse that caused the snitches embroidered on his underpants to spell out the word PERVERT whenever someone of the fairer sex got remotely close to removing them.

Granger wriggled from his grasp, exasperated. “*To whom,*” she mocked, in an over-enunciated version of his accent. “Are you having me on, Malfoy?”

His cock hardened under his towel, now unmistakably interested. The resurgence of her use of his surname had him disproportionately eager. *She was going to yell at him,* he thought, already impossibly aroused at the idea. Pansy was right, Draco was a pervert.

“To Harry and Ron, you prick! I’ve been trying to convince them to let you in on our planning meetings for weeks now, explaining how you could be a real asset to our... *situation*, and they’ve been fighting me tooth and nail. Now, all of a sudden, you lot duel and almost bring the house down, and they come to me like the world’s most demented admissions committee saying that they’ve discussed it and they’re ‘willing to offer you an opportunity to prove yourself.’ So I’ll repeat, *what did you say to them?* ”

“I didn’t discuss anything sensitive,” Draco said with a frown, taking in her worried expression. “I mean, about the bond. I wouldn’t do that without talking to you. We may have gotten into it while cleaning—ghastly experience, to say the least—and they accused me of not being trustworthy or serious about this or some shite. So I told them that I stepped in front of a Killing Curse I thought was going to hit you, and was that serious enough? What— it’s true, isn’t it? Why are you looking at me like that?”

Hermione’s eyes had gone wide, worrying her bottom lip with her teeth. She’d both startled at his words and seemed to abruptly realize he was shirtless and damp.

“Those twits,” she murmured faintly, once she’d torn her eyes from his chest. What a little lech. “Of course that’s what would impress them. Suicidal tendencies.”

“Not suicidal,” he demurred. “Sacrificial, maybe. Martyr-like.”

“Idiotic,” she corrected. “Thick-headed.”

“Hm,” he hummed and adjusted the towel around his waist suggestively. “Say more, and I won’t make it into fresh clothes. Which wouldn’t be a shame, given that I have to give you your *other* Christmas present.”

He got closer, intruding on her space.

“Take your jumper off, darling,” he murmured. “It’s awful.”

“You really think you deserve *that*, after your little tantrum?” Hermione asked, although her eyelids had lowered suggestively, clearly taking in his erection. “Do you deserve to have me after kicking up a fuss like that?”

He drew back, suddenly serious.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “I don’t think I do.”

Hermione’s eyes snapped to his, instantly concerned by the heaviness in his tone.

“Draco,” she insisted, reaching up to trace his lips with a finger. He shuddered, always disproportionately effected by her touch. “Draco Malfoy, listen to me. You are a good man. A foolish, impulsive, arrogant man. But you are also generous and protective and self-sacrificing to a fault. You deserve *everything*. ”

She pushed him to the mattress and climbed astride his hips, flipping her skirt up and pulling her knickers to the side. When she’d teased him sufficiently, rubbing against him to the point where it could be very well considered torture, she finally slid down on his length, taking him to the hilt.

"Everything," she panted, repeating her words as she rose up and down again slowly. Her pace was painfully gentle, and she reached down to cup his cheek, stroking his face with her thumb tenderly.

It was too soft, too sweet. Draco tilted his head back and closed his eyes so that she wouldn’t see the moisture that had accumulated.

*For Merlin’s sake*, he thought wryly. *The third Black had fallen.*

After, they fell asleep quickly, lulled by the post-coital endorphins and each other’s warmth.

Soothed by the feeling of being wrapped around Hermione’s body, Draco had the loveliest, strangest dream: he was sitting at a picnic

table in what he recognized as the Manor's gardens, laid out with a veritable feast of finger sandwiches and sausage rolls and puddings. All around him were familiar faces, young and free of worry: there was Theo, ruffling Pansy's hair as she scowled performatively; Crabbe and Goyle looking carefree, undoubtedly cracking crude jokes; at the far side, his lovely mother, looking healthier than she'd been in years, was holding hands with his father, who watched the scene with a serene indulgence that Draco had only seen on a few treasured Christmases and birthdays, from long before the Dark Lord rose for the second time. And beside him Granger, looking radiant as ever, with her hand openly in his.

So yes, he was more than irritated when he woke suddenly, alerted by the unmistakable sound of footsteps. But they weren't outside the door this time. They were coming from inside the room.

In a flash, he had his wand in his hand, illuminating the trespasser.

"Potter," Draco snarled. "What exactly do you think you're doing with that sword?"

---

---

Where to begin! First, thank you for all the love you've shown this story as of late. To everyone recommending it on other sites (especially the ones I am not active on), I love you and am forever in your debt. [I am on Tumblr, where you can ask me any and every question about this story, writing, or just life.](#)

- The title of this chapter is a reference to the wonderfully bittersweet ["If We Make It Through December," by Merle Haggard and the Strangers \(and more recently covered by Phoebe Bridgers\)](#).

- This is the soft, crying chapter. All three Blacks (minus poor Narcissa) have meltdowns over ideas regarding family. It's a canon divergence, but I wanted to really consider Tonks' right to choose not to go through with her pregnancy (instead of pretending abortion doesn't exist like in the canon, where everyone gets pregnant at like

21). Despite his old school pureblood morals, Draco has zero qualms about helping her make that choice.

- Andromeda's gift to Harry is particularly touching because she's immediately pegged him as someone who comes from an abusive household (pointing towards her own abuse). IDK if the date line up on Andromeda and James Potter being at school together, but you know what, let's call it creative liberties.

- Yes, Draco's gift to Hermione is The Amulet from Chapter 3! And his gift to Andromeda is so meaningful, because only pureblood families have signet rings. By making her this one, Draco is making a big statement.

- Next chapter, we hit an abrupt return to war. Stay tuned for What's Going On With Harry and incoming Horcrux/Hallows lore. See you soon!

---

# A Prison of the Soul

## Chapter 38: The Prison of the Soul

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

With a wand aimed at his throat, the intruder started awake, blinking in confusion as he was suddenly and unceremoniously yanked from sleep's grasp.

"Malfoy?" Potter squinted his eyes at the glare of the *lumos*. He was barefoot and missing his glasses, clad in a ratty cotton t-shirt with holes in the collar and boxer shorts emblazoned with different dragons. As he recoiled from the wandlight, he very much resembled a child that had wandered out of bed. "What are you doing in my room?"

"You're in my room, you thieving little shite," Draco spat. "Put the sword down, *slowly*."

All at once, Potter seemed to realize what was in his grasp: Godric Gryffindor's sword. Under Draco's watchful eye, he slid the blade to the ground, all the while staring horrified at his hands like they belonged to someone else. It clattered to the floor with an angry sound of metal against wood.

Hermione started awake and was up from the bed in a flash, gripping Draco's forearm.

"Don't hurt him," she croaked, voice raspy from disuse. "He's sleepwalking, Draco."

He softened his stance marginally at her touch, but did not lower his wand. From his peripheral vision, he caught a glimpse of her bare shoulders; she was wrapped only in the top sheet, which did little to conceal her state of undress. Both wizards seemed to notice this at the same time

“Oh,” Potter managed faintly. “Good. Hermione’s here too.”

Draco snarled in his direction until he quickly averted his eyes, focusing his gaze on the floor’s woodgrain.

When Hermione noticed the sword at Potter’s feet, she sucked in a sharp inhale, brown eyes heavy with trepidation as she saw what exactly he had been attempting to procure while sleepwalking.

“Harry,” she said tersely. “Are you wearing the—?”

She cut off, shooting an uncertain glance in Draco’s direction. Whatever she’d been about to say was clearly related to the whispered “research” meetings they’d been conducting in the study.

“Huh?” Potter managed inarticulately, taking a minute to process her stilted implication. Then, as if he’d been hit around the head by a Bludger, his jaw fell open in realization.

“Oh *shit*. It can’t be—shit, you don’t think—like Ginny and the diary?” He stammered, fumbling at the collar of his shirt, before pulling a silver chain with some sort of locket pendant from beneath the fabric. Hastily, he ripped it off and hurled it to the floor.

Draco remembered Weasley’s words from one of their initial confrontations at Tonks House... *second year, when my sister was possessed by the fucking Dark Lord because of a diary your father gave her.*

As he stared at the discarded locket in disbelief, he swore he saw it twitch, like the necklace had somehow taken on a pulse of its own.

“What the fuck?”

Draco moved closer and reached to examine it, certain he must need his eyes checked, but was stopped by a shriek.

“Don’t touch it!” Hermione cried, slapping her hand over her mouth as she remembered the rest of the house’s sleeping occupants.

They all collectively stilled, listening for sounds of disturbance, but there was nothing; Draco's privacy wards must have held through the night, a fact that made Potter's unauthorized entrance all the more disturbing.

Granger gingerly lifted the necklace with the tip of her wand like it was on the verge of combustion, and held the glinting piece of jewelry as far away from her body as she could.

Draco, having read the book he'd procured for Hermione from the Nott Manor library multiple times out of sheer boredom, realized—

The journal. The necklace. The eighth chapter in *Magick Moste Evile*, titled "The Prison of the Soul." And most damningly, the fateful question she'd scrawled in their courting journals that he'd sworn to never repeat: *what do you know about the term 'horcrux'?*

"Granger," he croaked, feeling ill at the very possibility that he was right. "Please don't tell me that's what I think it is."

Hermione looked up at him, still clad in only a sheet, her bottom lip between her teeth. Draco had realized long ago: this was one of her tells, whenever she'd been caught in a lie.

"We need to talk," she said, a grave look on her pretty face. "All of us."

When Potter let out a noise of protest, she held firm, pinning him with a disapproving glare that would have made Narcissa Malfoy stand and applaud.

"I don't want to hear it, alright? I'm going to wake Ron up."

Draco cleared his throat unobtrusively.

"Aren't you a bit cold, darling?" He suggested, inclining his chin towards her creative use of their bedding.



She looked down at herself and flushed, turning a shade of pink that was, in Draco's opinion, simply unfair.

"Erm," she started, and then got even pinker as she realized the implications of her, naked in his bedroom. In her haste to stop Potter's murder, she hadn't realized the optics of wearing nothing but Draco Malfoy's sheet; it wasn't like her friends didn't *know*, but it also clearly wasn't something she wanted the imbeciles to actually witness firsthand. "On second thought, I suppose I should change."

"Potter, go wake Weasley, since apparently he's essential personnel," he drawled, trying and failing not to sound smug. "Granger needs to get dressed and I'm not trying to catch a glimpse of freckle-cock in his skivvies. We meet in the study in ten minutes. Don't dawdle."

Potter left unceremoniously, also red in the face. *Merlin*, Draco thought, *Gryffindor blokes were hopeless*. They'd surely not survive a single Friday night in *his* dormitory; Pansy alone could easily have eaten them alive.

After returning the sword to its sheath, Draco turned to Hermione with arms crossed expectantly, a storm brewing in his eyes.

"Been keeping secrets, have we?"

"Okay, I haven't been *completely* honest..." Hermione started, but he stopped her with a hard look, not in any mood to be placated. It was still dark outside, the horizon not yet split by the promise of the day, and Draco was awake and being forced to deal with Potter. All while learning that he'd potentially been in close quarters with a portion of the Dark Lord's soul.

"I have questions, Granger."

If he was right, and they'd kept this *thing* in the house, kept it around their fucking *necks* ...

"I might not be able to—"

"I'm not trying to fall out with you," he interrupted, his expression as hard as granite. "I've played very nice, cooperated with those two nitwits down the hall." The muscles in his cheek jumped as he clenched his jaw, the tight leash that he used to rein in his anger going slack. "Now, it's time to give me some fucking answers."

---

"Let me get this straight," Draco said, pinching the bridge of his nose so that he wouldn't fly off the handle. The oil lamps in the study flickered, with every spike in his temper. "You three have somehow, against all luck and logic, found yourselves in possession of a piece of the Dark Lord's soul."

Weasley and Potter, still in pajamas, had their eyes trained warily at the locket, which lay in the center of the study's wooden desk as they crowded around it. Granger was pacing the length of the room compulsively, perhaps attempting to burn off the anxiety that flooded through their bond.

"We didn't find ourselves in possession of it," Potter snapped. He still looked awful, but had at least regained a little warmth in his skin once separated from the Dark object in question. "It took us *months* to find it. While you were still playing Death Eater, we were combing every inch of wizarding Britain for the blasted thing."

"And you've been keeping it under security charms? Wards? Encasing it in obsidian? Making sure that whatever was inside it couldn't get out?"

"No," Granger ground out, continuing her restless strides. "We obviously didn't have the access or resources for that."

"We've been taking turns," Potter added. "Wearing it around our necks for safe keeping."

A flush crept up Draco's neck as his body tensed, muscles coiling like springs ready to snap.

"Wearing it. Around your necks." The air around him crackled, thick with tension. "Have you lost your fucking minds?"

"This is why I didn't tell you," Hermione snapped, eyes sparking as she threw a venomous glare over her shoulder. "I knew you'd react like this. Obviously, we wouldn't have done it if we had any other choice."

"I don't know why we're telling him *now*," Weasley protested, for the hundredth time that night. He'd been the most reluctant to tell Draco exactly what the locket was and why it had been taking over Potter's body for nightly jaunts through the halls. "Dumbledore said no one else was supposed to know."

"Dumbledore?" Draco snarled at the ginger's direction, having had quite enough of the stale 'Draco Malfoy, Son of the Devil' bit that he was still carrying on with. " *Dumbledore* was a morally bereft megalomaniac, who plotted to send me into the underbelly of the Death Eaters in order to collect military intelligence. He consistently proved he had little to no regard for my life or the lives of anyone around me, so you'll forgive me if I disobey his deathbed requests. I know you're lacking in brain cells, Weasley, so let me spell it out: if the late great Headmaster himself wanted to use me as a spy, he probably had faith that I could keep a secret, don't you think?"

"He's an *occlumens* , Ron," Granger added, taking another frenetic turn around the back of the couch. "A natural occlumens. That means his mind is like a Gringotts vault, almost completely impenetrable. He lied to You-Know-Who's face for over a year. "

"I didn't need an assist, Granger," he snapped and she narrowed her eyes at him, flooding the bond with her irritation.

"Ah, their hundredth row of the night. We should commemorate it with a plaque or something," Potter snarked. "Or is this what you

consider as flirting, Malfoy?"

He should have allowed the prat to impale himself in his sleep. Yes, they'd been arguing; Draco was furious to learn how she'd been putting herself in harm's way, and Hermione, being Hermione, reacted with instant defensiveness, resenting his questioning of her judgement. Both were certain they were unquestionably right and the other was dead wrong.

It was a part of their character: she would always face danger, unflinchingly, and he would always insist she allow someone else to be the one to make the sacrifice. A stalemate, a state of locked horns.

"How?" He asked Granger tersely, not bothering with the rest of his question. *How* meant a lot of things— How did they even find the locket? How had they not immediately destroyed it? How dare she put herself in so much danger?

The brown eyed hellion in question stormed back across the room in her apparent quest to put a Granger sized hole in the flooring, ignoring him in favor of the other two wizards at hand.

"Let's get one thing straight. First of all, Draco knows. That ship has sailed, there is no use moaning about it. He was the one who got the book in the first place, and he's not an idiot— oh, don't you *dare* interrupt me to say something stupid, Harry Potter!"

Potter, who'd clearly preparing himself to say something stupid regarding Draco's intelligence, showed a rare glimmer of self-preservation and decided to remain quiet.

"Since no one in this room can manage to have a civil conversation about this without interrupting or swearing or whatever *Ron* is doing over there with his face, I'm just going to show him."

"Show him?" Weasley asked, forever one step behind, elbowing Potter in the side. "What does she mean, show him?"

"Go on," she said, moving to stand in front of Draco with her arms folded over her chest. "Just like in detention."

"Really?" He scoffed disbelievingly. "You're giving me free reign to poke around your head?"

"As if you could see anything I don't expressly allow you to." He could almost see her hackles rising as she responded to the challenge. "I'm not a novice anymore, Malfoy. I'm not giving you *free reign*, I'm giving you a sporting chance."

Fine, if that's what she wanted. Draco pointed his wand in her direction and thought, *legilimens* .

He was met with no notable interference. Her mental defenses—the ones he'd helped her construct—were stowed away neatly; library gates unlocked, memories pulled from the shelves for his perusal. When his eyes tried to wander to other shelves, she firmly redirected his attention to her chosen selections, flipping through books to show him a barrage of moments from the three months they'd been out of contact.

He sunk into the pages with her until they were in a memory, watching from up close.

She was sitting in what could only be the Gryffindor common room, with Potter gesticulating wildly in front of the fire, his face flushed with adrenaline: *Dumbledore says he made seven of them...seven, the most powerful magical number...*

The walls transformed to those of a cramped attic bedroom, where the three Gryffindors bent their heads together to examine a simpler necklace, with a passing similarity to the locket. Inside, they discovered a vitriol filled note addressed to the Dark Lord, from someone with the initials R.A.B. Initials he recognized distantly, but before he could put his finger on it, she'd already thrown them into another memory.

He looked around at the familiar setting, a stately country home on a glossy summer evening. The night she'd visited the second son's estate, where the answer she'd been looking for had been embedded in the crown molding with all the other spare heirs of Draco's matrilineal line. The name of the home's previous owner: Regulus Arcturus Black.

Draco didn't have time to process that he was in fact not the only Black heir to have turned traitor against the Dark Lord, because their surroundings were shifting again, to a tense conversation with Potter, Weasley, and an ancient House-Elf—Kreacher, the Black family servant—who'd been summoned to what appeared to be a cobweb ridden broom shed. Potter draped Regulus' false locket around its gnarled little neck and the elf turned emotional at the gesture, giving them a name in return: *Mundungus Fletcher*.

In a blink, Draco was striding through a thick wheat field in desperate need of harvesting, not far from where he and Theo had met her to pass on their warning. Behind him, he was barely able to make out the tottering Weasley house in the distance.

From ahead, he watched as Hermione was advancing on a figure, who scrambled in an attempt to get away. As he followed her closer, Draco vaguely recognized the sweaty face, turning back towards him in terror. A grubby middle-aged wizard he'd seen a mugshot of in the Prophet, some petty thief wanted for suspected larceny.

She cast a tripping jinx and sent the man sprawling. From the ground, Mundungus looked up with pure loathing, his beady eyes darting to right to hers, not knowing that eye contact would be a fatal mistake.

"*Legilimens*," she murmured, and Draco watched from the outside as she took what she needed from the man's mind. It was impressively quick: five seconds, maybe six. She *had* improved, clearly having come into her inherent talent. Although Draco was cross with her at the moment, he couldn't help but feel a twisted sort of satisfaction; after all, he was the one who'd taught her.

“I’ve got rights, you know,” the thief panted, when she’d withdrawn from his head, having presumably found what she was looking for. “There’s no way the Order sanctioned *this*. You can’t just—Moody wrote to me! I came ‘round here in good faith! There are rules!”

“Moody didn’t write to you. I did.” Hermione looked over her shoulder, scanning the dense field for witnesses. Potter and Weasley were notably nowhere to be found. Draco suddenly suspected *why* it was so important that he be shown this privately, rather than told aloud. “You know, that’s what everyone always gets wrong. It’s like they think those are the magic words: *see Hermione, there are rules!*” She mimicked the thief, putting on a rather unflattering impression of the man’s whiny voice.

“The Order may have found you useful once,” she continued as the man squirmed, fighting her magic’s iron grip. She’d pinned him in place, an insect under her thumb. “But I find any potential usefulness is far outweighed by your greed, your complete lack of loyalty. You’re far too comfortable taking what isn’t yours and only answering to the highest bidder. Stealing from a senile elf? Are there no lows to which you won’t sink?”

Mundungus opened his mouth to beg or scream for help or curse her name, but no noise came out, and he blanched, face going bloodless in realization of his utter helplessness.

“Now, you’ve found yourself with the wrong plunder, at the mercy of the wrong witch.” She tilted her head, contemplatively. “Because as far as following the rules goes, I really couldn’t be bothered.”

Draco would be lying if he said he wasn’t deeply affected by seeing her this way: all sharp edges and bared teeth. *Ruthless*. Was she going to kill the thief, right there amidst the rotting crops?

“Good bye, Mundungus. Perhaps your next self will be an improvement, but I suppose it doesn’t matter. You won’t remember, either way. *Obliviate*.”

When the man's eyes had gone completely vacant, she reached into his cloak's pockets, turning them all out to reveal a small mountain of junk: bits and baubles, nicked wands and illegal potions ingredients, and yes— copious stolen jewelry. Amongst the rings and watches and loose precious stones, she found it: the silver locket, emblazoned with a letter S.

Draco could *feel* the horcrux through her memory, the roiling darkness under the clasp, whispering to be let free. He felt it—her fear then, and her fear now—threatening to consume her as she trudged back towards the house, radiating foreboding instead of triumph.

Draco said it during their initial occlumency lessons and he'd stand by his words: Hermione Granger's mind was a terrifying place.

Her defenses snapped back into place, and he was thrust back into his own head abruptly, dizzy by the jarring difference in interiority.

She was looking up at him, her lips pressed in a grim line. He reached out through the bond to find that she felt...nervous. Anticipatory of his judgment. It occurred to him that perhaps she was worried that he'd be put off, by her lack of remorse. As if she had to worry about *that*.

"Blimey," Draco said, carding a hand through his hair as he collected himself. "Remind me never to nick anything from you."

The corner of her mouth twitched and he felt her relief like a brisk wind against his face. Draco shook his head in admonishment. *Merlin, she was a handful.*

"Just about done with the picture show?" Potter asked dryly, and Draco suddenly remembered the existence of the room's other two occupants and reluctantly redirected his attention.

"I understand what this is and how you obtained it. What I don't understand," he drawled, directing the question at all three



Gryffindors. “Is that why you have allowed that thing to *continue* to exist?”

“Yes,” Potter agreed loudly, glaring pointedly in Granger’s direction. “Why *have* we, Hermione?”

Hermione made a sound not unlike an angry cat, and Draco realized he’d unknowingly stumbled upon a well-worn argument between the two.

“Sorry,” she sniped back. “When exactly did you learn how to cast Fiendfyre without burning us all to a crisp? Or did you stumble upon another basilisk when I wasn’t looking?”

“Why’d you have to remind them?” Weasley shot Draco a dark look of commiseration, the familiar act catching him off guard. “They’d only *just* stopped shouting each other down for Christmas.”

“I say,” Potter continued determinedly, his green eyes gleaming with the same maniacal energy he had when attempting to catch the snitch. “We should just open it and *try* . We know how to get rid of it, thanks to that ghastly book. We can’t just keep wringing our hands about it.”

“Yes, let’s open it and set the Dark Lord’s soul free to roam at will, what could possibly go wrong?” Draco replied with an eye roll.

“Potter, you continue to astound me with your idiocy. What exactly do you contribute to this endeavor? Moral support? Flatulence? If not for Granger, you’d probably be dead, your corpse thrown on top of Weasley’s in a ditch somewhere. Face to arse, just like you were in life.”

“Oi, steady on—” Weasley started, an affronted look on his freckled face, but Draco was not done.

“Did you not even *read* the book I so painstakingly procured for you?” He continued, raising his voice. “Why haven’t you just used the Killing Curse?”

The room went silent as three heads turned towards him in unison. Their expressions varied: Potter appeared scandalized, Weasley dumbfounded, and Granger—

The look on her face informed him that oh yes, it was something she'd considered, but not yet brought herself to attempt. Or perhaps, he thought, remembering what he'd seen her do to Mundungus Fletcher, it was something she'd attempted and failed.

"That's Dark magic." Potter looked perturbed that Draco had even suggested it, immediately reclaiming the moral high ground. "Using it rips up the soul, even to if your intention is to ultimately do good—"

"I know exactly what using the Killing Curse does to the caster, Potter," Draco replied quietly. "Did you really expect to escape this war unscathed? Disarm the Dark Lord to death?"

"I know sacrifices need to be made, okay? But I can't let Hermione or Ron do that to their magic. I won't."

"Why not you, Chosen One?"

"Because I can't," Potter admitted tersely, looking down at his hands. "I've tried and I *can't*. Wearing it around my neck at night was the least I could do. I'm no stranger to the Dark Lord's nightmares, I could handle it."

Granger gave a sharp little inhale; by the look on her face, it seemed that she and Weasley had been unaware of this revelation. Draco felt an uneasy twinge of surprise as he realized the bane of his school years was...like him. Until very recently, he'd not been able to cast the Killing Curse either. Not under threat of torture. Not even under actual torture. He'd been so desperate to channel the correct feeling, and then when he finally could—

He had expected the side effects, the erratic magic and sense of complete and total depletion. He'd watched Theo go through it, after Dumbledore's death. What he *hadn't* expected was the flood of

control, the heady rush of the conqueror. He'd been half drunk on it, a dangerous elixir that promised only the guarantee of more violence.

"Hang on," Weasley blurted abruptly, jarring him from his thoughts. "Go back to the basilisk."

"Ron," Hermione sighed as if she'd already explained this many times, adopting the patronizing tone one would use on a child. "We already decided, we aren't breaking into Hogwarts. It's almost impossible on a good day, and now that it's crawling with Death Eaters—"

"Sorry," Draco interrupted. "Did you say there's a basilisk in *Hogwarts*? Or is this some sort of extended metaphor?" His query went completely ignored.

"Not *that*," Weasley corrected, scowling at her inflection. "I'm not dim you know. My ideas have gotten you out of plenty of scrapes, in case you forgot." He pivoted, looking at Draco from across the table with an uncharacteristic intensity. "We don't need to break into Hogwarts for basilisk venom. We've got some right here in the very house."

He grinned triumphantly, as if he expected a resounding cheer in response, but Potter and Granger only exchanged confused looks when Weasley pointed directly at him.

"If you're making a Slytherins are snakes joke, I'm afraid you've missed the mark," Draco retorted, unamused.

"Have you really not figured it out?" When he received nothing but blank looks in response, he grinned smugly. "Just me, who should have been in Ravenclaw then?"

"Would you tell us already?"

"When we were in the Chamber of Secrets, Harry stabbed the basilisk through its jaw with Gryffindor's sword." He flicked his finger,

as if connecting dots mid-air. “The sword is made of goblin-wrought silver, which according to Hermione’s last D.A.D.A study guide, means that the blade—”

“Was impregnated by the basilisk venom,” Hermione completed faintly. She covered her mouth with her hand, shaking her head in disbelief. “That’s why Dumbledore gave it to Draco, and why Harry’s been trying to get to it in his sleep while wearing the locket. The horcrux felt the threat and is possessing him to get rid of it.”

When she looked back up at Weasley, her eyes were worryingly misty.

“You read my study guide?”

“It was *Snape’s* exam,” Weasley answered. “I wasn’t about to make the greasy git’s day by failing, was I?”

In a flash, Hermione skirted the table, and nearly leaped into his gangly embrace. Dumbfounded, Weasley went slack in her grasp and then, as if remembering he had arms, patted her mechanically on the back.

Over her shoulder, he shot a bemused look at Draco and mouthed *women*, as if this were a sentiment he was supposed to relate to.

“Alright, that’s...that’s enough, Weasley,” Draco said, when the redhead began to lean into the embrace a bit too much for his liking. Meanwhile, Potter looked on fondly, like he was of half a mind to join in.

“I’m getting the sword,” he said, taking this as his cue to redirect their attention. “You lot better not be weeping and swearing oaths of friendship when I get back.”

When Draco returned, the trio’s warm moment had sailed, and they’d begun debating who should be the one to destroy the object.

“Hermione found the locket. If anyone, she deserves to—”

“No, you do it, Ron. The sword was your idea. A brilliant one at that.”

“I reckon it should be Harry, shouldn’t it? He’s the one who started this whole thing, he should get to finish it.”

“Move aside,” Draco interrupted, leaving no room for argument as he raised the weapon aloft.

The locket started vibrating on the table, as if sensing a threat to its existence.

Granger dragged Weasley out of the way and Potter opened his mouth in protest, but Draco was already swinging the sword, bringing it down swiftly. The moment the blade collided with the locket, a plume of eerie green mist bled from its interior, and the Dark Lord’s low rasp filled the room.

*“Draco Malfoy...the deserter. You are not where you belong.”*

Once, when Draco was young, he’d been dared to walk out on the ice of a frozen pond and fallen in. He’d found himself trapped against the frozen surface, losing precious oxygen as he struggled to locate the hole his body had made in the ice.

Unexpectedly hearing the sound of the Dark Lord’s voice again was like being caught under that frozen lake. Growing weaker and colder, until he could no longer fight his way back to the surface.

*“You may have severed your vow to me, Draco, but your heart—your heart will always be mine.”*

As the mist obscured his vision entirely, changing manifestations like a boggart until it settled into familiar figures: his father and mother, looking down on him with shame and regret.

*“A stain on your noble house ...”* The ghost of his father raised a castigating hand, and Draco winced as the mist swept across his

face, a whisper where he'd expected a slap. *"... A disappointment to your family name. Everyone always said you were a yellow-bellied weakling, hiding behind your father's cloak... oh how you've proved them right."*

His parents were whisked away, replaced by a strange, ghostly version of Hermione; her likeness but not, eyes turned cruel and skin waxy where it should be warm. Panicked, Draco reached out to her with the hand not holding the sword, but she drew away in disgust.

*"I knew I would regret letting you touch me,"* this Hermione said, sounding far more vicious than he'd ever heard. *"Did you really think I would choose you? Claim you?"* She laughed, a sound like grating locomotive brakes. *"Love you? You're a coward, Malfoy. A traitorous apostate who believes in only his own survival. A cockroach."*

Draco's breath left his lungs, seizing in his chest. It wasn't real. He *knew* it wasn't real, but he could not bring himself to look away as she scorned him.

*"I could never love someone like you."*

She disappeared in a rush of wind, and then he couldn't see anything at all, only heard the terrible, rasping voice.

*"You have tasted the sweet nectar of power,"* it said, silkily. *"You have known what it is to kill, to triumph over your enemies. And yet, you would throw that protection away... out of fear? I can help you, Draco. I can make it so you'll never be afraid again... but only if you allow me."*

The metal of the sword's hilt warmed in Draco's hand and suddenly, he could hear a small voice in his head—his *own* voice—reminding him: no coward could ever wield Godric Gryffindor's sword.

With a cry, he brought the blade down on the cursed locket again and again, slicing through the mist, and the inhuman voice screamed in agony as the weapon found its mark.

Then, all was quiet and clear.

As the world came back into focus, Draco didn't acknowledge the stricken faces surrounding him. He shook his head like a wet dog, trying to dispel the last of the redolent darkness that had permeated the air.

To his surprise, it was Weasley who spoke first.

"Fucking hell," he said, in a blunt but accurate summary of what had just occurred. "Nice one, Malfoy." He turned to Potter, shaking his head in disbelief. "Did you know it was going to do that?"

"The diary just sort of...bragged about itself," Potter responded faintly, clearly rattled. "You know— *join me, the most powerful wizard to ever exist* —that sort of thing. I suppose that was who Riddle was at sixteen, and this is who he became...later."

Draco turned to the only person he cared to see, and found Hermione swaying faintly, looking as if she might be sick on the carpet.

"All right, Granger?" He managed, like he'd not just been skinned alive in front of her.

"I think I'm going to be sick," she croaked, and promptly bent over to vomit all over the floor. Weasley made a small sound of commiseration and vanished the mess immediately, for which Draco was thankful; his magic felt so unstable that if he tried to cast so much as an *evanesco* right now, he'd probably blow up the whole house.

Her emotions through the bond were too muddled to identify and his were too heightened, alternately garish and blurred until he could no longer make sense of either.

"In lieu of any gratitude, I'd appreciate it if we were to simply never speak of this again," Draco warned, approaching the wreckage of the

desk he'd split in two.

The broken remnants of the horcrux oozed black sludge, pathetic in its destruction. He brought his boot down, crushing it to complete smithereens under his foot for good measure.

"How many more to go?"

---

After weeks of absence, Lupin returned to the safe house after the New Year, fresh from his mission amongst the werewolves and looking significantly worse for wear, with a series of angry raised claw marks across his face.

To Draco's surprise, his old Professor asked to speak with him privately, a request that could only presage one thing for certain: problems. He asked any deity that was listening to ensure this was not about Tonks; he wanted to discuss *that* nightmare with Lupin like he wanted an Avada to the chest. But as the gods had never favored Draco—he'd not exactly lived a pious life, could one really blame them?—it was somehow something even worse.

"Thank you for humoring me, Draco. I'm sure you're very busy."

"Not really," Draco lied, narrowing his eyes in an attempt to discern whether or not this meeting was just Lupin digging for information on what he and the others had been up to. "What do you want?"

"Will you join me for a walk," his former Defense professor asked, the hard set of his mouth leaving no room for argument, reminding him that although Lupin seemed a morose, sentimental fool, he'd proved to be a hardlining general for the Order. "I find the cold air to be particularly good for morning contemplation."

He heard the throwaway comment for what it really was: an implicit warning that they were not to be overheard.



They trudged along on the outskirts of the clearing just inside the wards, where the snow-laden evergreens sagged under the weight of winter. Frost had crept along the edges of fallen logs and the remnants of tall grass stood frozen, brittle and pale.

It was bitingly cold, but Lupin seemed completely unbothered, clad only in a thin jacket as Draco, bundled in his cloak, cast warming charms on his extremities.

“When I was underground, I scented someone familiar,” Lupin said as they walked, taking no time to exchange pleasantries. “A friend of yours.”

“Nott,” Draco said tersely, his stomach dropping into his boots. It was not a difficult leap of logic; he only knew one other werewolf.

“Yes. Theodore Nott. If I recall your third year class of Slytherins correctly, his boggart was a walking cane.”

“The cane was his father’s.”

Lupin winced.

Draco’s mind took off racing; if his former professor had gone to parlay with Greyback’s old pack, that meant speaking with the wolves that existed on the outskirts of society, the ones who preferred to live as beasts without restrictions rather than as wizards in chains— why on earth was Theo with them?

“Why was Nott there?” He lowered his voice instinctively, although there was no one else around to hear it. The clearing felt both exposed and sheltered at once, a contrast to the dense, shadowed forest beyond.

“I assume for the same reason they all were,” Lupin replied. “A lack of wolfsbane or a safe place to transform.”

“He has access to wolfsbane. I brewed it for him and when I couldn’t, Snape would.”

Lupin frowned, as if this was not what he expected to hear. “It’s possible,” he said slowly, as a worried look crossed his face. “That he was sent by the Dark Lord to accomplish the same thing I was attempting to do. Sway sympathetic wolves to our side.”

“No,” Draco said, shooting down the idea immediately. “Theo’s never been around any other werewolves, he wouldn’t be sent as an emissary. He was only bitten a little over a year ago by—”

“Greyback,” Lupin finished in a near growl. “I know. It happened to me when I was four years old.” The overcast light filtered through the heavy clouds and his features momentarily turned more wolfish than human. “I very much regret not being the one to kill him.”

This was not common knowledge; Draco had no idea that Lupin and Theo shared an attacker. He knew from watching his childhood friend go through it that being bitten was the kind of event that created a horizon, a before and an after. The death of the wizard and the birth of the wolf. He had no idea how Lupin—who on the best of days looked as if he was held together by paste and spare bits—had survived over three decades worth of transforming under the agony of the full moon.

“There are many who were turned by Fenrir Greyback, but Theodore Nott is an unusual case,” Lupin continued. “He assassinated one of the most famous wizards in history and it’s unintentionally given him influence, in certain circles. There is a power vacuum, in Greyback’s absence, and it’s possible that the pack sees him as someone who could eventually become a sort of...successor. As someone who was sired, not bitten. Chosen.”

If Draco knew one thing about Nott, it was that he hated every second of being a werewolf. He’d fought his instincts and inclinations since the first moon, even when it made little sense. He’d refused restraints before the moon or healing charms after. He’d rather

starve than eat *meat*, much less voluntarily join the pack of wolves whose whole identity was their lycanthropy.

Why would he forego wolfsbane, the very potion he took at the maximum dose every month? Why wouldn't he spend the full moon in the Shrieking Shack or behind a locked door in the dungeons, as he had for months? And why, even at the Dark Lord's behest, would he be transforming with those who saw his condition as a blessing instead of a curse?

Whatever Theo was involved in, it wasn't recruitment. He'd bet his wand on it.

"It doesn't sound like him," Draco maintained. "There's no universe where he'd want to follow in Greyback's footsteps. He really, *really* hates being a werewolf. No offense."

"It may be that the wolf has changed the boy you once knew. I've seen it happen to others." Lupin rubbed at his jaw tiredly, looking very much in need of a shave. "Men older and wiser than Theodore have been swayed by the intoxication of wielding a predator's power. Not just on the full moon, but always."

"Do you know what I've found to be effective against the lure of power?" Draco asked without expecting a response. "Crippling self-hatred. And ever since we were about ten, Theo's had *that* in spades."

"That's the dangerous thing about childhood friends. It's easy to convince yourself that despite the mounting evidence to the contrary, they're still the same boy who finished your crosswords and stuck chewing gum under his mattress...you don't see it coming, when the person you'd take a bullet for turns on you for forty pieces of silver."

"I've got no idea what a *bullet* is," Draco retorted. The cold air stung his face, turning his breath briefly visible. "But I've never deluded myself that I could truly know the motives of Theodore Nott, much

less trust in them unquestioningly. Don't project your betrayals onto me."

"I can only hope my suspicions are only projections. My ghosts, at the very least, are harmless." For a moment, the only sound was that of boots crunching against the frozen undergrowth. His former professor's focus drifted, momentarily stuck in the quicksand of the past, before coming back to himself. "Thank you for your help, Draco. I'll keep an eye out for Nott. Next month's full moon—"

"Do you really think it's wise to come and go on missions as you please?" He interrupted, curling his lip in disdain. "Or are you simply under the impression you are the exception to the rule?" He gestured to the forest, on the other side of the faintly shimmering wards. "I'm certain the rest of us would love a bit of freedom, but you see, we're trying not to get everyone killed."

"The wards around this house are some of the strongest and most complex that I've ever seen," Lupin responded, tilting his head as if he could see the invisible dome surrounding the clearing. "Your aunt has quite the gift."

"I'd be sure to pass along the message," Draco offered sarcastically. "If she didn't fucking hate you. And honestly? I'm beginning to see why. What if you're followed back here?"

"That would be rather difficult," he responded, voice still even but with a slight edge. "I may be the one that leaves this place, but it's the wolf who returns." He took on a rather haunted look, eyes going distant, focused on some point deep in the forest. "Those stupid enough to follow *him* have historically lost their heads."

Draco left soon after, feeling deeply unsettled about the entire conversation, but paused on his way back to the house, turning back to where Lupin was still examining the wards.

"Nott has had a difficult life, perhaps more difficult than I can understand. Not that mine's been a walk in the bloody park. But what

he lacks in strategy, he makes up for in unpredictability. No one thought he'd be able to do it, killing Dumbledore, and then... if you *do* see him," Draco considered, pulling his coat tightly around him. "Watch your back."

---

The entirety of January was spent in a frenzy, electrified by the breakthrough that was the sword of Gryffindor. Every second of Draco's day was occupied by research and planning on how to locate and destroy the remaining horcruxes, out of which Potter was only positive of two. Helga Hufflepuff's enchanted cup, which he'd supposedly seen in Dumbledore's memories, and the Dark Lord's enormous snake, Nagini. According to the late Headmaster's instructions, the third had to be an item of Rowena Ravenclaw's, and like most of Dumbeldore's supposed assistance, it was completely useless.

He barely managed the time and discretion required to brew his cousin the potion he'd promised, secretly setting up his cauldron in the bedroom closet so as not to draw unnecessary attention. Having no recipes or manuals of his own, he consulted one of Hermione's endless supply of books in her extendible bag, a ratty copy of *Advanced Potion Making*.

The odds that the potion he needed would be in the table of contents was slim to none—certainly wouldn't find it in the Hogwarts curriculum—but he'd at least be able to use the ingredient glossary. In a wild stroke of luck, the abortifacient potion was written in on one of the book's index pages, scrawled in spiky handwriting.

The potion was notoriously fickle to brew and unstable to bottle, so when the cauldron's contents finally turned a pale orange, he hurried to get a vial to Tonks before it could spoil.

He found her standing frozen in the kitchen, staring blankly at the whistling kettle.

“Reckon that’s just about boiling,” Draco said, reaching over to switch off the stove.

She jumped, jarred abruptly from whatever train of thought she’d been paralyzed by, and pressed a hand to her heart.

“Merlin, you walk quietly.”

He held out the vial wordlessly. Tonks gave him a grateful nod and wasted no time, uncorking the vial with her teeth and swallowing its contents without hesitation. After a moment, her hair turned a flurry of different colors before landing on a cool blonde, a few shades darker than his own.

“Alright?” He asked her, checking her visage for signs of accidental poisoning. Her pallor looked fine and she wasn’t vomiting up black bile...it seemed the measurements he’d used were accurate.

“Fine.” Tonks grimaced at the aftertaste. “I ended things with Lupin, for good. You were right, it wasn’t doing either of us any favors.”

Draco snorted, as he remembered using...harsher vocabulary.

“Cheers, then,” he replied, the wrong person to have this conversation with in any of its many possible iterations. Whatever discomfort he felt must have been on his face, because Tonks took in his expression and let out a huff of laughter.

“Alright, you’ve stopped me from accidentally burning down the house,” Tonks said, eyes twinkling. “Go on then, leave me to have my think.”

He lingered only long enough to discern any latent negative reaction that could be evidence of a misbrew, of which there was blessedly none. It seemed a rather private situation, and anyway, he was shit at comforting witches, or anyone at all for that matter.

When Draco returned to his room, he found it already occupied by a nosy little sneak, sifting through the contents of his closet. He must have left the door unlocked in his haste.

“Wormwood, salvia, licorice root,” Granger noted, working her way through his ingredients store. She made a wafting motion with her hand, inhaling the residual fumes from the now empty cauldron. “Mint, pennyroyal, and calendula. Is there something you’re... *expecting*, Draco?”

“Very funny,” he groaned, realizing this was a stipulation of being in close proximity with Hermione Granger; she didn’t miss a damn thing. Between her predilection for solving puzzles and their revelatory bond, he’d never be able to keep a secret again. “I’m just helping someone with a problem. Not my problem,” he hurried to explain, lest she get the wrong idea. “Their problem.”

“I know,” she said with a small smile, like she found it funny he’d need to clarify. “I caught Tonks vomiting in a vase in the hallway two mornings in a row. I won’t say anything, it’s none of my business.”

“As if that’s ever stopped you,” Draco huffed, vanishing the mess from his brewing with a flick of his wand. He was still cross with her about withholding her knowledge of the locket. Not because of his ego, but because it was reckless and dangerous. Possibly a little bit because of his ego.

“It has stopped me,” she disagreed quietly. “I may not agree with some people’s boundaries, but I do respect them. Even if I think they’re completely asinine.”

“Oh, not this again,” Draco groaned, picking up on her unsubtle allusions to the night he destroyed the horcrux, and how he’d refused to discuss what the *thing* in the locket had said to him ever since.

He’d asked that they never speak of it again, which proved to be something all Gryffindors seemed to have trouble with, especially the

ones he'd been stuck with. This was not, in his mind, an unreasonable request. In fact, any Slytherin would have immediately understood, and he wouldn't have to suffer the well-meaning looks he'd been getting ever since he'd swung the sword. The cornerstone of their house was pinched repression, and sometimes, it came in handy.

Instead, he had Potter, who for some reason kept clapping him on the back whenever they passed in the corridor, and Weasley, who, despite his lingering animosity, had started addressing Draco as *mate*. And then there was Granger, who wouldn't shove him over the cliff of his boundary, but certainly push up right up to its edge and force him to look over.

It wasn't that he didn't appreciate her concern—any other time, he'd have relished in it, played it up—but more so that the grisly scenes the horcrux showed him were born from a pit of his worst fears, the bottom dwelling detritus of his self-loathing.

It was one thing, to be exposed so fully in front of Potter and Weasley. But they didn't know him, didn't know the significance of what the horcrux showed. *She* knew him, better than most. Knew that after a year of being used as a chess pawn by more powerful wizards, Draco *hated* losing his tenuous grasp on the controls of his life, loathed feeling dread or uncertainty. Fear—especially in its most blunted, obvious state—made one weak, and Draco didn't want her to see him that way. Powerless. Full of doubt.

Especially when it came to her. How he *felt* about her.

"I know you don't want to talk about it."

"You're right," he said sharply. "I don't."

"But I can feel everything you do, Draco. You—"

"I know how I feel, thanks."



“You are the biggest pain in the arse.” She moved so that she blocked the room’s exit, effectively boxing him in against his dresser.

“I know your chosen strategy for dealing with your emotions may be bottling them up until they explode and then going on a rampage, but I actually believe in handling your feelings like an adult. Which is to say, *talking about them*. Especially after something traumatic.”

“That wasn’t traumatic, Granger. That was mortifying. How’d you like your worst thoughts narrated by the Dark Lord with an audience of your two least favorite school chums and the witch you fancy? Does that sound like something you’d like to *deal* with?”

“I already have,” she cried, jabbing him in the chest with an accusatory finger. “I had you poking around my head all last year! Do you think I enjoyed having my nemesis watch every occasion I made a fool of myself? A constant reel of all the nights I cried myself to sleep? Do you think I liked having you see every vulnerability, every mistake I’d ever made? Especially after I’d started feeling this way about you? It was like being flayed alive. That was the only reason my occlumency got better. I couldn’t fucking bear it.”

Draco knew this rationally, but he hadn’t actually *realized* the extent to which his presence in her head had been difficult for her.

He opened his mouth—to apologize or perhaps, to insert his foot, he wasn’t honestly sure—but she silenced him by reaching up and yanking his collar, pulling him down until they were eye level.

For a moment, he thought she was going to kiss him, but instead she inhaled sharply, as if garnering all her resolve.

“I love you,” she said simply and he stopped breathing. “I didn’t mean to. I fought it every step of the way. But I do, Draco. *I do* .”

For once, Draco Malfoy—known soliloquy enthusiast, master of the clever quip and the offensive limerick—was struck completely and totally silent.

“There,” Hermione declared, chest heaving. “I said it.”

She stared defiantly up at him, a manic sort of triumph in her eyes, as if this were a competition he hadn’t realized they were having, and she had won.

When, after a long moment, he still hadn’t said anything, she wilted slightly, releasing his collar. But before she could draw back completely, he had one of his hands around her waist, using the other to cup the side of her face.

“You are a *madwoman*,” he said, flexing his fingers against her waist as she made to draw away. “Your mind is terrifying. You trap people in jars and plot to overthrow governments and wipe the memories of criminals without hesitation. You face the prospect of death with your head held high. You see the good in every broken, helpless thing. You—”

Draco’s voice dropped several levels, low and deadly serious.

“You are the most singular witch I’ve ever known and if we die tomorrow, I swear— I will find you in the next lifetime and in every one that follows.”

Her breath hitched in her lungs. He could hear it, feel it under his own ribs, accompanied by the warm, golden glow he sometimes noted and now had the name for.

“You’re mine, Granger.” He ran his thumb gently across her lower lip, tracing the curve of her mouth. “In every version of this world, you are mine.”

He kissed her because he wanted to. Because he could. Because it was late January and freezing, and she ignited something in him that was hotter and more insistent than any flame. He kissed her and kissed her and only stopped when he ran out of air.

The beast in Draco chest—the covetous Black side of him—roared in triumph.

“I love you,” he panted. “If that wasn’t completely clear.”

She peeked up at him through dark lashes. The look in her amber-flecked eyes pulled at a loose cord in his heart until it was strung taut. Plucked it like an instrument’s string, filling his chest with its single, bright note.

“I know,” she said, smiling, and unable to help himself, he kissed her again.

---

“You must know *something*, ” Potter insisted, before yawning loudly for the millionth time.

The early morning light poured through the drawing room window, a gentle cascade of gold spilling onto the polished wooden floor. Illuminating the delicate dust motes that floated lazily in the air, turning them into tiny, glittering stars. The muted winter sun seemed to linger reverently at the horizon, savoring the stillness of the early hour, as if time itself had stopped to pay tribute to the dawn.

They were up before any of the others. Draco—who’d been aghast to realize Potter couldn’t shield his mind *at all* — had insisted on lessons while no one else was awake to distract him, in an attempt to give their one hope at vanquishing the Dark Lord a crash course in occlumency.

He’d expected Potter to be a poor student. He hadn’t expected him to be completely and utterly hopeless. Draco wasn’t even sure he had a mind to organize, just a tangle of emotions and impulses and vendettas and needs. Being inside his head was like reading the mind of a chimera, ever shifting between opposing beastly conditions.

Instead of focusing, Potter was using the opportunity to hound him about the horcruxes, his favorite and only topic as of late. He harped on and on about how if they were to follow the Dark Lord's pattern of unknowingly bestowing pieces of his soul to his lieutenants for stowing or safekeeping— such as with Lucius Malfoy and the diary or Regulus Black and the locket—then the most likely suspect was undoubtedly the Dark Lord's right hand, Bellatrix Lestrange.

"She's your aunt," Potter maintained stubbornly, as Draco massaged his temples after another attempt in the gladiator's area that the Gryffindor boy had in place of a brain. "Do you remember her ever saying anything to you about it?"

"You're lucky she's not the one teaching you occlumency," Draco gritted. "She liked to motivate me with the Cruciatus from time to time. To be fair, I'm considering it—"

"Come on, Malfoy, think! Did she ever mention anything about an artifact...or maybe some sort of honor she was given? A token of loyalty?"

"Bellatrix is a lunatic," he explained grimly, thinking about the time she'd spent in the Manor after breaking out of prison, until she'd returned to claim the Black family seat in Gloucestershire. "Fifteen years in Azkaban will break anyone, and by all accounts, my aunt didn't have a whole lot of sanity to start with. She made us take out every ninety-third brick in the manor, because that was her prisoner's number. I once watched her kill a man with a flick of her wand because he sneezed without covering his mouth. There is no rhyme or reason to anything she does, she's...fully unpredictable."

"It's a cup," a frail voice offered, one that Draco had not heard outside of her bedroom in months. He startled, elbowing Potter out of the way, so he could see his mother, standing upright in the threshold, observing him with shockingly clear eyes.

"Mother?"

"It's a cup," she repeated, entering the room with tentative steps, as if any movement could cost her her balance. He immediately moved to help, placing her hand in the crook of his elbow and guiding her to sit. She was wearing a floaty white nightdress that came down to her ankles and a quilted dressing gown. Her hair was clean and unbound, dark blond waves falling around her shoulders.

She sat elegantly in the high-backed chair, exuding a quiet grace. As the light from the windows fell across her cheekbones, she looked for the first time in a long while like Narcissa Malfoy. Like his mother.

If Draco didn't know better, he'd be informing Hermione to call off the Americans, but as it was, he knew these lucid moments were only ever temporary. No matter how good of a morning this was, she'd be taking a portkey to the States in a matter of days.

He turned his head casually, not wanting to alarm his mother, in order to catch Potter's eye. *A cup*. The other wizard met Draco's gaze excitedly, undoubtedly preparing a barrage of follow-up questions.

"Er, hello Mrs. Malfoy," he said, far too loudly, as if Narcissa was having issues with her ears rather than with her magic. "How are you feeling?"

"Pipe down, Potter," he said pointedly. "No need to shout like an imbecile, she can hear you perfectly fine."

"My prickly little dragon." His mother smiled his way beatifically — somewhere, a chorus of nightingales surely burst into song — "Always coming to my defense."

She turned to Potter, who was suddenly standing very straight, the picture of propriety. "You asked if my sister was ever given an heirloom by the Dark Lord. She was."

He drew a sharp, excited inhale, ignoring the glare Draco sent his way. "Do you remember what it looked like?" He blurted. "Or where

she may have kept it?"

"You don't have to concern yourself with the horribly rude boy, Mother." Draco said, making furious faces in Potter's direction when she wasn't looking. "Please, don't overencumber yourself."

"It's alright, Draco." She leaned back in her chair, a thoughtful hand on her cheek, notably missing its ring finger. "I remember. It was the same night he gave the diary to Lucius, just a ratty old thing, but it felt...for many years, we kept it locked in one of the family vaults. I couldn't bear to have it in the house." His mother shuddered, eyes going momentarily unfocused, before coming back to herself. "The Dark Lord gave Bellatrix a handsome gold cup, supposedly Helga Hufflepuff's personal chalice although that would have to be authenticated, and he said we were never to tell or show them to anyone. He told us we would shepherd in a new, glorious generation of magic...Bella, Rodolphus, Lucius and I. And we believed him."

Potter opened his mouth to press further, but he gave a subtle but definitive shake of his head towards the door. He had no idea how fragile his mother was, and even his presence could be enough to ruin whatever rare state she'd found herself in. This was more conversation than Narcissa had managed in months...things she would have never told him before.

"Draco," she addressed him suddenly, turning to him with the piercing stare he associated with being caught nicking sweets from the kitchen. "You're going to try and stop him, aren't you?"

Luckily, Potter seemed to realize the familial nature of the moment, and murmured his excuses, before slipping from the room. Draco weighed his options, and decided on honesty.

"Yes," he answered softly. "I am."

Draco had never known how closely his mother had followed the Dark Lord, never really known what she believed and what she

simply went along with for his father's sake. All these years, she'd kept her cards so close to her chest.

"I was afraid of that," she replied. A heaviness settled in her expression, and the faintest crease formed between her brows, a silent trace of the weight she carried. Regret flickered there, deep and unspoken. "I have long feared that you would one day walk the same path as I did, dutifully ignoring the shadows in my periphery. Caring more about what was expected of me than creating expectations of my own. And then, I saw you harden like your father and I begged the gods for a world in which you'd one day be allowed to be soft...to be free. But perhaps you aren't like either of us. Perhaps you, my son, are your own mercy."

A smile hovered at the edges of her lips, soft and bittersweet, yet it never reached her eyes. There, behind the faint curve, lingered a quiet ache. Barely noticeable, but unmistakable to Draco, who knew her heart. It was the smile of someone who had learned to hide sorrow behind grace.

He wondered if he ever would know her fully. If she'd tell him what she knew to be true and what she questioned or refused. If he'd get to speak with her about everything they'd gotten wrong or argue over what was still right, discuss where duty and honor and tradition fell on that spectrum. If he'd ever get the opportunity.

He clenched his fists at the thought, suddenly quite angry that so much had been taken from them. Not the Manor or the influence.  
*Time.*

"Thank you," Draco said suddenly, taking her hands in his own. He hadn't thought of what to say, just let the words fall from his tongue as they came to him, truer than an arrow, pointed due north. "Thank you for shielding me from it for so long, for protecting me when I couldn't protect myself. But I'm stronger now, Mother. I can take care of us both."

“I’m your mother, Draco,” she said gently, as if he’d missed something obvious. “I will always protect you.”

And then, as suddenly as she’d reappeared, Narcissa closed her eyes, slipping back into the safety of her own head, and his mother as he remembered her was gone.

---

They came that night.

If Draco had been. If maybe. Or possibly. If only.

It didn’t matter. All those words would prove useless at dusk, as the sky struggled valiantly to hold onto the last of its light, casting long blue shadows over the clearing. When the dark finally swept the forest, a terrible tearing noise sent the house’s walls shuddering, its occupants calling out in alarm. A noise Draco had never heard before.

He leaped from where he was reading in the study, and raced to window. When he looked out into the thick night, he saw shadows moving unmistakably at the edge of the property. Figures—cloaked, hooded—emerged from the tree line, their silhouettes rippling as the shimmering barrier shuddered and tore, like burning pits of parchment.

*No*, he thought. Nothing else, simply *no, no, no*, denial tolling through his head like abbey bells.

The wards of Tonks House had fallen.

---

---

- I wanted to post this on Hermione's birthday but instead...I'm posting on my birthday!! To celebrate, she is PEAK Virgo in this chapter: saying I love you in the most aggressive way possible.



- Surprise! The Horcrux has been there all along. Hermione realized who R.A.B. was and this set the chain of events into motion faster than in the canon, thus giving them the opportunity to catch Mundungus before Umbridge did. Obviously, she feels strongly about wizards taking advantage of elves, which Mundungus finds out the hard way.

- In the canon it's never addressed that Avada Kedavra can, in fact, kill a horcrux (it kills the one in Harry, after all). But yes, it's on the very short list.

- Draco and Hermione are more alike than they care to admit: she'd sacrifice her well being by carrying the locket, he'd sacrifice his by using the Killing curse if he needed to. So yeah, their need to protect each other is always going to be at odds.

- I've got a lot of love for Ron and Harry, but Draco doesn't. The fact that Harry attempted the Killing Curse (even though, like our boy, he failed) earned him some of Draco's respect. And this is Ron's big moment regarding the basilisk (was it a coincidence, that Snape put that little fact on his exam?). They certainly won't be best friends moving forward, but Ron and Harry saw Draco a way they'd never seen him before: vulnerable. They understand him a little better, after the horcrux.

- When Lupin is talking to Draco about Theo, he's thinking, of course, about Peter Pettigrew and how boys betray each other.

- Don't tell me you love me. Tell me that 'I am the most singular witch you've ever known and if we die tomorrow, you swear you'll find me in the next lifetime and in every one that follows.' [In the same vein, this chapter's song is We're in Love by boygenius](#)

- I love you all. Going to pop a bottle of champagne now. See you for the next chapter, "The Tale of the Three Sisters"

---

# The Tale of the Three Sisters

## Chapter 39: The Tale of the Three Sisters

---

This chapter contains torture and serious violence that may be upsetting to readers (no SA). Please read with care.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

When Draco was young, his mother used to tell him a bedtime story with which she had taken certain creative liberties:

*Long ago, three sisters of a noble house were traveling across the countryside to wed their intended husbands— three wizards, brothers of the purest lineage— when their carriage came to an unexpected stop. The eldest sister, who was famed for her beauty and volatile temperament, climbed out first to see what had the thestrals at a standstill, only to find an old woman standing in the middle of the road, selling roses. She introduced herself as Fate and asked if the three sisters would like to know their fortune in exchange for a piece of gold.*

*The youngest sister, who was a romantic and foolish, asked if her intended would be her true love, and Fate gave her a rose and told her it would be as she wished.*

*The middle sister, a pragmatist seeking to thwart Death, asked if her life would be long and healthy, and Fate gave her a rose and told her too, that it would be as she wished.*

*The eldest sister, the keeper of the coin purse, did not take stock in prophecy or providence and refused a fortune from a dirty beggar woman, withholding the promised gold. When Fate demanded*

payment, the eldest sister laughed and insisted the old crone move from the path so that they could be on their way.

Fate, insulted by the eldest sister's dismissal, pricked a crooked finger with one of the rose thorns, and used her blood to curse all three girls, prophesying that the fortunes they'd sought would one day lead to each of their demises. And the eldest daughter, Fate warned, who had not received a prophecy, would be cursed to never know the thing she craved most.

Soon after, the youngest sister was wed to the most handsome of the brothers and served dutifully as his wife, her love blinding her to his faults. One day, the handsome brother, a notorious gambler, made a wager with a dangerous wizard, betting more gold than he had in his coffers. When he lost, the wizard in question came to collect, deciding that if the handsome brother could not pay in gold, he would pay in blood. The wizard killed the youngest sister to satisfy the debt, and the first of Fate's fortunes was fulfilled.

The middle sister, who had been promised a long and healthy life, married and bore two sons to the most talented brother, a musician. He could tame even the wildest of magical beasts with his harp; his song enchanted dragons and bewitched chimeras. One day, he happened upon a mantichore in the forest and when he went to pluck his instrument, he found the strings of his harp snapped. Helpless, he was devoured. The middle sister, left to care for her children alone, became poor and destitute and when her sons fell sick with dragon pox, she begged Fate to restore their health and give her their sickness instead. When Fate refused, she asked Death to make it so she fell sick and died in their place. Death, unhappy with the middle sister's attempt to outsmart him, refused her pleas. And so when the middle sister's sons succumbed to illness, her fortune also came true.

The eldest sister married the Heir, the son who was set to inherit the vast estate. Neither handsome or beguiling, he was a braggart prone to falling deep into his cups. A drunken lout who wasted both his gold and his influence, as the eldest sister's animosity towards her

*husband grew. Eager to be rid of him, she laced his wine with poison, but that night, even after draining his flagon, he did not die. Then, she paid assassins to slide a dagger twixt his ribs, and still, her husband did not die.*

*Finally, the eldest sister demanded her husband set her free, so that she might marry someone more fitting of her station. Her husband agreed that he would dissolve their binding marriage vows, if she completed a woven tapestry of their family tree without the use of magic. The eldest sister agreed, spending her days hunched over the loom with pricked fingers. But whatever she spun by day, her husband would secretly undo by night, leaving the tapestry perpetually unfinished and the eldest sister questioning her own sanity.*

*For many years, the eldest sister tried futilely to finish the tapestry by hand, but her fingers grew brittle and twisted and left her unable to weave. Despite her promise that she would not use magic, one day she took out her wand and completed the tapestry, laid it at the feet of her husband and demanded her reward. To her surprise, her husband agreed, severing their marriage vows. But as soon as they were unbound, the husband cast her out of the Manor and onto the street, penniless.*

*As she made her way along the path, she caught a glimpse of her reflection in the nearby stream: after years at the loom, her skin was grey and wrinkled and her beauty distorted.*

*Distraught, she called upon Fate, who arrived in the form of a young woman traveling on horseback. The eldest sister begged for her former life back, having seen the error in her arrogance.*

*And Fate— Fate laughed and told the eldest sister to get out of her way.*

This was, of course, his mother's version of a lesson in morality: a warning of the dangers of gambling and foolishness and the importance of paying your debts. A meditation on the dangers of

pride. And most importantly, a reminder that Draco would carry with him for the rest of his days: *be careful of who you dismiss, lest they prove to be a worthy adversary.*

---

Out in the shattered night, cloaked figures advanced from the edges of the forest, their outlines barely discernible against the dark sky. The wind whipped through the trees, carrying the distant echo of the tearing wards, crackling in the air. At the center of the clearing, Tonks House stood alone, its windows gleaming faintly with protective charms.

Inside, Draco tore through the halls, raising the alarm. Hermione, undoubtedly sensing his dismay, emerged from a hastily opened door, with Potter and Weasley at her side.

“The wards?”

He gave them a sharp nod, confirming their fears, and charged down the staircase towards the threat with the trio hot on his heels, ducking periodically to dodge shattering glass as offensive spells battered the walls and blew out the windows.

The Death Eaters didn’t have to bother with a full on charge, not while their targets were trapped inside the house waiting to be gradually picked off like swatted flies.

“How’d they find us?” Potter cried, yanking Weasley out of the way as a bombarda blew a hole through the roof a few feet from where his ginger head had been. “How’d they get through the wards? They’d need muggleborn blood—”

“Less hypothesizing, more running, Potter,” Draco snarled, casting an impenetrable shield charm over their heads, protecting them from falling debris. From the ground floor, he could hear voices, calling out defensive maneuvers as the house groaned and shook under the barrage of spells.

When he chanced a look out of one of the shattered windows, Draco caught a glimpse of the clearing. Six, maybe seven figures, all cloaked and masked. Having been on the other side of the fight, the number of combatants told him two things in regards to their strategy: first, that this attack was most likely part of a raid, one of the missions routinely set up to infiltrate and destroy Order safe houses, typically consisting of a few senior members and a handful of newer recruits.

Which brought him to his second realization, that there was no way the Death Eaters knew that Potter himself was inside. If they had, there would be a lot more than half a dozen foot soldiers to deal with.

Was it possible that the invaders had stumbled upon Tonks House without knowing who was hidden behind its walls? If that were so, how had they broken through the incredibly exacting wards that required muggleborn blood, given willingly? And who amongst the lingering, besieged muggleborns in Great Britain would have ever offered it?

“Draco! We need to go!” Granger urged him, burnt honey eyes wild with adrenaline and terror as she yanked him away from the window. “Your mother.”

Upon seeing the wards fall, Narcissa had been his first thought. As had been happening more and more, they had a full conversation in only a few words: under Lupin’s watchful eye, the house’s occupants had practiced evacuations, but never under the threat of Death Eaters at their doorstep. There was a strict hierarchy in place for who was to evacuate first in case of Anti-Apparition wards, via the few, precious portkeys kept by the Order for emergencies such as this one: Potter, for obvious reasons, and then the innocent, those who wouldn’t be able to defend themselves should it come down to that—namely, Narcissa.

The timing was so heinous it nearly convinced Draco of the existence of a higher power, one who was hellbent on smiting him for the sins of a past life. His mother wasn’t scheduled to leave for

treatment in New York yet; *that* portkey wouldn't activate until the following day. The attack felt a particularly cruel twist of fate, a twisting of the proverbial knife. He'd been so close to getting her to safety and now—

And then, there was Hermione, whose proximity to harm made him feel *insane*. He couldn't handle losing her, couldn't survive it—

"I'm not leaving!" Hermione insisted, reading the look on his face, no doubt away from what Draco was about to insist: *leave, run, save yourself. You're worth more than any of them*. Blasted witch. Didn't she realize he couldn't focus, couldn't fight properly, when fear for her wellbeing was invading his thoughts? "I'm not leaving you or your mother. I made a vow, Draco, and I very well intend on keeping it!"

He could feel it through the bond, the pulse of pure, undiluted fear. For the first time, he was unsure of which side it originated from.

Suddenly, a powerful shockwave rocked the building. The ceiling groaned and cracked; a sliver of the night sky visible, as plaster and debris rained down. They staggered down the staircase but didn't falter. they descended the staircase, narrowly sidestepping the fallout of shattered window panes.

"We need reinforcements," Weasley panted, vaulting the banister with surprising ability. His mouth was set in a hard line, his expression worlds away from his usual slack-jawed idiocy. "We need to call the Order—" He cut off, struck by the chaos unravelling before him.

The sitting room had turned into a melee: his aunt and uncle— no doubt the first to feel the disturbance in the wards— were already in defensive positions, with Andromeda covering an injured Ted as she fired curses out the shattered bay windows of the sitting room. Blood soaked his shirt; he was covered in dust and plaster, having clearly been caught in an explosion.

His cousin and Lupin were similarly occupied, casting nasty looking spells before ducking and rolling to take cover as they received jets of green light in return. Killing Curses, illuminated their grim, determined faces.

“Get Potter out of here,” Tonks cried in Draco’s direction, looking over her shoulder for a split second as she fired curse after curse from her position, crouched behind furniture. “They’ve erected the Anti-Apparition wards, you’ll have to use the portkeys.”

The revelation, although expected, was a punch in the gut: Anti-Apparition wards meant that there was no help coming. The Order, even if mobilized, would be unable to permeate the perimeter. Only Marked Death Eaters would be able to come in or out.

Tonks took over defense as Lupin paused his onslaught to toss a small drawstring bag Draco’s way. He caught it, seeker reflexes going into overdrive, and tipped out its contents to find two glass marbles: the portkeys, both embedded with the locations of an undisclosed safe house.

He turned to Granger, his jaw set. There would be no Gryffindor heroics from her, not if he could help it.

“I’ll see to Potter,” he said shortly. “Just get my mother out, okay? Don’t wait for me, I’ll be—”

“If you say fine, I will gut you like a fish,” Hermione snarled, refusing battlefield parting niceties. She strode to him with a blazing look on her face and snatched the second portkey from his palm. “Offer me another useless platitude like I’m some simpering fool and there won’t be enough of you left for the Death Eaters to string up.”

“Yes, dear,” he said, his sarcasm undermined by the warmth he felt towards the witch before him. She kissed him once, hard, and flew back up the stairs to save his mother.



The chaos didn't stop long enough for them to have a proper goodbye, as the door ripped from its hinges. Draco heard the rush of a bombardia maxima barreling towards the house's unprotected entrance, threatening to collapse the roof from within.

Time was momentarily suspended as he threw himself towards the open door frame. He heard his own voice calling out, "*Protego!*" —

During one of their training sessions, Tonks had told Draco the story of her first mission, a reconnaissance attempt turned firefight from years prior. *I was so bloody scared I nearly shat myself. Couldn't think straight, could hardly breathe. It's mad the way the training takes over, she reminisced. For a moment, I froze, but then something just kicked me into gear and I was fighting. Don't remember a thing until we were back at the Ministry, when Moody dunked my head into a bucket of freezing water trying to get me to snap out of it. She barked out a laugh, teeth bared. My Auror cohort called me Catatontonks for weeks.*

Draco hadn't understood it then. He'd known frozen terror well: the blank fear of every audience with the Dark Lord, a dull roar that swept over his senses. He remembered the feeling of sheer impotence, standing before his master and awaiting punishment. Wanting with every fiber of his being to *flee*.

Now, as the wards tore around Tonks House and offensive spells lit up the night sky over the clearing, he realized in an instant: he was no longer the boy who'd knelt and accepted torture. Who fled the fight, who feared retribution. Without realizing, his first instinct had shifted, no longer urging him to run from danger, but to fling himself in its way.

The only reason he and his shield were not blown into the stratosphere was because apparently, he wasn't the only one with inclinations towards martyrdom: both he and Potter had instinctively cast their shield charms at the same moment, which had miraculous effect of lessening the brunt of the explosion as they were blasted back into the hall.

Draco landed hard on his shoulder; distantly, Potter became a bruised tangle of limbs in his peripheral vision. He had no love for the imbecile, but had somehow found himself firmly on the side of the war that required his former nemesis to *live*, and so in a sudden stroke of urgency, Draco disarmed the dark haired boy.

Potter, in predictable turn, lunged for his wand, kicking and snarling like some kind of beast. Draco held his own, having been well-trained in breaking up catfights between Pansy and whoever was stupid enough to step into her crosshairs.

“Gimme my wand—”

“Stop fighting me, you useless lump!”

The Gryffindor boy strained wildly as he got him in a headlock, only for the skinny bastard to slip free; Potter was like a bull, insisting on running directly into the slaughterhouse. Too stupid for Draco to reason with, too stupid for him to yell at, and yet, he found himself yelling. The idiot was going to get himself killed trying to protect everyone around him— or worse, captured without a lick of occlumency to use as defense—and then what?

“We don’t have time for this! Just take the fucking out, Potter!”

“I’m not leaving anyone behind,” Potter yelled back. “Not even you, you berk.”

With a snarl of frustration, Draco took matters into his own hands.

“Have it your way then,” he gritted, disentangling himself enough to kick Potter squarely in the chest, knocking the wind out of him and leaving him collapsed and gasping. Draco had never been particularly skilled in hand to hand combat, but he certainly hadn’t been scrawny, and Tonks’ training sessions had both made him stronger and taught him to fight dirty.

He moved quickly, placed his wand at the boy's temple just to the left of the angry lightning-shaped scar. Outside, the Death Eaters pressed their attack, surrounding the house. A roaring sound filled the air as something Draco would not see was lit ablaze.

"Don't you dare—" Potter wheezed, sounding utterly betrayed, too shocked to even struggle before Draco struck, felling him with a murmured stunner, before tucking the famed phoenix-feather wand back in his robes.

"Oi!" Weasley cried, having managed to surpass the debris and smoke to catch up to them, hot on Potter's tail like the loyal mutt he was. "What are you doing to him!" His tone was accusatory, probably suspecting Draco of being in on the attack in some way, part of the collusion that had led to the wards falling. He almost couldn't blame him for the association; he was the only defected Death Eater in the area and thus the most obvious of suspects. *Almost.*

"Not your mate anymore, am I, Weasley? Oh, how quickly you change your tune. You can rest assured knowing that I'm saving your pea-brained boyfriend's life."

Draco tipped the remaining marble from the pouch and tapped it with his wand until it began to glow a silvery-blue. He sent it arcing through the air, until it flew into its intended location: Weasley's shirt pocket.

"The cup," he snapped with urgency. "Last night in the study, Mother said they were hidden in the family vaults—"

"What are you going on about?" Weasley looked at Draco with wide eyes and a furrowed brow, as if he were speaking in tongues. "What cup? What vaults?"

Beneath them, the floor rumbled with some distant blast. Not distant enough for Draco to dither on and on.

“Potter will know what it means,” Draco insisted, refusing to waste time explaining. “Tell him when he wakes up from his nap.” He conjured a sort of lasso just as the marble began to emit a shrill whirring sound, and sent it flying, tying Potter firmly to Weasley’s lanky figure.

“Hang on, what about Hermione?” The red-head called frantically, finally realizing this was in fact, an evacuation of Potter, and not an attempt on his life. “We can’t leave her behind—”

“She’ll be right behind you,” Draco avowed, as Weasley started to vibrate. “She’s with my mother.”

Just as the tightly bound pair disappeared with a flash, smoke filled the hall and a thin, cloaked figure appeared in the ruined hallway. The Death Eaters had breached the perimeter, which meant—

*Dead*, a horrid voice in Draco’s brain piped up, howling. *That means someone is dead.*

The figure kept his wand raised as he threw back his hood, familiar dark curls ruffling from the movement. He was not wearing a mask.

The sounds of other duels in the crumbling house, the shouts and curses and screams, faded into nothing as Draco felt all the blood in his body rush into his head, consumed by an anger so corporeal it threatened to take his body and run with it.

It was the incomparable burn of complete and utter betrayal.

“Stop in the name of the Dark Lord! Surrender and we’ll—” The figure stopped abruptly, pale, elfin features screwing up in horror as he realized exactly who was standing before him. “*Draco?!*”

The cornerstone in the mystery of the attack fell into place. Suddenly, Draco knew how the wards he once thought impenetrable had fallen.

“Nott,” he snarled, firing off a bright streak of purple flame, a vicious acid hex that barely missed its target. “You should never have come back here.”

His former housemate had fresh scars along his face, undoubtedly claw marks. He looked hardened, dangerous even, and all together a stranger. Friend, enemy, walking Faustian curse— Theodore Nott had proved Draco wrong at every turn.

“Back!?” Nott barked, like the very thought was insane, but his outrage was interrupted by Draco’s next curse. One Nott was familiar with.

*“Sectumsempra!”*

Nott dodged the inky jet of magic with inhuman speed—bloody indestructible werewolves— but the magnitude of the curse set a dangerous precedent, as the two exchanged rapid blows, wands moving like extensions of their body’s reach. Each deflected curse sent furniture flying and scorched the once pristine walls, shattering photographs and tearing through drapes.

Nott was on the defense, blocking curses and sending stunners. Draco, on the other hand, was out for blood. He remembered the days they were paired, practicing dueling in Defense class; Theo had always been evasive, while Draco relied on brute force. It was a dynamic they fell into easily, despite everything else that had changed.

“Fuck!” Nott chanted as he danced out of the way, as Draco blew a chunk out of the staircase. “I didn’t know you were here! I didn’t know who was inside, Draco, I swear! I led them here because I thought it was just an Order hideout! You can fucking look in my head if you don’t believe me, just *please*—”

If he weren’t blinded by anger, he might question why Nott wasn’t trying as hard as Draco was to injure or kill, why he was bothering with pleas and babbling explanations in the first place. But at that

moment, he couldn't see beyond the padlocked room that had enclosed his head and heart, where all the lamps were lit with the small, bitter flame of vengeance.

He blasted Nott into the wall and heard a sickening crunch.

Theo struggled and ultimately failed to get to his feet, curling into a crumpled heap amidst the debris.

"I'm going to kill you," Draco informed him, and a part of him— the part that had relished in the sheer power of Dark magic— was telling the truth. "You traitorous fucking *scum*. I kept your secrets, I brewed your potion so that you'd stop trying to tear your own head off every full moon—"

"I didn't know!" Nott kept shouting, like the mantra or a prayer, looking up at Draco's wandpoint with desperate eyes. He coughed, spitting out a mouthful of saliva and blood. "He looked in my head, Draco! I thought I'd found Lupin, I thought...I thought you were *dead* —"

"Thinking has never been your strong suit, has it Theo?" His voice was foreign, colder and deadlier than he'd ever heard himself sound. "I fucking *believed* you. I thought you of all people knew what it was to be bound by that lunatic, to be forced to your knees. You've made me into quite a fool. *I've proven to be remarkably hard to kill. I'll survive without you.*" He barked out a mirthless, bitter laugh as he mimicked Nott's parting words. "I entrusted you with my mother, who cares for you like her own *son*—"

Draco's voice broke, overlaid with fury. Around them, duels raged, screams and cackling laughter and the woosh of vicious curses echoing through the house that had only hours prior been his sanctuary. The walls shook, unable to contain it all. And at the center, Draco Malfoy raised his wand, acrid smoke in his lungs and something unforgivable on his tongue.

“Your mother?” Nott cried. There was a trail of rust leaking from one nostril, running into his bloody mouth, making him look positively wolflike. “Draco, your mother is dead! After you disappeared, I thought you were too!”

Draco hesitated, realizing too late that Granger’s formidable talent for obliviation had done its job *too* well. She’d wiped Theodore Nott’s memory of their escape to Tonks House until it was sparkling clean, so much so that it had allowed him to lead the Death Eaters to the very door where he had deposited them, months prior. And Draco—who had always been supposed to return in his capacity as a spy, who was to ensure *this* would never happen—had selfishly remained at her side, not realizing the consequences of his choice.

He was always too late, in every sense of the phrase. Too late to the truth, too late to protect those he loved, too late to defend himself when he felt the sharp jab of a wand into his back, right between his shoulder blades.

A familiar redolence permeated the air, the smell of carrion and powdery opium and the sickly sweet undercurrent of rotten vegetation.

“Give me your wand, nephew.” He knew that voice. Dread curled in his stomach as he placed the tone, sinister and familiar in equal measure. He heard it in his nightmares sometimes: *Close your mind, Draco. Stop screaming and get up and face me, you weakling.*

He looked at Nott with the utmost disgust and spat on the floor, inches from his figure. Theo winced, but Draco, held at wandpoint by one of the most dangerous witches alive, could not bring himself to feel an iota of pity. Nott may not have known who resided in the safe house, but he’d brought his bloodthirsty aunt along with clear intentions: to wipe the earth of its occupants.

The threat prodded into his kidney, and what else could he do? Die with his back turned? He lowered his wand slowly, until it clattered to the floor.

“Nice and slow now, that’s very good. We wouldn’t want you accidentally cursing *family*, would we?”

He felt undoubtedly dirty fingernails dig into his shoulders as his *other* aunt draped herself against him in a perverse embrace.

“I’m very disappointed, Draco,” Bellatrix Lestrange murmured, her hot breath on the side of his neck. “I always knew you were a coward, but this— running into the arms of the traitorous filth I once called my sister? Hiding in a stolen family home, amongst her abominable brood, tainted by the mixed blood of her filthy Muggle husband? What ever would dear Lucius say.”

She sighed, wrenching him around to face her. The fight was evident in her appearance; robes torn and matted curls askew. He clenched his jaw and looked past her, gaze unwavering, refusing to meet her bloodshot eyes.

“Do you know what happens when you lie down with mangy crups, Draco?”

He would not beg for his life. He swore it to himself, all while knowing the promise to be impossible. Under enough exposure to the Cruciatus, even the martyrs turned traitor, begging—always begging—for their lives, and eventually, for their deaths.

“You get fleas.” Bellatrix finished, baring her yellowed teeth in what was once perhaps considered a smile. She raised her foot and stomped hard on his wand, splintering it in two.

He bit the side of his cheek so he wouldn’t call out in anguish, tasting the metallic rush on his tongue. He felt like it had been his spine, cracked under her heel. Like a piece of him—his heart, his lungs, his *magic*—had been wrenched from his body and smashed into unrecognizable smithereens. His wand, the one he picked out at Olivander’s at age eleven, with his parents proudly watching on as he created a shower of golden sparks at the first wave. Gone.



“Madam Lestrangle, we caught this one trying to run down the stairs. Looks an awful lot like Potter’s mud— Merlin’s taint, is that Malfoy?”

Draco’s stomach dropped to his feet, and then even lower, into the bowels of what was undoubtedly hell as Mulciber ogled him in shock.

The ruddy-faced Death Eater had Gryffindor’s sword trailing in one hand, his other arm tightened into a headlock around a struggling figure, fist full of dusty curls. He yanked her head up, exposing her face.

“Isn’t this your pet, Draco?” Bellatrix whispered, craning his neck with her sharp nails. “The one you were supposed to kill, all those months ago? We’ve all heard the rumors, of course...”

No, he thought, entrenching himself in denial. It couldn’t be. She was supposed to be in a safe house with Draco’s mother by now, she was supposed to have gotten out *first*—

"Did you find anyone else?" Bellatrix snapped at Mulciber, as if something had just occurred to her. "Did you search thoroughly? They say where there is smoke, there's fire and where there's mudbloods..." His aunt laughed, the high bark of a jackal. "...There's Potter."

"Just her. No one else in the house, at least no one able to use a wand. Some of them rooms are warded to shit...we'll have to get the Nott brat up there for that."

Upon hearing his name, Nott winced, standing from the floor. He could not meet Draco’s eyes as he fled the room and went up the half-destroyed staircase.

Draco listened, the gears in his head turning wildly as he schooled his face into a blank stare. No one else meant Hermione had gotten to Narcissa in time, didn't it? Had she foolishly doubled back for the sword, putting her neck on the line for the only object that could destroy a horcrux?

Hermione looked at him with searing eyes.

*I'm sorry*, she mouthed, and his mouth went bone dry, throat closing around nothing as he choked on the realization that all of his worst fears had arrived for him at once.

Beside him, Bellatrix tensed, a look of cold terror sliding down her expression as she focused her gaze on the sword unflinchingly.

“You’re about to be a lot sorrier, mudblood.”

---

Draco once thought that having endless pain inflicted upon him was the worst thing he could physically experience. When he’d been tortured under the Dark Lord’s wand, the Cruciatus had felt inescapable and unrelenting, a complete loss of control over his body and mind. It had felt like a thousand shards of glass, embedding themselves under his skin, like every bone in his body was breaking and re-breaking, crumbling until he was filled with nothing but dust.

He hadn’t realized that there could be something much, much worse.

They’d been dragged from the house—bound and shackled with obsidian cuffs to suppress wandless magic and gagged by conjured restraints, all of their wands snapped on the spot— and deposited in the snowy ground of the clearing.

A few yards away lay a haphazard pile of bodies. Two Death Eaters: Jugson, he thought, and another he didn’t recognize. Beside them, Lupin, looking as soberingly serious in death as he had in life. Draco wondered if his death—quick, by Killing Curse—had been a mercy.

In the darkest fathom of his heart, Draco felt a stab of envy, looking at the werewolf’s lifeless body. Remus Lupin went gently into the night. He didn’t have to watch the witch he loved be tortured. Gone before he ever had to shoulder the unfathomable guilt that it had been him, who led the Death Eaters to their doorstep.

Thrown carelessly to the side a few yards away was the corpse of a woman Draco had never seen before he'd heard begging for her life.

*P-please*, the woman had sobbed, clutching at the hem of Mulciber's robe. *You said...If I helped you, you'd p-protect my children. M-maisie, Ellie and little Alfred...Cattermole. You said—*

*Filthy fucking Muggle*, Mulciber had spat and Draco lowered his eyes as he killed her with a jet of green light, the question of how the blood wards had been circumvented finally answered in the cruelest of fashions.

Beside him, Andromeda was pulling at her bindings, snarling around her gag. Nymphadora was verging on catatonic, staring at Lupin with flat eyes, her ever changing appearance settled on something so sickly and gray Draco found it impossible to look at. Ted lay crumpled—clearly gravely injured—managing to nod weakly in reassurance at Draco despite it all, even as the snow bloomed scarlet and he grew paler and paler from blood loss.

All of them, battered and bruised and awaiting the noose; the remnants of the once powerful Black family.

And then, his— and then, Hermione. Crumpled under Bellatrix's wand, her muggle jumper and denims sodden and soiled, covered in acrid vomit as she twitched weakly in the snow. She was still conscious, somehow.

She refused to look at him. He refused to look away.

Draco had vomited too, after the first round of Cruciatus from Bellatrix's cruel, curved wand. Right down his front, as any control over his bodily functions was torn from his grasp. Every time his aunt cursed her, Draco felt it too, the tremendous agony coursing through their bond.

That first time he—to his great shame—had flinched away from it, trying to protect himself before realizing that perhaps, if he could feel

her pain, he could take it from her as well. During each round of Bellatrix's curse, he pulled a little harder, absorbing as much as he could from his side of their bond. Trying desperately to send any goodness he had left in her direction.

*A golden dress. A hot mouth and an oak door. An unblemished blue sky. Blue, blue, blue...*

The remaining two Death Eaters—Mulciber and one of the Avery cousins— hadn't realized the source of his own groans and shudders, only jeered at his weak stomach for torture. Nott hadn't even the stone to face him, volunteering instead to comb the ruined house for hidden muggleborns, as if they were stored under the floorboards.

Even with Draco's efforts, Hermione's warm eyes had gone dim and unfocused, evidence that whatever capacity for occlumency she had left was fading quickly. She'd had too much exposure to the Cruciatus and for too long; if it weren't for their bond, she'd have gone mad hours ago.

As it was, Draco was well on his way.

"I'll not ask again, mudblood! Where did you get the sword!? Where is *Potter!?! Legilimens! Crucio!* "

"I don't know," she moaned into the ground, unable to even flinch away. The Cruciatus took all muscle control, left her quivering and powerless to shield herself. "Dumbledore left it...to me. His will... *Please.*"

"You filthy little liar! *Crucio!*"

Hermione screamed and screamed. A roaring noise filled Draco's head, his only coherent thought: *make it stop, please make it stop.* He could feel it, his sanity. Slipping through his fingers.

He wished, quietly and shamefully, for death.

*Oh, you're going to die*, a voice that sounded remarkably like Voldemort's locket told him. *But first, you will watch your every fear, your every failure. The woman you love...the family you wished for... all dead, as you look on.*

He raised the gates of his mental garden, attempting to focus on something he could project through the bond, anything to ground them in.

*Long ago, three sisters traveled the countryside...* Desperately, he pulled at the old story like a lifeline, using the practiced words to keep his head above water. When he'd gotten to the point where the middle sister begs for mercy, the screaming finally stopped and Hermione's head lolled limply into the snow.

"She doesn't know anything, Bella," Andromeda, having managed to spit out her gag, called from her huddled position. There was a wild, feverish look in her eyes as she fixed her gaze on the woman she'd once called sister. "Kill her and be done with it. Kill us all!"

"Don't call me that!" Bellatrix whirled on Andromeda, spittle falling on the snow. "You're not fit to use my given name, blood traitor! You, who deserted our family, for this *scum* —"

She strode over, and kicked Ted in the ribs, hitting his injury with precision.

"Is this the bounty of love, Andromeda? Is this the fruit of your abandonment?"

Ted made a sound like a wounded dog and Andromeda's eyes narrowed into dangerous slits.

"You know nothing of love," she taunted softly, goading her in the way only a sister could. "Poor Bellatrix. Always last to the table. Cissa was Mother's favorite, that was undeniable. Her little porcelain doll. We both know Father favored me up until the day I married, and perhaps even after. He wrote to me once, begging me to return. He

said he could forgive my indiscretions, if I came back and married the Rosier boy. I suppose he wished it was you that had left. His beastly, unmarriageable daughter—”

“Shut your mouth! Shut your mouth you traitorous bitch!” Bellatrix, who seemed profoundly affected by her sister’s words, seethed. She turned her wand on Andromeda. “*Crucio!*”

That’s when Draco realized. Andromeda was picking a fight.

His aunt screamed in agony and beside her, Ted moaned weakly in protest. Tonks—eyes bright with tears— whispered so low only Draco could hear, *hang on mum*. When Bellatrix finally exhausted herself and dropped her wand, Andromeda was still screaming. At least that’s what Draco thought at first, his head thick and aching. It took several moments for him to realize his aunt wasn’t screaming anymore. She was *laughing*.

“Poor...stupid...Bella,” she croaked, grinning in a way that made her regal features slip into something far more deranged. “No children to carry your lineage...just a cold, useless husband and a Dark Lord who left you to rot in Azkaban...do you remember the story Mother used to tell us about the three sisters? Did you ever realize that all three of them—stupid, selfish, *alone* — were supposed to be *you*?”

Bellatrix snapped, pointing her wand directly at her sister’s chest.

“*Avada Kedavra.*”

Draco watched in horror as the green light flashed from her wand, expecting Andromeda to crumple and scream. But just as the curse left her tongue, Ted, with his final bout of strength, reared up on his knees and threw his bound body over Andromeda’s, knocking his wife to the ground.

He did not get up.

It couldn't be Ted, who died here in the snow. Good, kind-hearted Ted, who opened his doors to a gaggle of desperate teenagers without hesitation. Who taught Draco how to make tea the muggle way. Who told bawdy jokes at dinner and held his wife's hand under the table. Who taught Draco more about love than Dumbledore ever could. It couldn't be Ted Tonks who died.

Oh, but it could.

"*Dad!*" Tonks screamed, her face twisting in agony. The skin under her eyes bloomed a bruised purple, as her eyes turned jet black, the color of onyx. Suddenly Draco understood what was meant, when the artists called darkness the absence of light. "*Dad! Dad, please!*"

Somewhere in the distance, Mulciber laughed.

With terrifying dignity, Andromeda crouched beside her fallen husband. "It's alright, Teddy," she whispered as she reached out to delicately caress Ted's lifeless face with trembling fingers, voice calm and cold. "I'll be right behind you."

"Yes, you will," Bellatrix panted. "I'm afraid our family tree needs plenty of pruning."

She turned to Draco with alarming precision, kicking him to his knees as shoving her wand into his throat until he raised his chin and looked into her eyes.

If Draco had his wand, he knew he'd be able to manage the Killing Curse right then, even in his filthy, weakened state.

"Do you see what happens when you pollute our bloodline? When you copulate with filth, with *vermin*? Is this the future you wanted, Draco?" She pointed at his motionless uncle and Draco—sick, powerless—closed his eyes and wished for lightning or hellfire for the ground to open up and swallow her. "I'll kill you before I see you crying in the dirt for your dead mudblood bitch—"

“Bella?”

His eyes flew open.

*Fuck.*

A woman was crossing the clearing, bare feet gone blue in the snow. Blonde hair fell around her shoulders like a veil, her eyes clouded with confusion and something else, a darkness swirling underneath. Unruly magic, radiating from her skin, crackling like lightning at her fingertips.

She was supposed to be gone. She—the portkey—the safe house. She was supposed to leave *first*.

“No,” Draco moaned. “Mother—no, no, *no*.”

“Cissy?” Bellatrix spun her head around, keeping Draco in a tight hold. “You were dead. Lucius said...Cissy, what are you doing!?” She shrieked at the sight of sparks, emerging from Narcissa’s sleeves.

“Oi,” the younger Avery, called, with Mulciber at his heels. “Who the bloody fuck got through the Anti-Apparition wards?”

His mother raised her hands, enveloped in bright, blue magic the exact shade of her eyes and the North Sea. It danced along her fingers, and then, both the male Death Eaters were blown back.

“Let go of my son, Bella.” His mother’s voice, soft and scratchy from disuse, was eerily calm.

“I am trying to *help* him, Cissy. It is not your fault he has forgotten his place; if your fool husband hadn’t failed the Dark Lord...but now, you will return to him, serve him once more. As his most faithful and devout of followers, I will ask that he pardons your indiscretions,” Bellatrix begged, in a very different tone than she’d used with Andromeda. “You’re not well, even the healers said so.”



Narcissa said nothing, turning slowly to observe the scene. A tremor in her face sent her eyes twitching, magic erratically buzzing around her like a swarming hive. It was clear to Draco that any mental progress she may have made in convalescence at Tonks House was shattered by the gore and destruction of the once peaceful clearing. Her gaze traveled over Hermione's twitching figure and fixed on the middle Black sister—Andromeda hadn't even flinched her way, holding unrelentingly to her husband's corpse— before settling on Draco. Something passed through her eyes as they stared at each other, waves crashing onto slate-gray rocks.

Her legilimency—fragile, weak from lack of practice— flooded his fractured mind. A cool, soothing touch against his tortured brain, a respite from the pain, the devastation.

In his ruined occlumency garden, she reached down to the charred earth until a flower bloomed from the wreckage, a perfect four-petal periwinkle. She spun between her fingers.

*Beautiful*, he thought. His mother had always been so, hadn't she? She'd been bred to exist in the context of a garden, not this wasteland they'd found themselves suspended in.

"Cissy, I—" Bellatrix's voice cut into his thoughts, sending him wincing again, body instinctively preparing for another round of the Cruciatus.

"I said, let go of my *son!*"

"He's failed you!" Bellatrix cried, somewhere between raving and a plea. She jabbed her wand deeper into Draco's windpipe as he fought for air. "Soiling himself with Muggle filth. He's weak, like Lucius always was, a soft-hearted fool—"

Narcissa exploded in a blood curdling scream, a sound of agony as if she were being cleaved in two, as bright a pillar blue flame shot from her chest.

Bellatrix's hold on Draco was instantly broken, as her body levitated in the air before him and began to twist and seize as if she were being burned alive. The fire engulfed her with an otherworldly intensity, flames devouring flesh with unnatural grace.

The magic streaming from Narcissa's body was uncategorizable as dark or light. It was guttural and unflinching, an unpolluted source of power, drawn straight from his mother's magical core. A spectacle of destruction.

Mulciber and Avery cried out and shielded their eyes as the blaze intensified, Bellatrix's cries distorted in the air. Draco could smell flesh, blistering and peeling away.

The blue flames, beautiful and deadly, flickered out as quickly as they came, leaving only a scorched shadow of the figure that once stood. Draco's stomach heaved as hardly a teaspoon remained of Bellatrix Lestrange.

Beyond, Narcissa's figure crumpled and fell into the snow, her body smoking until there was nothing but ash, caught and carried by the wind.

A mind could only bear so much before it refused cooperation. Until it snapped into delirium, submerging the self in a thick, invisible fog. And this was his mind's breaking point, the moment his brain decided: *too much, no more.*

Everything around him went out of focus. The cries of the remaining Death Eaters, the groans of Andromeda and Hermione— all distant, muffled, as if the world has slipped just out of reach. He could feel his heart racing, the blood pounding in his head, which was strange given the fact that his thoughts had been completely detached from his own body, left hovering over the slumped figure that was once Draco Malfoy.

*Get up*, he thought to himself weakly. The body he once called his refused.

Time distorted beyond recognition—it could have been seconds or days that passed as he shivered, growing colder and colder in the snow.

Somewhere, there was shouting. His name. There were several loud cracks. Perhaps a chasm had opened in the ground, and they were all falling, down, down, down...

“Master Draco must come with Dobby! Quickly!”

His vision focused out of sheer shock to find a distraught House-Elf. Actually—perhaps he was seeing in doubles—two distraught House-Elves? One was old and decrepit, the House-Elf he’d seen in Hermione’s memories, giving the name of the locket thief. *Kreacher*, the Black elf. Potter’s elf, grabbing hold of Tonks and Andromeda, who refused to let go of Ted’s body in the distance—Ted was dead, Ted was *dead* and so was Narcissa, his mother, *gone* —

Something hit him in the face. A tiny, elfin hand. A sensation so strange it gave him a momentary glimmer of coherence.

A House-Elf had slapped him across the face.

“Master Draco!” Dobby— *Dobby?* — cried, “Please, Dobby must save Harry Potter’s Granger, and Harry Potter’s Granger will not go without Master Draco!”

Perhaps he’d died? But if he were dead how could Hermione be here, dirty and shaking and hardly-conscious, clinging to Dobby’s shoulder like a lifeline.

“Draco,” She croaked, and Draco reached for her fingers. Almost, almost—

“Behind you—”

“I don’t fucking think so, sonny,” a Mulciber’s rough voice said, and then the elf and Hermione were gone and Draco was yanked back

and promptly whacked firmly in the back of his head. His last lucid thought was the realization that he'd not been able to take a hold of her hand.

---

Draco woke to splitting pain in his skull. He blinked and winced from the sting, assessing. Pain everywhere, but the ache in his head was the most urgent. He had to have been gravely injured to have gone blind like this, surrounded only by darkness and the cool damp feeling of moss-covered stone. It smelled strangely musty and mineral, like earth and mildew.

There had been a mantra. He'd been repeating a mantra, he was sure of it. How did it go?

A golden dress. A hot mouth and an oak door. An unblemished blue sky. Blue, blue, blue...

*Blue like the fire that had consumed his mother.*

He cried out, clutching his head with both hands.

"Finally," a familiar snooty voice said from somewhere in the dark. "I've been waiting for you to come to for ages. I thought you were dead, you know. Drank a bottle of Daddy's vintage in your memory, which I should really be reimbursed for. Although after recent events, I'm ready to pour out the contents of his precious wine cellar."

A golden ball of light flickered to life, cupped by formerly manicured hands, their polish chipped and cuticles bloodied.

Draco looked up in disbelief, taking in his surroundings. He was in a cell, iron bars heavily reinforced with an obsidian padlock. He had the strangest sensation he'd been here before, he just couldn't remember when—

"We snogged here once," the voice offered. "If you're wondering why it looks familiar."

He'd gone mad, it was the only explanation. Maybe if he went back to sleep, he'd wake up from this nightmare in his bed in Tonks House with Hermione pressed against him.

"Well, don't get lightheaded! There's not much to do down here and I wouldn't want you to pass out and leave me bored again."

"Pansy?" Draco croaked, blinking rapidly as the orb of light grew and she came into focus.

It was Pansy, but it wasn't. Pansy would never allow herself to look like this, with dirt smudged on her cheeks, once sleek black bob turned greasy and matted.

Maybe this was hell?

"We're not in hell," Pansy sniffed, looking slightly put out. "We're in Parkinson Manor. Well, more specifically, in the dungeons. You showed up a few days ago, unconscious and twitching and making all sorts of fuss. I've been in here...well, longer than that. You see Draco, I'm afraid we've both gotten ourselves—and I don't mean to be crass— into deep, *deep* shit."

---

---

Yikes, this is my red wedding. Kind of a brutal chapter to return with, but alas, we cannot control the hurricanes that flood our apartments and ruin our fanfiction posting schedules (all good now, go FEMA). I know readers will be upset about the deaths that occurred. Trust me, I even cried while writing it, which felt very silly at the time. This is Capital W War and I intend to write it as such.

- Behind the Scenes: Draco asked Hermione to flee with Narcissa in order to get her out of the house. She had given Narcissa the portkey (but not activated it), but she Gryffindored and went back for the sword, where she was caught by Mulciber.

- The story of the Three Sisters is entirely made up, cooked from my brain but based on various snippets of folk tales. The connections are...unfortunately, evident.
- Both Narcissa and Bellatrix burn/basically vaporize a la Dr. Manhattan due to Narcissa's obscurial blow up. That leaves Andromeda as, you guessed it, the heartbroken middle sister who survived all her family.
- Head Canons: Andromeda absolutely roasts Bellatrix (please I didn't mean it was a pun) because her special Black talent is Being Mean. The only family member Bellatrix ever loved (if you could call it that) was Narcissa. When Narcissa told Draco that story, she took creative liberties: she changed the fate of the youngest sister (her) to reflect how she felt about herself and Lucius after the first war.
- The saddest possible ending for...Mary Cattermole. Dark horse of the Misery Olympics. Silver medal is a three way tie between Nymphadora, Draco and Andromeda.
- Remember Lady Nott's prediction? Yeah. Grim.
- So many questions! Who called Dobby and Kreacher? Why is Pansy in pureblood prison? Theo? (That last one is a question in itself)

Love you all and apologies for causing any distress!

Next chapter: The Girl in the Greenhouse. Oh yes...it's time for Pansy's Arc.

---

# The Girl in the Greenhouse

## Chapter 40: The Girl in the Greenhouse

---

CW: Animal cruelty (rabbits, not graphic), talk of suicide, canon typical torture and violence, thinly veiled critique of fascism, gratuitous use of philosophy.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

*"I'll not ask again, mudblood! Where did you get the sword!? Where is Potter!?! Legilimens! Crucio!"*

*"I don't know...Dumbledore left it...to me. His will... Please."*

*"You filthy little liar! Crucio!"*

Draco awoke with a start on a scratchy hay pallet, blinking in the dim torchlight of the dungeon only to find his ex-girlfriend, scowling down at him. Promptly, he closed his eyes again, hoping he'd be dragged under once more; when he was out cold, he could hang onto the tiny hope that the nightmares were something he could at the very least eventually wake up from. In consciousness, Draco had to face the reality that there was no going back.

"No, none of that." Pansy gave him a sharp pat on the cheek. "It's been days, Draco. You need to wake up."

She took his shoulders, pulled him up to a sitting position as his body screamed in protest so that they were facing each other, cross-legged on the pallet. He ached everywhere, the remnants of the Cruciatus skittering along his nerves like sparks from a bonfire.

*"Fuck, that hurts."*

“Eyes open,” she instructed, flicking his temple. He obeyed instinctively, taking in her pale sallow face and limpid appearance, miles away from the prissy girl he’d once known. His brain, battered and bruised, simply couldn’t process her presence, one he associated with scoldings and mince pies and the Slytherin common room; the only thing stronger than the pain was the pure shock from seeing Pansy Parkinson after all this time, looking like absolute *shite*.

If he were in a better state, perhaps he could spare the emotional fortitude to concern himself with matters such as polyjuice, but he’d known Pansy almost as long as he could remember and there were certain mannerisms—her quivering sneer, her perfect posture, the way she chewed the inside of her cheek when she was nervous or afraid—that simply couldn’t be replicated. Still, he feebly attempted to check.

“It is *you*, isn’t it?”

“That’s the fourth time I’ve answered you,” Pansy scoffed, rolling her eyes so hard they threatened to stay stuck in the back of her head. Oh yes, it was definitely her. “Let’s get through your usual questions quickly: yes, it’s me. No, no one is going to overhear us; I haven’t had company since they dragged poor old Olivander away, and that was *ages* ago.”

“Olivander? The wandmaker?”

“The very one. I’ve told you this before, you know. Meanwhile, you keep knocking out before you can so much as begin to explain what in Salazar’s saggy bollocks you’re doing here, injured and raving and *alive*. Draco—” Pansy’s voice wavered infinitesimally on his name. “Draco, we all thought you were *dead*. You disappeared and never came back and everyone knows what happens to deserters. If the Dark Lord doesn’t find them himself, the Mark kills them before they can get far. I thought you’d decided you were better off dead than fighting for him. I thought you’d taken the out—the *ultimate* out—and then suddenly, you show up bloody and in tatters and— how the fuck are you still alive?”



Draco shook his head like a wet dog, trying to dislodge the fuzzy static that had implanted itself in his thoughts. Pansy raised an excellent question: why was he locked underground when he should undoubtedly be well on his way to being digested by Nagini?

“I shouldn’t be alive.” His voice was that of a particularly hoarse stranger. “How long have I been here? I should have been killed on the spot when they found us, or when I was taken prisoner, or—”

He looked around, taking in the dungeon. They were deep within the bowels of Parkinson Manor, hidden away in the shadows of the stone walls, moss and mildew clinging to every crevice. The cold air carried a stale, earthy scent mixed with the faint metallic tang of iron from the rusting chains. Obsidian shackles, known for their magical suppressant qualities, dangled from the walls, the foreboding relics of past incarcerations.

A cold dread unfurled in his stomach at the realization; that fact that he was being kept alive and imprisoned all but guaranteed a long, grisly, *public* death in his inclement future.

“Why hasn’t the Dark Lord killed me yet?”

Pansy drummed her fingers thoughtfully on her knee as she considered, her dark eyes narrowing as the wheels in her mind began to turn.

“For starters, I doubt that the Dark Lord even knows you’re here. That stupid oaf Mulciber brought you by several days ago. At least I think it was days, my only time marker is whenever the gruel appears. Anyway, you showed up covered in piss and boke, moaning and convulsing and making all sorts of a fuss, and I’m not a betting witch, but since Mulciber’s both an idiot and *deeply* in debt to my father, I’d wager that you’re alive because someone who *isn’t* the Dark Lord is offering quite a bit of gold for you. Which begs the question: which incredibly stupid thing that you’ve done put a price on your head?”

*A price on his head?* His thoughts came only with tremendous difficulty, like his brain had turned to molasses. He felt like he'd been emptied out, left only as an echo of an echo. His grief drowned out all cognisance in a chorus of loss: sounds of Ted, moaning as he slowly bled out beside Andromeda. His mother's shriek, as she burst into blue-tinged light. Hermione's screams under Bellatrix's wand.

*Hermione.* When he tried instinctively to sense her through their bond, he received nothing but searing pain in response. The thread connecting them had burnt out, leaving a live wire in its place, electrocuting him each time he drew near.

What if the Cruciatus had been too much? A panicked voice in his head provided. Even with his magic pushing through, taking on some of the pain, she'd screamed and begged for what felt like an eternity. In the damp quiet of the dungeon, he could still hear it.

He shook his head, trying to dislodge the sounds, but they continued like a broken gramophone.

"Draco?" Pansy's expression split into concern. He must have been in a very bad way for Pansy to be looking at him with the terrible pity he remembered as a mainstay of her gaze in the months after he'd been Marked, like he'd been diagnosed with some fatal disease. He supposed the comparison wasn't all that far off.

"Are you alright?"

*What a bizarre question,* he thought. *He'd never be alright again.*

"My mother's dead." His lips moved around the words automatically, even though their sentiment seemed so impossible to comprehend.

"I know. Theo wrote to me a few months back and told me that she'd...well. Ended her life. I thought that was why you'd, er, *left.*"

Upon hearing the name, Draco ground his teeth together and wished a sudden and violent death on Theodore Nott. "No, you don't know,"

he corrected, eyes misting over as he went very far away; his occlumency garden was all but torched, so he dissociated into nothingness, willing himself to dissolve into the dark. “You have no idea, Pansy. If you did, you’d never mention that *bastard’s* name to me again. He’s the one who led them to us. He’s the reason—” Draco started to shiver, although he wasn’t cold. Funnily enough, he couldn’t feel anything at all. “It’s his fault—I trusted him, I thought—”

His lungs seized, robbing him on oxygen, as he choked on a thick wave of panic, the memories of the raid coming back in a disjointed flood: dueling with Theo in the entrance hall, Bellatrix’s hot breath on his neck, Lupin’s corpse cast away like garbage, that Muggleborn woman screaming for her children...

After a moment of hesitation, Pansy leaned over and pulled him into an embrace, alarmingly gentle and thus, incredibly out of character. In her arms, his chest contracted over and over as he gasped for air, clearly having some sort of post-Cruciatuus full body fit.

“Oh, Ducky, please don’t cry,” she murmured, gingerly patting his shoulder. Someone made a terrible noise. Based on her worried sigh, it was probably him. “Deep breaths, alright? You’re having a panic attack. It’ll pass, I promise. Just breathe.”

The stupid nickname was a relic of a former time, something Pansy used to call him when they were seven and she couldn’t pronounce *Draco* without tripping over the *r*. Everytime she stuttered, their governess delivered a stinging hex to her palm, because pureblood witches simply didn’t falter in their words. Pansy, terribly stubborn and already full of loathing for the old woman, found her way around it, substituting any words with prevalent *r* sounds with nonsensical alternatives, inadvertently correcting her stutter out of pure spite. Unfortunately, Draco became *Ducky* in the process, a nickname he’d loathed and that she’d been firmly banned from using in front of their peers at Hogwarts after he’d in turn threatened to reveal that Pansy’s middle name was *Hortensia* .

Hearing the childish sobriquet now was so jarring it almost reminded him to breathe again. Eventually he calmed, sniffled into her shoulder, and drew back to scrub his hands over his face, embarrassed.

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. You look so awful, it’s almost making me less cross with you for allowing me to think you’d croaked for all these months.” Pansy wiped the tear tracks from under his eyes with her thumbs. She seemed softer than he’d remembered her, but then again, war changed everyone. “Why did you run? And for Merlin’s sake, why didn’t you warn me?”

In answer, he rolled up his sleeve. With wide terrified eyes, she reached out and ran a finger over the scar that had once pulsed with dark magic, tying Draco to the most dangerous wizard to ever live.

"Seven hells," she breathed. "How—?" She took in the forbidding look on his face and shook her head. "I don't want to know, do I?"

“For your own sake, it’s better you don’t,” Draco rasped, remembering the events that had led him here. “My mother was dying. I didn’t have a choice. I couldn’t—every time I failed the Dark Lord, Mother was made to pay for it. He would have Dolohov use the Cruciatus on her and eventually her magic became unstable; it turned on her, starting destroying her from the inside out. She was having accidents every time she used her wand.”

Pansy drew in a sharp inhale, probably unaware that such things could even befall pureblood witches like Narcissa, but swallowed her distress and nodded for him to go on.

“At first, she tried to hide it by blaming things on the older elves,” he relaid bitterly, thankful the dim light would at least mask the terrible guilt that no doubt spread across his countenance. “But then it got worse and worse, and I realized that if I didn’t do something, she was going to disappear. So, I made a deal with Dumbledore...”

Pansy swore, jaw dropping as Draco roughly explained his acts of treason, his double-crossing of the Death Eaters and eventual flight to the Order, too exhausted to go into the finer and more dangerous details. Too broken to speak in depth of his relationship with Hermione. When finally he got to the destruction of Tonks House, his voice went ragged, as if his vocal cords were refusing his efforts.

“...I guess it didn’t matter in the end, because they found us thanks to that son of a bitch, Nott.” He ran his hands through his soot stained hair, tugging at the roots, grounding himself in his scalp’s discomfort. “Mother sacrificed herself because of *him*. And Granger, she...she was under the Cruciatus for a long time.” His voice roughened, lowering into a near growl. “They snapped my wand and made me watch as Bellatrix made an example of her, to show me what happens when purebloods fall in love with the enemy.”

Pansy gave him a strange look he could not place, before sharply looking away, like she wanted to say something, but had thought better of it at the last minute.

“You—” She cleared her throat. “You love her then? Granger?”

*I will find you in the next lifetime and in every one that follows. You’re mine, Granger. In every version of this world, you are mine.*

He'd thought himself more powerful than Fate, and for his hubris, he'd loved her and he'd lost her, just as she feared.

“She— I don’t know if she’s going to ever—” His breath began to hitch over the thought: Hermione had withstood so much damage, all while trying to occlude against Bellatrix’s mental attacks. What if she became like his mother, locked in her own head, unable to perform magic, a time-bomb just waiting to—

He fell quiet and the screaming grew louder, threatening to drag him under.

“Please say something,” he muttered, pressing his palms against his eyes with mounting pressure, trying to get rid of the sounds in his head. “Anything. When it’s quiet I can still hear the sounds...she *begged* for it to stop, Pansy.”

“Stop it, before you set yourself off again.” She arranged herself on the pallet so she could press herself against his slumped shoulder, her touch and proximity reminding him that despite the horrors, he was, in fact, still alive. “Does it help when I talk?”

He nodded.

“Well, that’s a first.” She managed a sad little smile, nostalgia playing on her lips. “I did love your mother, you know. She was always kind to me...like how I imagined a mother would be. It honors her memory, that she was protective of you, up until the very end.” After a moment of sniffing, she collected herself. “Nothing like the bitch upstairs. Do you know what she said when Father locked me in here? *You did this to yourself* .”

“Your father was the one who stuck you here?” Draco couldn’t help but trip over his words in surprise. He’d never interacted much with Mr. Parkinson, knowing him only as a stuffy and distant figure who he occasionally saw on the train platform sending his daughter off to school, or meeting with Lucius in his study to talk business. “Whatever for?”

Pansy barked out a laugh that was completely devoid of humor. She straightened, posture springing back to immaculate and dark eyes gone cold and flat, but behind the careful veneer, a hint of fury sparked to life.

“You’ve been gone a long time, Draco. You’re not the only one who has changed.”

She leaned her head back on the wall, chin tilted upwards in a way that made her look particularly regal, as if she were looking down her

nose at the rest of the world, and began to tell him a long and incredibly unlikely story.

For hours and hours, Draco lay weakly on a hay pallet and drowned out the screaming by listening to the tale of the rebellion and subsequent emancipation of one Pansy Hortensia Parkinson.

---

Pansy had never meant for any of it to happen.

She never meant to end up imprisoned in her own home as an enemy of the state. To be quite honest, she'd never thought herself capable of anything so remotely liberal in the first place. She was simply not the girl who put up a fight for anything other than the amount of allowance dispersed into her vault or the hem of her robes at Twilfit and Tattings, because ever since she was seven years old, Pansy Parkinson knew *exactly* what her future would hold.

With no male children to take up the mantle of the family name, the only daughter of Percival and Amaryllis Parkinson was expected to do exactly one thing with her wild and precious life: marry a pureblood, preferably an only son for inheritance purposes, and pop out an heir and, if she was feeling generous, a couple of spares. No matter that Pansy was witty and talented on the piano forte and a whiz at arithmancy; apparently none of that mattered more than what she had between her legs.

She often wondered if it were possible to be born with a broken heart, and if so, what she'd done in a prior life to deserve the wreckage that lay behind her ribs.

You see, like most of her wealthy, privileged friends, Pansy's had not exactly been what one would consider a happy childhood. Of course, she never wanted for anything, whether that was hair ribbons or the winged Palominos stallions she spent long hours brushing in the Parkinson stables. But she realized from a young age that to her parents, she was more of an asset than a living, breathing child; as was customary, her father had very little to do with her raising and

her haughty English rose of a mother—who proved either unable or unwilling to suffer through giving her a sibling—spent the majority of her time at various social events and galas, leaving Pansy to be raised by a series of governesses and nannies that never lasted long at their posts for reasons having to do with her father’s “determination to embarrass this family.”

When Amaryllis did communicate with Pansy, it was via scoldings: *sit up straight, pull down your skirt, shut your mouth when your betters are speaking. And use your wand to draw the curtains—for Merlin’s sake, do you want your future in-laws to think you’re a squib?*

Her mother had been *furious* when the Malfoys fell from grace; once Draco bore the smear of his father’s failure, he was no longer a suitable prospect for marriage, and all her painstaking betrothal preparations evaporated with the summer rains. Enraged by the turn of events, Amaryllis insisted that her daughter cease her association with the Malfoy boy and the other one—the skinny, sallow Nott heir with the unsavory dead mother—immediately.

Pansy didn’t realize at the time that this was the pebble that preceded the eventual avalanche, but if she were to examine her life in retrospect—which she had plenty of time to do, being locked in a dungeon for weeks on end—it was the first time she defied the order of things.

Sixth year was her desperate attempt at keeping ripped edges from fraying, as the boys, the ones she’d begun to consider as *hers*, were all but sentenced to certain death for their fathers’ failures. She was not unaware of how precarious it all was; one wrong move and perhaps it would have been her, with the Dark Mark burned into her forearm. She spent long nights in the Shrieking Shack with Theodore, as he tried to create a warded passageway into the dusty old house so as to allow the Death Eaters to permeate the castle. She watched as Draco became something strange and unrecognizable, eyes always following Hermione Granger, as if the swotty Gryffindor suddenly contained the secrets to the universe.



She knew that despite what he insisted, his interest wasn't about fulfilling the Dark Lord's instructions to murder the girl; no, Draco had never once looked at Pansy like that, even while naked. Stupid, righteous Granger would *definitely* get him killed; even under the threat of his ire, Pansy did everything she could to keep them apart, without much success. She taunted the Gryffindor girl with mentions of her dead parents and threw Draco resoundingly under the bus, only to nearly get him killed in the process. She hexed his belt buckle so as to stop any untoward developments between the two, only to wake up one morning with a foggy memory of the previous night and a splitting headache.

That year, her only respite had been Care of Magical Creatures, where she could tune out the world and stroke the invisible necks of the thestrals, who'd always liked her best even though she couldn't see them. Perhaps they smelled her horses, lingering on her clothing. Perhaps they sensed that she understood what it was like, to be invisible. Either way, she fed them buckets of oats and lingered at the edges of the paddock long after lessons, divulging her fears. What if Draco grew more and more disenchanted by his fallen position in society, and she lost him to Granger? What if Theo ripped himself to shreds after a bad transformation? What if everyone she'd ever loved died in servitude to the Dark Lord, and she alone was left to bear the weight of whatever terrible new world they'd brought forth?

And by the end of the year, she was alone; she lost Draco gradually over the dwindling months, and Theodore, all at once, on top of the Astronomy tower. She always knew she would, but she thought it would be to the pureblood girls they'd be orchestrated to marry. She thought, quite simply, that they had more time.

Her final year at Hogwarts started ominously when, having summoned her to his study for a rare audience, Pansy's father lectured her about how now more than ever, it was important for her to do her duty to the Dark Lord's cause and preserve their legacy.

The reminder had been embedded with a threat; if she didn't find an appropriate marriage prospect, one would be appointed to her.

The thought haunted her the whole dreary train ride to the castle, the Hogwarts Express emptier than she'd ever seen. She sat in a compartment alongside the other remnants of their year: Tracey and Daphne, who she could live companionably with, but never quite befriend due to the *competition* that sprung up between pureblood girls like unwanted weeds; Crabbe and Goyle, who were still too stupid to deploy on the battlefield as Draco and Theo had; and Blaise Zabini, winking her way suggestively as he asked if she had a nice break, like the world wasn't in flames.

She ignored them all and shoved her monogrammed leather trunk under the seat, going through the motions as she considered her life with consummate misery. She'd tried so hard to be the perfect pureblood daughter, hadn't she? Sneering at Weasleys and steering clear of mudbloods, lest their inferiority prove contagious. Emitting a constant stream of parroted beliefs and cruel words and never, ever questioning her own place at the top of the world. This was mostly because the alternative meant punishment, and at Parkinson Manor punishment had been... *harsh* . Pansy could admit that to herself; she was good because she was very, very afraid not to be.

It occurred to her, not for the first time, that for all its supposed prestige, the top was quite a lonely place indeed.

She leaned against the glossy train window, half-listening as the others gossiped—news of the war, all anyone ever bloody talked about was the *war* these days— wondering if anyone would notice if she had died over the summer and been replaced by a ghost.

If sixth year had been dangerous, what with a Granger-obsessed Draco and a freshly bitten Theodore skulking about the castle plotting to murder with little success, seventh year proved to be an absolute *bloodbath* . In the absence of Dumbledore, the Carrows transformed Hogwarts from sanctuary to open-air prison, with even the most minimal of infractions earning the culprit a beating at best

and a taste of the Cruciatus at worst. Outside the castle walls, the war raged on, lists of dead mudbloods printed next to the society pages, as shortages of potion ingredients and wand-making materials grew more and more dire. Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley were desolate and empty, businesses shuttered, as black markets selling rationed goods sprung up and disappeared in rapid succession.

*Really, Pansy began to wonder, who cared if the mudbloods held their little jobs and raised their filthy children in relative peace? Wasn't that better than this?*

Such thoughts were, of course, treason. But they'd infected her mind like some sort of mutating dragon-pox, a disease she couldn't pinpoint the origin of or fully eradicate. She found herself longing for the days when she questioned nothing, and fell in line effortlessly, Draco and Theodore by her side. But those days had dissipated into smoke when Theo, the boy who used to shove flobberworms in her pockets, killed the doddering old Headmaster, while Draco all but transformed into a blonder version of Snape, a dour, secretive stranger.

And Pansy—who had always been what others told her to be, who had been so fucking *good*, who followed the rules because when she didn't, unspeakable things happened to her—Pansy was suddenly very, very angry that she'd gotten *nothing* for her efforts.

It started small, as rebellions often do. She stopped docking points during her Prefect rounds, looked the other way when she saw blood traitors passing messages in the corridors, strangely immune to the evangelical zeal of the Dark Lord's cause that seemed to have infected so many of her Slytherin peers. Zealotry was just so terribly *gauche*.

With apathy as her armor, she began skiving off her classes—their professors had far more to worry about than mere truancy—and spending most of her time on her own, experimenting with a variety of illicit substances that had popped up on the school's own black

market, run by the ever enterprising Blaise Zabini. Conveniently, Pansy had a direct line to the supply; she'd been sleeping with the handsome Slytherin on and off since the previous year, mostly out of boredom and the realization that soon, she'd be bound by a betrothal contract and should have her fun while she still could.

The sex—like most sex she'd experienced thus far—had not proved particularly fruitful or even interesting, but it was a shortcut that allowed her to be looked at the way she wanted to be looked at: with all encompassing focus. As if, for a brief moment, *she* was the answer to someone's murmured question.

One afternoon in September, she nicked a bit of Blaise's supply of gillyweed— which because of the wartime shortages, was cut with the fuzzy, muggle plant that made her mouth go bone dry—and found herself skipping the mandatory Magical Race and Nation Studies course set by the Carrows in favor of lighting up behind the greenhouses in peace. Pansy had always hated Herbology on principle—the flower-etymology puns due to her cursed name, the dirt under her fingernails—firmly of the belief that gardening, like cooking and cleaning, should be left for the help. But even she had to admit there was something vaguely peaceful about sprawling in the grass, blades brushing teasingly against the skin between her thigh high silk stockings and the hem of her uniform skirt. She propped herself up against one of the enormous terracotta pots that Sprout preferred, watching the light filter through the emerald tinged glass of the Hogwarts greenhouses.

The sweet-herbal smoke dulled her senses and kept her suspended somewhere above herself and for once, it was deliriously pleasurable not being in her body . Lately, she *hated* being Pansy Parkinson. More and more, she had been treacherously flirting with the idea of what it would be to be Pansy, just Pansy, hazy and loose-limbed and more than a little randy from the weed—

A deep, rough voice caught her off guard.

“Godric, is that *cannabis*? ”

Pansy had one hand on her wand instantly, as the other flew up to shade her eyes with a perfectly French-manicured hand. Neville Longbottom was towering above her, dirt on his face and a shovel propped over his shoulder, an obnoxious expression on his face. Smug like he'd caught her in the act, which she supposed he technically had. He looked...

...*rather fit*, a voice she did not appreciate piped up. She racked her mind, trying to find the last instance she'd teased him, and came up empty. The formerly dumpy Gryffindor had grown about a foot and a half and filled out considerably in the last year. Now, he was broad-chested and sporting thick, sinewy Beater's arms and hands that were frankly, far too large. His anxious round face had hardened into steep angles and a strong, square jaw that grew tighter as they glared at each other, the air thick with a confusing, accusatory silence, both unsure of what to say with neither in their predetermined role.

"So what if it is?" She finally snapped, instantly reverting to her sensible self, the self that did not *stare* at blood traitors while under the influence of muggle drugs. "Shouldn't you be strung up in the dungeons by your ankles?"

"Shouldn't you?" Longbottom retorted, a brow raised, before realizing the rather improper implications of his words. "I mean, be in the dungeons. Not er..." He trailed off, face flushing the color Pansy's mouth turned when she ate too many pomegranate seeds. Merlin, it didn't take much did it?

"Do tell, Longbottom," Pansy smirked. "How exactly do you picture me *positioned* in the dungeons?" She was lowering a familiar lure, ready to pounce on her old reliable: male weakness. But to her surprise, Longbottom did not bite.

"With your head in the sand." His words were inlaid with a bitter fiber of loathing. "Pretending you're not complicit in all this, like all the other Slytherins."

He did not bother looking her way as he began to dig some sort of ditch in the soft dirt a few yards from where she sat sprawled.

“Complicit,” she scoffed, adjusting to curl her legs up under her and smoothing her skirt, refusing to cede her territory. He had some nerve, speaking to her this way. Didn’t he realize she had as little choice in this as he did? “I’m suffering just as much as anyone, you know. Do you think I wanted to spend my year rationing my Sleekeazy’s because no one can get a hold of any bloody Asian Dragon Hair? You should mind your tongue, before I hex it off.”

“Empty threats,” Longbottom dismissed, heaving the shovel a few yards away like some sort of wandless muggle. “We both know you won’t lift a finger to curse me. You’re far too lazy for that.”

It took Pansy a second to catch up to his accusation, busy ignoring how the act of shoveling made the muscles of his back ripple through his shirt. She didn’t even like that sort of bulky, obtrusive build, okay? Historically, she liked her wizards aristocratic and borderline infirm.

“*Lazy?* ” She repeated, perfectly plucked eyebrows arched in surprise when she finally realized what had been said. It appeared Longbottom, as sniveling and repellant as he was as a boy, had grown into a man who could be rather *biting* with his words .

“It’s not your fault,” he said brusquely, as if that was some sort of consolation.. Still, he would not look at her, utterly focused on shifting the earth. The back of his neck began to glisten from exertion. “No one’s ever thought you capable of much, have they?”

First, came the outrage. How *dare* he? Him of all people—a blood traitor—telling Pansy that no one thought much of her? *Her?* But under Pansy’s affront lay something far more dangerous; she squirmed internally under the realization that the Gryffindor brute had somehow taken one look her way and read her insecurities like a bloody *book*.

That's why Draco and Theo hadn't taken her along with them, wasn't it? Because she was incapable. Useless. *Decorative* .

"Why would I want to be thought of as capable?" She tossed her pretty head dismissively, squashing her doubts instead of airing her internal struggle to bloody *Longbottom*, of all people. "Capable is an insult disguised as a compliment for the working class and, gods forbid, the few hideous, unmarriageable pureblood witches who become loathsome governesses and punish little girls who dare trip over their words."

Her sentence finished on a more frazzled note than she'd have liked. She smoothed her hair just as he looked up from digging his ditch, his lips twitching.

Was he *laughing* at her?

"Speaking from experience, then? Was your governess mean to you, Parkinson? Is that why you seem to think yourself a victim in all this? Poor little rich girl, had her wrists hit with a ruler—"

"That's none of your business," she snapped, stung that he'd hit the nail so exactly on the head. "I don't know why someone as far below my station as *you* is even speaking to me."

"Why do you keep responding?" Longbottom muttered, scattering something from his pocket into the ditch haphazardly. "If I'm so below you?"

It was a question Pansy didn't necessarily have the answer to. She harrumphed and smoked and watched out of the corner of her eye as he dug what looked like a small trench. She was half expecting him to pull a buried chest of contraband from its depths, but he didn't seem to be digging in search of anything; he just stood, shovel in hand, creating an absence in the earth.

"What are you doing, anyway?" She asked despite herself, standing and dusting off her too short uniform skirt in the process, so she

could peer into the hole. “Digging a grave?”

As if she had some sort of contagious ailment, Longbottom stepped back, giving her a wide berth. She scoffed loudly, profoundly unconcerned about looking unattractive in front of the likes of him. More than anything, Pansy knew she was pretty. She had cultivated her beauty as one would a rose garden, with careful pruning and a delicate hand. Yes, she was beautiful: it was the most important thing about her.

“It’s not a grave.” He waved his wand and re-filled the hole, muttering spells until a series of fragrant, spicy shoots poked through the freshly tilled earth. “It’s dittany. Has to be planted two thirds of the way deep, like tomatoes. Can’t harvest them for another six weeks and the infirmary store is almost out.”

“Like...tomatoes.”

He dusted off his hands and shrugged, an unassuming gesture that made her want to club both him and herself over the head.

“There’s a shortage in the apothecaries and quite a lot of wounds that need minding around here, and...” He gestured to the freshly propagated plot. “I wanted to help. Not rocket science, is it?”

Before she could inquire what on earth *rocket science* was, he’d begun striding back towards the castle, broad shoulders braced against the early autumn wind—hadn’t he used to slouch? She imagined him, curled into a ball like an armadillo, begging to be kicked.

Put off, Pansy put out her spliff, unsettled by the way the interaction had left her with the strangest urge to cry. She didn’t, because she wasn’t a *child*, but she had to live with the fact that for a split second she wanted to, and that was embarrassment enough.

Circe, this war was making her *barmy*.



For days after, she struggled to get his words out of her head. They played on some sort of idiotic loop, like a broken gramophone in her subconscious: *I wanted to help* . It made her stomach twist at mealtimes, as she pushed her supper around on her plate, having lost her appetite around the same time she'd lost everything else.

Disturbed, Pansy considered: had she only ever accepted what she was told? Had she, even once, fought for anything she wanted rather than simply resigning herself to what she was given? Had she ever desired anything for anyone other than herself, which was to say, had she ever considered the world and wondered how she could improve it?

And worst of all— why had she never asked herself such things before?

In her gut, Pansy knew why: she was the de facto Parkinson heir, the contingency of a noble bloodline. She wasn't *allowed* to just do whatever she wanted (there it was again, that pesky word she'd grown to chafe against like burlap, *allowed* ), and so, she found it was much, much easier not to *want* to do anything at all with her life.

Annoyed, she cursed the stupid boy who'd planted the seed in the first place. Longbottom was the enemy, a blood traitor and worse, a bumbling fool. He associated with Potter and his merry gang of mudbloods. He was just another pathetic dogooder with a death wish and a hero complex.

Wasn't he?

Because the universe was dead set on conspiring against her, Flitwick partnered them together in their severely diminished seventh year Charms class for a lesson that had nothing to do with the planned curriculum. A Patronus Charm, the vertically-challenged professor explained, was a difficult N.E.W.T. level defensive spell that the Carrows had omitted from their Dark Arts focused syllabus.

“It is a spell that I am of the mindset that you should all learn, especially since I’ve received word of additional security measures in Hogsmeade Village.” Flitwick pursed his thin lips in disapproval. “I am sure you are all familiar with the Dementors.”

Pansy felt a wave of dread wash over her spine, remembering the feeling they’d conjured in her during third year, while they hunted Sirius Black. Like she was falling into a fathomless abyss, an ocean trench that held only the worst detritus of the world, her and all the other misshapen, vicious things that couldn’t survive in the light.

“Conjuring a corporeal patronus is no simple feat, but do not be discouraged! We currently have a plethora of adept casters; I’ve paired you so that at least one student with experience can assist the other.”

Pansy did not move as the students reluctantly paired off; Crabbe and Goyle had flunked out of charms after O.W.L.s, so she sent a look of commiseration to Blaise, who’d been matched with one of the Patil twins. Longbottom was forced to come to her; he strode over with his hands in his pockets and a solidity to his gait that frankly, annoyed her.

More than almost anyone, she knew the importance of looks. Of clothing carefully chosen to project authority or innocence, of the power of red lipstick or a good shave. Perhaps this was how she suddenly understood exactly *why* he had been getting in unceasing trouble under Hogwarts’ new regime. Without Potter’s swinging in from chandeliers, the school was missing a hero and, with a slightly crooked jawline and a face full of yellowing bruises, Longbottom certainly looked the part.

Something in her stomach clenched and then unfurled, like a flag being hoisted into a breeze.

“Alright?” He asked quietly and she sneered in response.

“Let’s get this over with.”

As it turned out, a Patronus was not something one simply got over with. It was fucking *impossible*; no matter how hard she tried, or what blasted memory she attempted to procure, all that ever left her wand were pathetic little wisps of mist.

She grew angrier and angrier as their practice session wore on, nearling snarling as she watched Blaise's gleaming monitor lizard curl up under the classroom's large windows in a patch of sun. Worst of all was when Longbottom, under the guise of demonstration, neatly conjured a silvery creature of his own: a regal swan that floated around the room, before snapping at her ankles with its vicious beak.

"Get that thing away from me," she gritted, a bead of sweat trickling off her forehead and into her eyes. Great, now her winged liner was going to be streaky. Excellent. The shit cherry on her shit day.

"It's mostly confidence." Longbottom crossed his arms, watching her stance without criticism as she tried and, unsurprisingly, failed. "Not necessarily picking the perfect memory. You just have to really believe that you were truly happy in the moment."

She pinched the bridge of her ski-slope nose in irritation, trying not to scream.

"Thank you for explaining the incredibly difficult concept of happiness to me. I never would have grasped it without you. Now, go away."

He did not go away. Worse, the look of pity returned.

"It *is* a difficult concept." His voice had gone low, like it was just for her. "Isn't it?"

"Fuck off," Pansy warned, her cheeks warming as the lesson ended and their classmates began to pack up their bags. Out of sheer stubbornness, she lingered in the classroom even after Flitwick departed, resolved to keep practicing; she would not fall into the Demontor's abyss again, not if she could help it.

To her dismay, Longbottom stayed as well, sending his silver swan swanning—honestly, fuck her life—around the empty classroom. She wasn't sure what was more insulting; that he thought she needed remedial instruction, or that he, their year's signature underperformer in both marks and practicals, could actually *help* her.

"Are you deaf? I said, go away."

"Stop ordering me around," he finally snapped, and there—there was the man she'd gotten glimpses of outside the greenhouse, *just* behind the soft, dopey exterior. Hardened and a little mean, the result of being underestimated and teased and beaten. Someone who had taken the abuse and grown *stronger* because of it. She wanted to pull him out from Longbottom's heart's basement and make him yell at her until she cried and she had no idea why.

Pansy chewed the inside of her teeth until she tasted blood.

"Please, leave me alone," she finally managed in her sweetest, falsest voice. "Don't you have tomatoes to grow? Children to inspire? Mudbloods to—"

"Don't say that word." A shadow crossed his face, the darkness uncharacteristic enough that it shut Pansy up. He looked...furious. With *her*. Inexplicably, her palms started to itch.

"Why not?" She asked, genuinely baffled. Despite his favored associations, it wasn't like *he* was one of them. Disgraced as they might be, Longbottom was of pure lineage, one of the Sacred Twenty-Eight at that. What did it matter to him what she called anyone else?

"Because I said so," he snapped, and then shook his head, like he was disappointed with himself for even engaging. "I won't help you if you're being hateful."

Ah, but she was hateful. It was in her blood.

“Fine. I don’t need your help, anyway.”

“Have it your way.” A part of her shriveled under his dismissal.

He made no effort to close the oak door quietly on his way out, letting it slam shut, the sound reverberating so that she felt it in the soles of her shoes long after he’d left.

Although she wasn’t quite sure why, she felt suddenly and tremendously guilty.

Try as she might, Pansy did not produce a Patronus that day. She overexerted herself and then skipped dinner, choosing instead to send an owl to Draco: a false, peppy missive that would undoubtedly be read by whoever was monitoring the school post. In it, she went on about how school had changed and how wonderful it all was now that they’d all but eradicated the threat to their culture. She knew he’d read between the lines; he knew her well enough to understand what she wasn’t stating outright. *They lied to us, didn’t they? They said this would make it all better, but it’s made everything so much worse.*

She sent it off with one of the school’s harried barn owls and did not hold her breath for a response.

---

Suddenly, Neville Longbottom was everywhere. Harvesting herbs in the garden outside the greenhouses. Nicking provisions from the kitchen for those who had to go without their tasteless rationed dinners as punishment. Colluding with Peeves— *with Peeves!* — in the corridors. Usually, he was surrounded by the younger students, who looked at him the way Pansy once looked at Draco, with flagrant admiration. But unlike Draco, he proved infinitely more patient and gentle with their regard, always seeing them off to class or chucking them under the chin encouragingly. Once she saw him take a weeping, disproportionately small first year by the hand, nearly doubling over so that he could lead the girl in the direction of the Hospital Wing, which made Pansy feel absolutely *nothing* besides

contempt, because she loathed heroics and found overt displays of empathy unsavory.

Didn't she?

---

A month into term, Pansy, along with the rest of the seventh years, was pulled into combat practice sessions that were *clearly* Death Eater training exercises, under the loose guise of education. It was the first class they'd ever been in where Crabbe and Goyle excelled, taking to the Unforgivable Curses like ducks to pond water. They were mercifully in the minority; even under the threat of the Carrows, most students couldn't so much as manage a wisp of dark magic.

Unfortunately, Pansy was not most students; when she failed miserably at every turn, Alecto Carrow lectured her ceaselessly about the dangers of not living up to her potential. She didn't care. Why be Pansy Parkinson if that didn't mean anything anymore?

It was during one of these lessons that she got a taste of the Carrows' cruelty firsthand. Thus far, she'd been spared their inhumane punishments, sentenced to mere scoldings when she skived off class or got caught after curfew. She had no doubt this was because of her name, but she was learning that apparently, even pedigree had its limits.

"Are you stupid, Parkinson?" Alecto Carrow crowed, when she failed to use the Imperius curse for the hundredth time, leaving the rabbit she was supposed to be practicing on to hop about as it pleased. In the distance, Goyle was making his white rabbit fight Crabbe's brown hare in a disturbing pseudo-gladiator match. The hare kept making high, distressed squeaks that were clawing at the seams of her brain, insisting she do something, *anything* to make it stop.

"Yes," Pansy said dully, hoping that would make the insipid bitch go away. Alecto smelled like smoke and stewed onions, a nauseating combination that sent her empty stomach lurching into her chest.

“Even the half-bloods can manage this. Are you stupider than a halfblood?”

“Maybe.” Pansy shrugged. It was dangerous, dangerous territory she was charting, as close as she’d ever got to questioning the laws of blood. “Who’s to say?”

The room grew quiet. Heads swiveled her way; Crabbe looked up, distracted enough for Goyle’s hare to sink its teeth into the white rabbit’s neck. Pansy grit her teeth at the terrible noise it made.

Alecto strode to the dueling piste, an elevated platform in the middle of the room where they’d once taken Apparation Lessons, the act a clear and present threat of one of her unsavory demonstrations. .

“Come here, Miss Parkinson.” She curled a finger in Pansy’s direction. “Bring the creature.”

Chin raised, she ignored the looks and whispers and forced her body to obey, holding the wriggling creature in her arms. Before her, Alecto Carrow’s eyes glittered like smoldering coals.

“Please demonstrate the Imperius Charm for the class.”

Pansy knew it would not work. It never did. She could feel the rabbit’s little heart in her hands, pounding in fear as she tried to take control of its skeletal structure and reflexes and tiny, tiny mind. She cared an embarrassing amount about hurting it; she’d always liked animals more than people, softened by their trust and lack of natural defenses.

When she failed, as she knew she would, the room collectively held its breath.

“A pity, Miss Parkinson,” Alecto tutted, circling Pansy’s position. In the gathered crowd of students she could see Daphne’s wide eyes, Tracey’s stiff shoulders, the tight line of Blaise’s lips and in the distance, Longbottom’s terrible, unyielding pity.

“A student of your caliber should be able to manage this with ease. Perhaps you need a more...hands on demonstration. *Imperio!*”

A strange, rolling fog filled her head, and then, the sensation of a hand yanking her into the backseat of her own mind. She could feel the unnaturalness of Alecto Carrow’s magic infiltrating her body. A tar-like foreign substance, oozing through her veins.

A voice that was not her own made itself known. *Kill the rabbit*, the voice told her.

*No*, Pansy thought, horrified. *I won’t*. But obedience was not a question; every inch of her was filled with the sudden terrible urge to do as the voice said. To resist was to be dragged over hot coals, impossible to sustain.

*You will*, it insisted. *Kill it now*.

Her lungs constricted, heart pounding frantically in her head, as if every lifegiving organ in her body would cease its function should she disobey. The rabbit scrabbled in her tightening grip, trying desperately to get away.

*Wring its neck, you stupid girl!*

Pansy’s hands moved before she could catch up to them, taking a firm hold of the creature’s neck and twisting until she heard a faint, sickening pop. Then, the voice released her, and she gasped as she dropped to her knees, clutching only the soft, still body of what was once a living thing.

Alecto Carrow stood over her crumpled form, a simper plastered on her brutish face.

“Let us hope you are not as thick headed when it comes to learning the Cruciatus Curse, Miss Parkinson. A practical application of *that* lesson will not be nearly as forgiving.”



She dragged herself up, willing her shaking body to be carried by invisible strings like a marionette as she gave herself instructions. *Walk, Pansy. Breathe, Pansy. Don't throw up, Pansy.* Somehow, she held it together until the end of the lesson, when she was finally able to streak to the second-floor girls' lavatory and retch into the sink.

She ran the tap, sticking her head under the stream, and wondered if this was what drowning felt like.

How had she ever thought herself exempt? If Draco and Theo weren't, why would she, Pansy Parkinson, ever be the exception to reciprocated cruelty? She looked at herself in the mirror, a slip of a girl with sad dark eyes and stringy wet hair and hands that had always done whatever they were told.

Pansy waited to return to the practice space, wanting to avoid any witnesses as she picked up the dead rabbit and cradled it in her arms like a doll, wincing at how it lolled, broken neck gone lax. She held it to her chest as she smoothed its rumpled fur. Another soft, sweet thing that had no business in this world, this wasteland she'd once believed to be hers.

Heavy footsteps made her whirl around, dead rabbit shoved behind her back lest she be seen being so openly weak and sentimental . But it was only *him* , holding a flimsy carton box lined with old *Prophets* in one of his enormous hands.

"Here," Longbottom's gruff voice offered, as he extended it in her direction. Pansy just stared, eyes growing to the size of saucers, afraid that if she spoke, something dangerously honest would escape.

"It's okay." He softened incrementally as he took in her state of shock, tone turning reassuring, like when he spoke to the younger students that came to him in tears. "Put it in here. I'll bury it."

"It's just a rabbit." She tried to sound uncaring, but the misery on her face must have given her away. Despite all her practice, she'd never

been very good at schooling her expression to hide her emotions.  
“It’s nothing.”

He extended the carton until it brushed her forearm. With a lump in her throat, she placed the limp animal in the box.

“You don’t have to do that, you know,” he said, large hands folding the top down so Pansy could no longer see it, and finally she could breathe again. Rapid little stutters that felt more like panic than anything else, but at least her brain was getting oxygen.

“Do what?”

“Pretend you don’t care.”

She sucked in a long shuddering exhale, wishing someone would just oblivate her already. Cowardly as she was, she hoped to forget all of this one day, that it would become a distant, terrible dream she couldn’t quite place.

“I—” She wasn’t sure there were words for what she was feeling at that moment. If there were, she didn’t know if she could bring herself to use them. She grasped desperately at an old vice, self-destruction. She didn’t deserve gentleness, not after she’d done such a thing.

“Why are you being kind to me? You h-hate me.” To her horror, her words carried an audible tremor. The phantom of her old stutter, beach from the grave. “You should hate me.”

Neville Longbottom held the box with the thing Pansy had killed inside it and shook his head, as if she’d misunderstood him entirely.

“I don’t hate you.”

“Why not?”

“It’s hard to hate someone who always looks so afraid.”

---

---

After the incident with the rabbit, Pansy took a page out of Draco Malfoy's old playbook: she wrote to her father.

It was unseemly, she insisted, that the Carrows—the Carrows, who everyone suspected of fudging bits of their family tree— were making *her* run drills, like a common foot soldier. It could impede her marriage prospects, if she were to be seen as anything other than a jewel that needed delicate handling; after all, no respectable wizard wanted a rough, brawling wife.

These were, of course, the magic words. Within a week, she was promptly excused from combat drills, free to flounce off and spend her time pouring over magical law and betrothal contracts in the library, familiarizing herself with the plank she'd undoubtedly soon be walking.

If Alecko Carrow hadn't liked Pansy before, she positively *hated* her now that her authority had been undermined, publicly and with aplomb. Whenever the odious woman happened upon her, she searched relentlessly to find any excuse for punishment: untidy uniform, tardiness, loitering in the corridors. Pansy couldn't help but poke the bear, smirking up at Alecko as she was given comparatively farcical punishments and made to write lines in detention, otherwise untouchable due to her father's intercession.

She wasn't quite sure why she was doing it anymore. Any of it. Most days, she felt very far from her own body, fathoms away from anything resembling pleasure. Still she let Blaise touch her, groan into her neck, as she floated somewhere above herself, wondering about all that she'd lost.

"Where'd you go?" He murmured, after one of their uninspired couplings in a broom closet. "You look like you're a million miles away."

"Perhaps your cock simply bores me," she snapped, pulling up her knickers and vanishing the mess.

“No need to be a bitch about it.” Blaise looked amused, rather than offended, always so difficult to knock off kilter. “You seemed to be having a nice enough time while I was fucking you.”

“I’d like to actually come before I get married,” she sniped back. “Perhaps I’ll start fucking someone else.”

“Who else is there that’s not dead or Marked yet?” Blaise laughed, unbothered. “Filch?”

As the broom closet door swung shut behind her, she decided that she was officially done with it. Really, if he couldn’t even get her off, what was the point?

With a string of insults circling her thoughts like a murder of crows—mainly oriented around Blaise’s tendency to rest on the laurels of his good looks and subsequent inability to please a witch—Pansy was well on her way to storming back down to her dormitory when she heard an agonized groan coming from one of the dungeon classrooms.

She stopped in her tracks. It was undoubtedly one of the Carrows’ latest victims, having received his share of corporal punishment. *Do not involve yourself*, she told herself firmly, instructing her own feet to carry her up to her four poster bed. Surely, someone else would see to it?

It was deeply inopportune to remember the gruff statement that had haunted her as of late: *I wanted to help*.

Suddenly, Pansy made an inexplicable, out-of-character decision.

She crept down the hallway in pursuit of the sound, cursing herself as she went, and followed the groans until she found their source behind a bolted door. She unlocked it with a murmured *alohomora* and peeked her head into the seemingly empty chamber, only to find a lone figure, crumpled in a corner. When she caught a glimpse of his swollen face in the torchlight, she gasped.

*“Longbottom?”* Before she could think about what she was doing and how very, very impractical it was, she’d crossed the room to where he lay crumpled on the floor.

Neville Longbottom had been all but flayed, lip split and his left eye swollen and blackening. His ash brown hair was sweaty and in disarray, a trickle of blood dripping from his hairline into his face as the tendons in his neck tightened and his body was wracked with visible tremors, no doubt the after effect of one of her housemates’ haphazard attempts at the Cruciatus.

“Come to finish me off, have you?” He croaked. “Decided to lift a finger after all?”

She crouched down, examining the injuries from a closer distance. Beyond his bruised visage, he had a dusting of freckles across his nose and cheeks, delicate looking against his pale skin. What a strange time to notice such a thing.

“You’re bleeding.”

“No...shit,” he groaned. Despite his injuries, he fought to haul himself up, panting at the exertion until he was level with her. She found herself wondering if he’d always been so determined, and if not, what had happened to him to inspire such iron resolve.

“Merlin, you’re in a state. What on earth did you *do*? ” Most students on the receiving end of the Carrows’ punishments got smacked around a bit, perhaps shocked with an electricity hex or given a weak taste of the Cruciatus. Not this gratuitous beating, an overzealous attempt at forced submission.

“Some kid was caught stealing Potions ingredients from Slughorn’s supply,” he gritted, every word costing him, and before she fully realized what she was doing, Pansy waved her wand and began to clean out any shallow injuries with the healing charm she’d used the prior year on Theodore’s self-induced lacerations. Longbottom hissed at the sting, but continued his explanation.

“Amycus told me to use the...C-Cruciatius on him.” His bloody face split into a cold smile, a demented little flicker catching light in his eyes. “I refused. Asked him if he needed to use students for his dirty work because he was too thick to manage it himself. May have mentioned his conception too...something about his mother fucking a troll?”

Pansy bit her lip.

There was something positively bizarre about watching the boy she’d teased relentlessly grow into the sort of man who taunted Death Eaters. He’d been beaten badly, and still, he was grinning like he was completely mental, bizarrely *proud* of his insubordination.

An unfamiliar sickening sensation tore through her, making her feel as though in some roundabout fashion, this was somehow her fault. Like she’d whipped and flogged him herself, like she’d been a part of this...this destruction. And she almost had, hadn’t she? If the Carrows had thought her particularly *promising*, if she’d not had her well-connected father pulling strings, it would have been her, raising her wand with the Cruciatius on her tongue.

Her healing wasn’t the neatest, but it would hold him together until he could get to the Hospital Wing. She concentrated on the task at hand, and he let out a pained yelp as she jabbed her wand into his dislocated shoulder, resetting it. His cry turned to something breather, a moan of relief, and she felt the blood rush traitorously into her cheeks.

“Nice one,” he managed, trying out his rotator cuff. “Thanks.”

“Why didn’t you just do it?” She asked bluntly, after he’d caught his breath. “You knew they would torture the poor sod either way, probably more violently at their hand than yours, so...why refuse? What does that accomplish?”

Longbottom’s jaw twitched, and he gave her that look again, the one that she loathed, like *she* was the one who they all should be sorry

for.

“You know, Parkinson,” he murmured, pausing to wince as he fought through another bout of tremors. “Sometimes when you say these things, you sound nearly sociopathic.”

“There’s no need to be *rude*,” Pansy sat back on her heels, strangely stung by his judgment. She was logical; that didn’t make her a *sociopath*.

Longbottom struggled to his feet, bracing himself on the wall and pulling himself up to his full height with a groan. She thought he was going to leave her kneeling there, but then he hesitated and turned her way.

“Do you know what happened to my parents?” He asked, very softly. “What was done to them during the first war?”

She nodded stiffly, the barest inclination of her head. Although it was not often spoken of aloud, everyone knew what happened to the Longbottoms. A pair of Aurors, tortured to insanity by Draco’s unsavory aunt. A tragedy or a warning, depending on who you asked.

“Then, why?” he said, something hard in the set of his jaw that gave her pause. “Why would you ask me that question, when you already have the answer?”

“I—” Pansy wet her lips, all the pithy words she’d turned into weapons turning to ash on her tongue. She didn’t know how to express it, her quiet desire to reject this life she’d been told would be something great, but in reality, was only filled with more violence, more loss. “—I don’t know.”

Something delicate and uncharted hung in the air between them as he hesitated, considering her with a furrowed brow. She fidgeted, still on her knees before him, unsure of how to be under the attention of a man who was looking at her so differently than men usually did.

With tremendous gravity instead of humor or placation or even attraction. Like she was something to be taken seriously.

She steeled herself and peered up from under her long dark lashes to meet his eyes. Had she ever realized before that they were blue? His gaze intensified—no, she corrected mentally, not blue. More like seaglass, their color mediating between lush meadow and breaking waves. Between cerulean and green, never simply one or the other.

With a sharp exhale, he seemed to make some sort of decision she was not privy to. He reached down for her hand and she took it, allowing herself to be helped up. His hands were calloused and large enough to span the small of her back, thumb to pinky.

“With nutters like the Carrows,” he started, not meeting her eyes and he carefully navigated his wording. “Everything is about power, mostly convincing you that you don’t have any. They want you to think that you’re helpless, because then you don’t fight back. Tonight, they wanted me to make it easy for them, and I refused, because people need to remember that we aren’t powerless. And we won’t make it fucking easy. ”

Pansy parted her lips to argue but Longbottom shook his head, not yet finished.

“It’s not some inherent thing, is it? Standing up for what’s right or against what’s wrong. It’s not...it never feels natural, to me. It feels well, a bit like Potions,” he finished, somewhat lacklusterly.

“Potions?”

“Impossible.” His lips quirked into a slight smile, softening his face. For a moment, Pansy saw a trace of the boy he used to be, flustered and chasing after his toad. “So bloody difficult you think, there’s no way I can do this. Nobody ever tells you that courage feels a lot like fear. And that when you *do* manage it...it’s the cleanest feeling in the world.”



Pansy's lips parted in a soft inhale, and then she promptly turned her back and strode towards the door. She had to get out of this room, and get far, far away from this...this *lunacy*, vaulting over the battlements of her cloistered worldview. But before she did—

“You should get yourself seen to.” She paused in the doorway, worrying her lip between her teeth. “The Cruciatus can leave you with nerve damage if you don’t take a muscle relaxant after exposure. Pomfrey won’t tell you this, but have a bit of whiskey with it, if you can manage. The alcohol is a depressant, it’ll loosen you up enough to sleep.”

“How...how do *you* know that?”

Something implicit passed between them, the realization that Pansy knew how to treat the Cruciatus the same way that Neville knew to refuse to use it: from lived experience.

It happened when she’d been forbidden to see Draco and Theodore, after their family’s respective falls from grace. Pansy, who bitterly accepted most of her parents rulings, had put up a rare fight.

*They’re my friends!*

*Friends?! What nonsense! Do you want to end up alone and penniless without a good name to protect you?*

*I have a good name!* She’d shot back. *I’m a Parkinson!*

*Only because of my sacrifices!* Her mother had screeched. *Because I gave up my wishful girlish fantasies and married your father as I was told. And you will do the same!*

*I don’t want your miserable fucking life!*

Then her mother had cursed her, and everything—all her fight and her protests— had dissipated like steam in cold air, making way for the unbearable pain that followed.

Pansy blinked, tearing her way free of the memory, and then, seized by a sudden fit of madness, spoke like he did, without reservation.

“Mother and I got into an awful strop once. I...said some things she disagreed with. She let me know in no uncertain terms that I was never to speak to her in that manner again.”

Longbottom’s expression seized, his lovely horrible sympathetic face softening devastatingly at the confession. Her hands curled into fists, nails digging painfully into her palms. This was why she didn’t share such things; if he expressed an iota of sympathy she was going to *scream* .

“Oh,” he finally said quietly, swaying a bit. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Don’t expect me to swoop in and save the day the next time you get massacred being *brave* ,” she barked, trying to establish control.

Too little, too late. Neville Longbottom smiled without mirth, a rather unexpected look for his newly sharpened countenance.

“I would never expect anything from you, Pansy.”

---

He’d called her *Pansy*. The insolence! It plagued her for weeks as she went through the motions, gulping down tea and firewhiskey in equal measure in order to maintain a consistent blariness that kept her more dangerous thoughts at bay. She considered that perhaps, this was the reason her mother drank so much elf-made wine, but she pushed the heinous idea away before she could fully consider its implications or, gods forbid, feel pity towards the miserable old cow.

She also found herself inexplicably lingering outside the greenhouses. She didn’t even have the excuse of smoking, now that her supply was cut off by Blaise’s petulance. Still, she spent an inordinate amount of time in the gardens, watching the last of the dittany until one day, when she found it had been harvested completely in preparation for inclement winter.

She caught a brief glimpse one day on the seventh floor, near the heinous troll ballet tapestry. His tall wide shoulders, his arm around a pretty, round-faced Hufflepuff girl, as he looked both ways before guiding her into a passageway. When he saw Pansy, he clenched his jaw, but did not hesitate before stepping through.

The war burned on. She muddled through, feeling less and less like herself with every reported skirmish, every time she looked for Draco or Theo's name on the list of casualties, every Dementor stationed at the castle gates. She watched classmates disappear into thin air, gone one day and mere whispers the next. Her mother wrote her a strongly worded letter, reminding her of her duty to marry. Pansy burned it in the bathroom sink.

She kept practicing her Patronus, lingering in the Charms classroom after class. Occasionally, Longbottom dawdled while packing up, until giving up the pretense all together and beginning his stream of unsolicited advice. She was reluctant to become his pet project, the recipient of his misplaced charity, but for some reason she was less willing to unleash her usual vitriol against him after the Rabbit Incident.

Perhaps she was just exhausted. They all were.

"You know, it took me ages to manage it," Longbottom told her during one such afternoon, looking absently out of one of the classroom windows with a frown, as if he was remembering something bittersweet. His lips lifted into a self-deprecating smile. "Practical theory-based magic has never been my strong suit."

Pansy had something mean on the tip of her tongue— *do you even have a strong suit, Longbottom?* — but swallowed it in shock as he stepped into her personal space and touched her arm, lifting her slack wand hand and bending her elbow into an outstretched angle.

"What are you doing?" Pansy said, nearly using the more appropriate, *don't fucking touch me* .

“Helping you.”

“Right.” She rolled her eyes magnificently, aware of every nerve ending on her stupid enblow. “Because you love to *help* . Planting dittany, and burying fallen leporidae, and taking pity on poor, stupid Pansy...going up for canonization, are you?”

“Someone helped me once.” He shrugged his enormous shoulders, unbothered by her snark. “Harry taught us in fifth year, probably spent the better part of the term tutoring just me.” He’s the only reason I can manage a Patronus now.”

Oh, that’s what this was. Longbottom, honoring the holy memory of Saint Fucking Potter. Well, she decided, he wouldn’t get to use her as a prop in his efforts.

“I don’t want your pay-it-forward, take a knut, leave a knut bullshite —”

“Shut up, Parkinson.”

Miraculously, she shut up.

“Try the movement without the charm. Stop putting so much pressure on yourself.” He gave her a nudge and without thinking, she flicked her wand in the demonstrated motion and he nodded approvingly at her effort. “Good.”

Something in her cracked open. She took a step away from him, increasing the distance and reinstating the propriety that had been apparently forgotten.

“Now think about what memory you want to use. In my experience...” He hesitated, ducking his head in a shy gesture that no longer fit his imposing physique, the remnants of a previous, softer body. “Sometimes you can’t use a real memory. Sometimes it’s easier to think about a feeling you’ve had, or even, hope to one day have.” He demonstrated the charm. “Expecto Patronum!”

His swan materialized once more, arching its handsome neck as it stared at Pansy in implicit judgment, before ruffling its feathers, affronted.

"It doesn't like me very much." She cocked her head. "I suppose that makes sense. You don't like me very much, do you?"

"The Patronus is unique to the caster's magical core," he answered, leaving her question hanging in the air between them, where it became more and more brittle. "It's more than a reflection of just their likes and dislikes. It's a representation of their innermost desires, the qualities that they attract or embody."

"And you attract mean-looking birds."

He gave her a long look that, on anyone else, would be considered borderline snide.

"As of late."

"Very funny." She braced herself and took a deep breath, correcting her stance.

Conjuring a happy memory did not come easy for her, a fact which embarrassed her more than anything else. She should be happy, shouldn't she? She was rich and pretty and at the top of the proverbial pecking order. She should be *swimming* in happiness.

Focusing hard, she thought of a picturesque afternoon: Draco and Theo riding their brooms as she did her arithmetic, sprawled in the grass of Malfoy Manor. Narcissa's lilting voice calling them in for tea, her manicured hand ruffling Pansy's hair affectionately.

" *Expecto Patronum!* "

She peeked through her lashes. Nothing. In her peripheral vision, she could see him watching her, waiting without urgency. A mortifying, unspeakable part of her wanted to impress him. Wanted,

more than anything, for him to call her good again. She drove a stake through its stupid heart.

“Forget it.” She crossed her arms stiffly. “I’m hopeless at this.”

“What did you think of?”

“That’s quite personal,” she answered tightly, before sighing and giving into the question. “My friends. My childhood. Good memories of both.”

“Try again.” Longbottom’s voice was deep and steady, like rain on glass window panes. “Maybe don’t use a memory. What about a feeling?”

She closed her eyes and thought of her Palominos, nickering in the stables as she brushed their manes. Thought of the sweet sensation of utter freedom that accompanied her streaking through the fields, certain she would not be bucked off because horses were fair like that. She loved them and in turn, they loved her without strings or stipulations. An easy give and take. She felt the wind in her hair, the leather of the saddle between her thighs as she urged her horse faster and faster until they took off, unfurling their great wings, shooting her into the sky. The place she could be Pansy, just Pansy —

“Expecto Patronum,” she whispered, her eyes tightly shut. She was too afraid to open them, unable to face failure with her heart so raw and chewed up—

“Go on. Look.”

She looked.

Her patronus was unsteady at first, getting its legs up from under it. But once it took its first, tentative steps it took off at a gallop, hooves pounding imaginary earth. A colt: young, unsteady, with spindly

awkward legs it had yet to grow into, and a bony, nearly skeletal body.

“It’s a horse,” she said.

“No,” Longbottom corrected, so quietly she almost missed it altogether. “That’s not a horse. That’s a thestral. A young one, by the looks of it.”

Pansy’s head whipped around, meeting his gaze in shock, his expression unassuming and a little grim, more serious than she’d ever seen him up close. Her patronus trotted closer to them and she watched as it pawed the ground, curious.

“I’ve never seen one,” she whispered, extending her hand to the silvery form. “I used to feed them oats, but I never saw them.” Her patronus ambled over to her, nudged its head under her outstretched palm as if nosing for sugar cubes, and Pansy—

Pansy blinked rapidly, and turned away, surreptitiously wiping her cheeks.

“You know what they look like,” she said stupidly. “You’ve seen the ones that pull the carriages?”

“Yes.”

“Oh.”

What would she say to the man standing in the room beside her, who had witnessed the innermost parts of her turn manifest? Who had witnessed enough death to see its harbingers?

She steeled herself as her patronus vanished into a fine mist, and focused on regaining what was left of her control over herself. The war had turned her into this thing, into this walking wound of a person, and she’d be damned if it took her composure as well.

“Well Longbottom, I suppose I appreciate your help,” she allowed out through clenched teeth, insisting to herself that it was the first and last time she’d ever lower herself into the fathomless mercy of gratitude.

But he was already gone, the classroom door left swinging quietly in his wake.

---

The point of no return came after she’d received Theo’s owl. Narcissa was dead, it read. As was Draco, by his own hand, although that couldn’t be confirmed. He was sorry, so sorry.

Pansy let her numb feet carry her numb heart up higher and higher. As fate would have it, it was Longbottom who found her at two in the morning, swigging firewhiskey on the parapets of the Astronomy tower, her stocking covered legs dangling dangerously off the ledge.

She looked terrible. Her dark eyes were glassy and reddened and she’d cried most of her makeup off her face. She was swollen from tears and blue with the cold and there was a slosh of whiskey on her wrinkled oxford shirt. Stupidly, she was not wearing her warm, fur lined winter cloak, left on her dormitory floor with Theo’s crumpled letter, and yet, she could not bring herself to cast a warming charm. Not when there was so little warmth left in her.

“Uh...Parkinson?”

She didn’t even turn, only took another gulp of firewhiskey, and glared at the audacity of the stars, winking above them mockingly.

“Back to Parkinson, am I?” She slurred, distantly noting that she sounded terribly *wounded*. How embarrassing for her. “What are you doing up here? Shouldn’t you be in an alcove diddling a Hufflepuff?”

He made an alarmed sound from the back of his throat at her crassness. Victory, she thought, marking a point in her mental column.



“I was sending some post off with some, er, delicate information. Correspondence with...well, it's better that you don't know. Had to wait until it was late enough that the owl wouldn't be seen.”

Ah, so he was communicating with the resistance. Fuck, on second thought, he probably *was* the resistance, which frankly, did not give her high hopes when it came to their fight against the Dark Lord.

Longbottom approached slowly, as if trying not to spook a hippogriff. When she glanced his way, she found that he had a new scar bisecting his face, taut and silvery in the moonlight, and a bit of a shadow on his jaw, scruffier than she'd ever seen him before.

“Bit late for a nightcap,” he said, a hint of caution in his tone. He gave her an appraising look, and she watched as he took in her ruined appearance. She must have looked an absolute fright. “What's wrong?”

Did he have to ask so gently? Her lower lip wobbled, outer facade crumbling like bits of chalk.

“Got a letter.” Her voice sounded like she hadn't used it in years. “Draco's dead.”

“Draco...Malfoy?”

“What other fucking Draco do you know?”

“Shit.” Through her inebriated haze, she thought she saw genuine regret in his eyes. “I'm sorry.”

Pansy snorted out a laugh, bitter as an orange rind. She let the cold wind ruffle her hair, not bothering to fix the mess. Before she could protest otherwise, she felt a warm roughspun weight fall around her shoulders, smelling of something woody and herbal with a hint of laundry soap.

“I don't need your cloak. Or your pity.”

Protected only by his jumper, he swung his legs over the parapet and sat beside her, an unwanted, very solid lump, blocking the wind. She told herself it was probably because his conscience would not allow him to leave, lest she throw herself off the ledge. He huffed out a visible breath, casting a warming charm that enveloped them both. Between the warmth of the cloak and the charm, her skin began to painfully reawaken, pinpricks of sensation lighting up her frozen limbs.

"It's not pity," he corrected. "I'm not sorry for you. I'm just sorry. Despite my personal feelings about Draco Malfoy, I know that you and he were always...close."

The wind picked up gently, brushing the castle ramparts like a lover's caress. Her eyes were burning, probably from the frozen air. She kept forgetting to blink.

*Close.* What a strange word, to encapsulate all that they'd been.

Pansy had known Draco practically as long as she'd been sentient; in an effort to lay groundwork for an eventual betrothal contract, she'd been put into lessons with him and a select few children from respectable families, and was thus doomed from the start to follow him and his pureblood playmates around like a House-Elf. Always so eager to obtain their regard, fully preoccupied by the discovery that sometimes, if she was very witty or particularly cruel, Draco paid attention to her. Sometimes she could even make him laugh and for a glorious moment, she would be seen as more than something decorative. As someone to be respected, or even, feared. And so, she sharpened her tongue and hoarded insults like silver-tipped arrows, ready to be shot into an unsuspecting victim at a moment's notice.

"It wasn't like everyone thought," she said, unsure of why she felt the urge to explain. "I wasn't in love with him, I just thought I was *supposed* to be. Our parents were in talks for a betrothal until Lucius was sent to Azkaban and all their plans fell through. Probably for the

best...we would have *loathed* being married, wouldn't have lasted a day without a row."

She wondered absently if Longbottom knew about pureblood betrothal contracts and marriage rituals, if he was raised within the culture or under a more progressive agenda.

"I certainly didn't help to curb his ego. Gods, I used to sit in the stands, even in the rain, to watch all his Seeker practices, and I abhor Quidditch. Absolutely loathe it, think it's a waste of time and precious resources— do you know how much culture we could fund the creation of if we weren't throwing mountains of gold at the bloody English National Team?" She sighed deeply, tracing her thoughts back to their painful source. "But even though he made me barmy and we rowed nonstop, he was my first friend. My first everything, actually."

Beside her, Longbottom quirked a brow, visibly surprised by the direction she'd taken. She recognized her tongue had been loosened by the whiskey, but couldn't bring herself to stop talking.

"It sounds terribly strange to say aloud, doesn't it? But that's what I keep thinking, that the boy I lost my virginity to is dead." She took a swig from her nearly empty bottle and shuddered at the fiery aftertaste.

She would not cry. If Draco were alive, he'd torment her over it. *Buck up, Parks, stop blubbering over my cock. Merlin, it wasn't that bad, was it?*

*It was worse*, she thought. But she wouldn't have had it any other way.

"Have you ever had sex, Longbottom?"

"Oh, I'm *much* too sober for this conversation."

“I’ll take that as a no.” She dangled the last of the whiskey under his nose. “Want any of this before I kill it?”

To her utter shock, he took the bottle from her and drained it with a grimace.

“Aren’t you scared you’ll die a virgin, what with the war on and all?”

His cheekbones pinkened ever so slightly from the cold and the alcohol.

“I didn’t say I was a virgin.”

“*Really?*” She whistled, low and impressed. “Look at you. Longbottom, all grown up. Was it good? It usually is for boys.” She sighed at the unfairness of the statement, squinting at the stars wishing she had more whiskey.

Personally, Pansy wasn’t afraid of dying—or marrying, there was little difference—without experiencing the transcendent sex of romance books, but she was scared that she’d live a whole life without ever falling in love.

“Do you ever think about killing yourself?” She asked bluntly, not bothering to mince words.

“Jesus *Christ*. ” He pinched the bridge of his nose, looking very much at a loss.

“That’s what Draco did. He knew deserting the Dark Lord would kill him and he did it anyway. If I died, my parents would be absolutely apoplectic, which is a plus. Then, they’d have no one to carry on their precious Parkinson bloodline. Death might be preferable to whatever heinous prospective husband they force on me, anyway. Father says if I don’t have a contract by Christmas, I’m going to the highest bidder.”

She laughed bitterly. Longbottom's concern grew more visible, as he took in their great height and the consequences of falling from it. It was lovely, having his worry directed at her. Warmer than even his cloak.

"If you're...thinking about doing that—erm—do you need me to get someone? Zabini or uh, Greengrass?"

"Oh stop it, I'm not going to jump. If I killed myself I'd use poison, obviously. I'd prefer to be a pretty corpse."

"It's the nineties. The alternative to being forced into an arranged marriage is not limited to committing suicide."

"Well, of course I'd prefer to live," she explained, as if this were obvious. "But how can anyone go on like this, unwanted betrothals aside? You know, they said that under the Dark Lord we'd have this shining civilization free of threats to our precious way of life, but do you know what I think?"

He raised a strong eyebrow, daring her to continue. Filled with a strange, whiskey induced confidence, she confessed everything she'd never previously managed to say aloud.

"I think they *lied*. I think it's shite, all of it. I don't care anymore who your parents are or where you come from, so long as my friends aren't dying or being ripped to shreds. It makes me *sick* to even think that I was ever stupid enough to be sold on it. You're a pureblood too, Longbottom. Aren't you angry?"

"I'm a blood traitor," he said simply. Pansy marveled at the fact that the pejorative term she once considered the highest of insults seemed to have no effect on him whatsoever. "No one ever promised me superiority; if they did, I wouldn't have wanted it anyway. And yeah, I'm fucking angry. Why do you think we're fighting back?" He scoffed, as if she was once again missing something obvious. "You know Pansy, you're a real trip sometimes. You get so close to the point and then—" He made a gesture with his hand, to

exemplify veering off course. “Suicide and sacrifice are two very different things, but I reckon that the line between them can get quite thin during wars.”

“How do you figure?”

“You asked me why I wouldn’t cast the Cruciatus? I hate to draw the comparison between myself and Malfoy, but maybe he had a similar answer. Maybe he refused, because what he was being asked to do was *wrong*, and he was willing to pay the price.” His jaw tightened into something that could cut through ice. “If I die, it’s going to be for something, like my mum and dad.”

Pansy suddenly couldn’t breathe. She’d not thought about it that way—it hadn’t even occurred to her—had Draco’s abandonment been a statement? Had he died going *against* the Dark Lord? Had he sacrificed himself rather than accept a fate he was unwilling to bear?

“Yes,” she managed. “That’s all very easy for you to say. You’re brave.”

His lips parted slightly, and something flashed across his face, something that looked a lot like—

“Sod these houses.” He scrubbed a hand over his eyes. “What a stupid fucking system, telling eleven year olds what they are and aren’t before their brains ever finish developing. You know, I used to be afraid all the fucking time. Afraid of Snape, of Draco...even of you.”

Pansy shrunk slightly, ducking her head into his cloak like a turtle and refusing to look the man beside her in the eye. She’d always been horrible to him, which begged the question: when exactly had she stopped? While practicing her Patronus? Patching him up in the dungeons? Merlin, had it been even earlier, outside the greenhouses?

“Back then,” he continued, unaware of her drunken train of thought. “I couldn’t get a bloody word out without feeling like I was going to asphyxiate. But do you know what happened? One day, I got tired of being so afraid all the time and I *did* something about it. And if *I* can do it, that means anyone can. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. Bravery...it’s just something you choose.”

To her complete and other surprise, he reached out and touched her face. She stopped breathing as his rough fingers gently turned her head, and then pressed under her chin so that she met his serious gaze.

“Aren’t you tired of having everything you believe dictated to you? Aren’t you sick of being hateful? Being afraid?”

Slowly, she nodded, head dipping up and down in his hand.

“Then don’t you want to fight for something better?”

She thought about Draco, who must have been so alone and afraid, choosing to die rather than living as the Dark Lord’s pawn. About Theo, choosing to fight his way through, to kill and maim for the chance to stay alive. What she was doing wasn’t living. It could barely be classed as surviving.

“I want—” She knew what she didn’t want. That was simple. She didn’t want to marry a stranger. She didn’t—gods help her—want to be her *mother*. She didn’t want to be so bloody tired all the time. She didn’t want to be considered less valuable just because she’d been born a witch instead of a wizard. She didn’t want to live in a world where dominance meant cruelty, meant subjugation.

She didn’t want Draco to have died in vain.

“I want to make them pay.”

A blazing expression took hold of his face, scorching her with its intensity. He withdrew his touch—and if anyone were to say she

chased it, arching her neck, *no*, she didn't —and stood rather abruptly. Without hesitating, he helped her off the ramparts and into the tower's solid ground like she was a sack of potatoes; even through his cloak, his hands were molten around her waist.

"Come on," he said gruffly. "Let's go."

"Where?" She breathed.

"Out of this bloody cold." He lingered at the top of the tower's stairs. "You coming?"

Still lightheaded from the whiskey, Pansy toddered across to where he stood in the doorway, but instead of starting down the stairs at his behest, she stood on her tiptoes and pressed her lips to his cheek. She was too short—technically she only reached his jaw— but the second they made contact, her soft pink mouth against his prickly stubble, he stilled completely like he'd been suddenly and completely encased in marble.

"Thank you," she said into his skin. "And...I'm sorry."

"Don't—" He cleared his throat, looking right over her head. "Don't mention it."

A whisper of color was left in her wake, the remnants of her undoubtedly smeared lipstick.

A wild thought occurred to her: if Draco were around to see her, drunk on the parapet, kissing Neville Longbottom's clenched jaw? Well. He'd simply *die*.

Pansy almost smiled, the wave of grief receding momentarily to make room for a strange, certain strength. A fortitude she'd never previously thought herself capable of wielding.

\*



It was night again in the Parkinson dungeon by the time she was nearly through and Draco's jaw had nearly unhinged from his skull.

"You're telling me that you were radicalized by *Neville fucking Longbottom?*"

"Hello pot, may I introduce you to kettle?"

"Longbottom," he continued, undeterred by sarcasm. "The boy who spent the better part of our school years chasing around a toad?"

Pansy kissed her teeth disapprovingly. "Well, I can hardly blame him for choosing an amphibian over the rest of Gryffindor House, can I?"

"You defected because of *Longbottom?*"

"I'd say your supposed death had a rather large part in it too," she said dryly. "I had a whole scheme to avenge you, you know."

"Right. Fuck, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I should have—" He cut himself off, shaking his head bitterly. "I'm sorry, Pansy."

How stupid he'd been, thinking his disappearance would go unquestioned, that he could just waltz off into the sun with Granger—

An unanticipated burst of pain flooded his head, charring his still sensitive nerve endings. Thinking of her was agony, a psychosomatic summoning of his exposure to the curse through their bond. He could hardly reach out in her direction, every outstretched attempt met by a searing hot blade. Was that what she currently felt? Or had the connection between them been irreparably damaged by the Cruciatus? Or even worse, was she—

Draco rubbed his temples groaning, and Pansy had to have taken pity on him, because she sniffed and patted his forearm rather magnanimously.

"I was rather cut up about it, but now that I know your grand demise was all bollocks, I'm rather set upon not dying in this dungeon while

holding a grudge against my oldest and most onerous friend. You're better company than Ollivander was anyway, blathering on about wand materials and the like. Bored me to absolute *tears*. ”

An glaringly obvious question reared its head as Draco's brain, still recuperating, struggled to keep up with the chain of events.

“Wait. How— How'd they find out about it? Your parents?”

Pansy sighed bitterly, tucking her hair behind both ears. In the dim light of the dungeon, it made her look very young, all but transforming her into the girl who used to stick her chewed Droobles on the bottom of his dragonhide boots.

“Well, it all went to shit didn't it?”

---

The Room of Requirement had never bloomed for Pansy as it had for Neville Longbottom; in fact, she'd never even been aware of its full potential, previously thinking it to be a particularly fickle alcove for a quick shag, a door that showed up occasionally when she was in need of a little privacy and a sturdy, load bearing wall.

But for him the room practically rolled out a red carpet; it grew large enough to house a small army, which Pansy supposed, was exactly what they were.

As the room turned into a sort of makeshift barracks, they were provided with hammocks and bunks, large wheeled chalkboards for charting plans and making supply lists, and an assortment of dummies for the dueling practices that often sprung up in the evenings. Hogwarts banners of every house—even, upon her arrival, Slytherin— hung on the walls, mismatched but comfortable couches, armchairs, and beanbags scattered around, creating cozy nooks for small groups to gather and plan. Spellbooks, maps of the castle, and parchments with hastily scrawled notes lay open on tables and a subtle charm over the entire room seemed to dampen sound from outside, creating an oddly peaceful sense of containment.

Under Neville's influence, the Room of Requirement was not just a place to hide—it was a sanctuary, providing warmth, safety, and a bizarre sense of community to all who sought refuge, even the fallen Slytherin princess herself.

Its inhabitants were understandably far more doubtful of Pansy's presence, even with Neville vouching for her. She was privy to several snide allusions to what she'd done to gain Longbottom's trust, a half-dozen shouting matches regarding her stay, and one great Gryffindor-style mass argument that almost came to blows and ultimately culminated in an ostentatious use of the democratic process as the issue—which was to say, *Pansy*—was put to a vote.

"You know Alecko has it in for her," Neville urged the gathered crowd, when the matter landed on a tie. "Come on, half you lot saw what she did with that fucking rabbit. No one should have to go through that, even Pansy." He shot a sheepish look her way. "No offense."

"None taken," she sniffed, and resumed painting her nails with a borrowed bottle of polish (a Muggle invention, if Susan Bones was to be believed). Pansy had changed in many ways, but certainly not enough to lower herself to *beg* for *shelter*. If they didn't want her there, she'd simply fuck off to the forest and lay herself at the mercy of the centaurs. Privately she thought that if they were to take a liking to any human, it would be her; they were part-horse after all, and she'd always had better luck with the four-legged contingent.

After several re-counts, the measure of Pansy's presence finally passed by one raised hand: Ernie MacMillan, of all people.

"Have you lost the plot?" Seamus Finnegan, who'd voted firmly against her each time, crowed. "It's Parkinson, mate. Who's to say she's not just going to double-cross us, or that she's not been sent to bide her time until she can point them in Potter's direction?"

"It's the principle, isn't it?" Ernie raised his chin pompously, giving her a magnanimous nod. "No man left behind? Social contract theory? Anyone?" There was a sea of answering blank stares as he shook

his head in disbelief. “Well— if Rousseau argues that human society functions on an implicit social contract in which people agree to uphold communal values for mutual benefit, who am I to argue?”

A collective groan arose in response to his gratuitous sermonizing, but the damage was done. Pansy was a permanent resident of the Room of Requirement.

The group was a little society, she realized, and not one that she had any passing familiarity with. Chores were shared—to her chagrin, she learned to wash dishes from Hannah Abbot and to make a passable bolognese from Terry Boot—as were resources, distributed equitably by age and need, with the younger students favored for nutritious and education.

Although there was no definitive hierarchy, in the absence of Potter and Granger and without a single Weasley in sight, it was clear that authority fell to a council of seventh years, with Longbottom as its leader. From what Pansy could see, he was fair and magnanimous and occasionally, a little too firm. It wasn't attractive to her. Not at all. That would be insane and although she'd all but lost it since hearing news of Draco's death, she'd not yet reached the point of mental instability where she was lusting after burly Gryffindors with leadership qualities.

She'd been accepted, but not yet trusted enough to engage with the war efforts, which was no hardship for her; she was happy to bide her time flipping through old magazines and teaching the younger girls hair glossing charms.

But to her chagrin, Neville insisted she was still essential to the war effort; instead of joining their defensive planning sessions, Pansy was given an alternate assignment. Just like he had that night on the Astronomy tower, he maintained that war was fought both on the ground and in the minds of the populace: part of fighting was inspiring hope of building a better world after.

And so, Pansy was assigned to work with her advocate, poncy Ernie MacMillan, on the bizarre task of dismantling the prejudicial systems that supported the Dark Lord's rise to power. In his dry academic way of speaking, MacMillan declared that Pansy would be particularly helpful in considering the weaknesses of pureblood ideology and the possibility of encouraging defection or disavowal of those from backgrounds like hers, who'd never known anything beside hate.

A nasty voice in her head warned that this was probably just a thinly veiled effort to rehabilitate *her*. But since she wasn't exactly in the position to refuse, she grit her teeth and hit the books; MacMillan had brought half the library into the sanctuary with him in order to maintain his *competitive position in future academic rankings*, although who he was competing against was anyone's guess.

"There may be a war on, but the N.E.W.T.s stop for no one," he often opined, as Pansy made rude gestures behind his back. "And everyone knows that backbone of any major political resistance is research!"

Under his supervision, she slogged through a series of a variety of both muggle and magical core theoretical texts, treatises on morality and humanity and many other -ities that gave her rollicking headaches. She jotted down notes on the rantings of some old dead blokes, Locke and Hobbes and some Danish tosser Kierkegaard, complaining bitterly the entire time. Some things, Pansy knew, didn't change; as long as she was given godforsaken *homework*, she was certainly going to whine about it.

"You know," Ernie told her conspiratorially, as he dropped another enormous tomb into her lap. "I know things are awfully dire, but I *am* enjoying the academic freedom. I suppose that is why the hat nearly put me in Ravenclaw. I always wondered why it settled on Hufflepuff..."

"Perhaps it realized you're an idiot," she grumbled.

“Oh, Pansy!” He laughed heartily, clapping her on the back as he missed the obvious insult by a mile. “Such acerbic wit! You always keep me on my toes!”

It was the stuff nightmares were made of; no matter how nasty or insulting she was, MacMillan always believed her to be joking.

She saw Neville sparingly. After the night on the tower ramparts, they didn’t often have the opportunity or privacy to speak often, but sometimes he would sit next to her with two bowls of whatever was for dinner and they’d eat in companionably silence. Those moments felt precious, but also a bit like treading water, like if she wasn’t incredibly diligent about staying afloat, she’d drown in depths of his presence.

It shocked her, how little she missed the life she’d so carefully preserved for all those years. The longer she stayed, the more she overheard about how the other half lived; her peers missed and worried about their families desperately, a queer realization Pansy hadn’t considered for herself. When she wondered about her parents, it was with little emotion and a fair amount of resentment; the Parkinsons could certainly give Hobbes a run for his money in regards to profiling the selfish, brutish nature of humanity.

There was one person she’d left behind: Theo. According to his letter bearing the news of Draco’s death, he had been forced into Greyback’s former position as the Dark Lord’s emissary to the werewolves, a situation Pansy knew was untenable at best and deadly at worst. She knew there would be no forgiveness for him, not even from the most magnanimous amongst them. It was one thing, acting as a childhood bully, repeating hateful language and other comparatively minuscule cruelties. It was quite another, to kill the beloved Albus Dumbledore, one of the most revered wizards in history, without hesitation.

That didn’t mean Pansy couldn’t look into...alternatives. Just because he couldn’t return didn’t mean he had to die, or remain leashed as the Dark Lord’s pet hound. To her surprise, the Room

acquiesced, and suddenly there was a shelf on the bookshelf with titles like: *The Unofficial History of Lycanthropy*, *Runic Magic and the Moon*, *Man or Beast: the Essentials of Lycanthropic Transfiguration Theory*.

She found what she was looking for quite by accident, while taking a break from the dreary musings of some ancient German cunt. A page in *Demi-Creatures and the Art of Magical Healing*, like a golden snitch falling right into her palm.

No one noticed as she looked around the room, busy making handcrafted gifts for the communal exchange planned to take place on Christmas, and so she quickly tore the page from the book. Ducked out of the room under a disillusionment charm—never her strength—took a wild, erratic chance that she blamed firmly on exposure to too many Gryffindors, and snuck through the deserted corridors to the owlery.

That was where Alecko Carrow caught her, primed and waiting, grinning at Pansy as if she'd just happened upon a fucking Christmas feast.

"Well, well, well," Alecko murmured, after stunning her and ripping her wand from her grasp. The book's page, crumpled in her robes pocket. "If it isn't the little *princess* herself."

Pansy knew she was fucked, plain and simple. The Carrows took turns with her under their wands, during which she learned she mercifully *couldn't* reveal the resistance's hiding place thanks to the Room's magic, but she *could* piss herself and throw up on her trainers. Curled in the fetal position on Alecko's office carpet, she was relieved when they finally tired out, only to realize as her father stepped through the flu, looking at her with pure, undiluted contempt, that there was something far worse than the Cruciatus Curse.

Captivity.

She was dragged home faster than she could say *blood traitor*, and promptly thrown into her own dungeons with a badly beaten wandmaker and no hope in sight. In the dark, damp enclosure, she realized: she'd never told anyone she was leaving. Longbottom was probably going to think she'd betrayed him, and funnily enough, that was the thought that nearly stopped whatever was left of her stupid, soft heart.

---

"And there you have it," Pansy shrugged, slightly hoarse from all the talking she'd done. "That's how I got here. Dunno why they haven't just gotten rid of me, but I suspect Father paid Alecto off and are going with some story that I've got to France or some shite for the duration of the war. And after that's done, well—" She grimaced, looking quite nauseous at the idea. "There are plenty of little Parkinsons for me to propagate. A blood traitor daughter is probably better than an extinct family line and the Parkinson fortune going to some Rosier cousin. I'm sure they'll find some old fucker who doesn't mind my *tarnished* reputation to lock me away. Hopefully his dungeon will have better light."

Draco looked at Pansy with astonishment, like he'd never previously seen exactly who she was before. As it was, he probably hadn't, too caught up in his own disasters. He couldn't think of nearly anything without triggering another fit, but he could focus on the fact that for the entirety of their shared life, he'd sorely underestimated the girl before him, and that perhaps, it had taken someone with personal experience being too often sold short to bring this side out in her.

He was about to voice this realization, when there was a distant metallic clanging, the sound of a door being unbolted.

They stared at each other in dismay. Both wandless, both too weak to fight back. There was a high possibility that Pansy Parkinson's face was the last he'd ever see. Oddly, the fact comforted him. They'd started their lives as each other's first companion; it was a fittingly dramatic ending, for them to go out in the same fashion.



With every footstep that approached, Draco's heart pounded harder, his body reluctant to face death even as his mind accepted it as an inevitability. Even though it felt like running himself through with a rusty axe, he closed his eyes and thought of his mother. Remembered the warmth shown to him by Ted and Andromeda and Tonks.

Finally, excruciatingly, he thought of Hermione. Curls over a bare shoulder, nose in a book, too long jumper hiding too short shorts. The feel of her mouth against his, the promises she'd muttered into his hair when she thought he was sleeping. The blazing look on her face when she'd admitted she loved him.

The footsteps came to a halt. Beside him, Pansy gasped and reached for his hand. He squeezed in return and braced himself for the green flash of light.

"I'd hoped I would never live to see this utter disgrace to my blood, but alas. The Heir to the mighty House Malfoy, locked away like a petty criminal. I can only thank the gods your mother is dead, lest she have to bear the shame." A silky voice that felt as much part of him as his hands or his wand echoed off the dungeon walls. It couldn't be. "Look at me when I speak to you, Draco."

He obeyed, as he'd been conditioned to do since the day he was born. Lucius Malfoy stood before him, a specter of the past, examining Draco with a disappointment that would have once eviscerated him. As if he was carrion, left rotting in the sun.

"Hello, Father." Draco raised his chin, defiant until the bitter end. "How good of you to visit."

---

---

- This behemoth of a chapter is for everyone who is having a difficult time right now. It is not a coincidence that Pansy's story is rooted in unlearning prejudices, the fallacy of wealth, and the dangers of bystander thinking. I love you all, take care of yourselves.

-Okay, who amongst you called the Panville coming from a mile away? Ten points to the House of those who guessed correctly! The Girl in the Greenhouse is her in the Hogwarts greenhouses but also, "the green house."

- Yes, I found a way to sneak in Pansy's POV as a function of storytelling (I've been plotting this since Chapter 12: The Woes of Pansy Parkinson). In Tonks House/the Room of Requirement, Draco and Pansy have mirrored experiences with unlearning violence via kindness and a Gryffindor who sees their potential and isn't easily scared off. I worked at a super fancy private school for a summer, and that experience very much informed my writing of Pansy.

- Horse Girl Pansy Parkinson is canon now, I don't make the rules (as is Draco being called Ducky). Also, can you even write a Dramione fic without a Patronus scene?

- Neville is so Peeta Mellark coded in this story, it's crazy ("Come to finish me off, sweetheart?"). Big, strong, gentle man who has natural leadership potential and affability? Who is quiet, but sharp and witty, with a tendency for seeing the best in prickly, angry girls? PLEASE.

- In regards to the [Smoke Signals playlist](#) Pansy's song is "How I Get Myself Killed" by Indigo DeSouza.

- Blame the gratuitous use of Philosophy jokes on \*free thinker\* Ernie MacMillan and my Ph.D. coursework (who's "the German cunt?" Kant, of course)

- Ah, welcome back, evil Lucius. Should have killed him when you had the chance, Draco...

-Next chapter: Pureblood plotting! The poorly timed return of Severus Snape! And oh yeah, what's been going on with Hermione?

---

# The Heir and the Spare

## Chapter 41: The Heir and the Spare

---

Some refreshers from last time:

- After the raid on Tonks house (which killed a fair few including Narcissa, Bellatrix, and Ted Tonks) Draco was captured and brought to the Parkinson dungeon by Mulciber, who was in debt to Pansy's father and thought to be seeking a reward for the price on Draco's head.

- Also currently being held in the dungeon is Pansy, who got involved with Neville and the resistance, and was caught by her parents and imprisoned in her own house. It's been stressed that before her fall from grace, Pansy's parents were trying to marry her off quickly.

- In Chapter 33, Hermione obliviated Lucius, wiping his memory of Draco and Narcissa's escape. She also obliviated Theo, who helped them get out. This accidentally allowed Theo to lead the Death Eaters back to Tonks House after picking up Lupin's scent with the werewolves, as he didn't remember going there in the first place.

- Draco and Theo fought violently during the raid on Tonks House; Theo expressed regret and Draco, understandably, tried to kill him for his perceived betrayal.

- Voldemort and the Death Eaters think that Draco deserted the Dark Lord and was thus killed by the Dark Mark's curse against deserters. They do not know Hermione managed to unbind him and rendered the Mark powerless.

- Draco and Hermione's resulting bond has been silent ever since she was tortured under Bellatrix's wand.

- Pansy's family breeds winged Palomino horses, which she is accomplished in riding.

Okay that's about everything you need to know! Godspeed!

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

When he was young, Draco had always looked up to his father. It was true that Lucius Malfoy was not always a kind man, that he could be cruel and unnecessarily severe when it came to punishments. Sometimes, in the proud shadow of his lineage, Draco felt more like an unmolded bit of clay than a boy, ready to be shaped into his image. But for all his sharp edges, Lucius was undeniably devoted to family, to the art of preserving legacy. While some of the other fathers in his Slytherin cohort dallied in gentleman's clubs and gambling halls, Draco's father was always adamant that his priority lay firmly within amassing the Malfoy fortune, not squandering it. Any time away from his efforts was spent with his wife and child, and those sparse moments informed how Draco would conceive of the word family for the rest of his life— however short that life might be.

Now, what once felt like a blessing had turned to a curse, a stain on his understanding of himself.

In the dim light of the Parkinson dungeon, father and son looked a perverse contrapair, regarding each other with refractory animosity.

"You have been my greatest shame," Lucius said softly, his words punctuated by the dripping of something damp from the old stone walls.

His once sharp, aristocratic features were drawn and hollow; the sheen of vitality that used to characterize him had been replaced by a sickly, haggard pallor and his once immaculately styled silvery-blond hair now looked lank and unkempt, hanging limply around his twisted face. In fact, the only visual reminder of the man Draco had once known and emulated was his proud, commanding posture.

“The feeling is mutual.” For a moment, Draco was stunned by the intensity of his hatred—dredged in tar, twisting his insides like hot metal in a forge. Beside him, he heard Pansy stifle a particularly inopportune snort of laughter.

Lucius gave her a single cold look, before turning back to examine him, taking in his squalid state in disgust. “You could not even *fathom* the depths of my disappointment when I realized what you’d done. That my only son—my *legacy*—abandoned his own family for a taste of a common mudblood whore.”

Draco’s jaw worked furiously, his tempter roaring to respond. Merlin, he hated that word. That word was everything he’d ever done wrong, every demonstration of blind loyalty and pathetic failure. A reminder of the worst parts of him. But he could not be foolish and impulsive; he was unsure of how much his father remembered after Hermione’s memory charm. While Theodore Nott’s obliviation had remained woefully intact, Lucius worryingly seemed to very much recollect the events at Malfoy Manor—primarily, his realization of his son’s emotional preoccupation with the notorious muggleborn witch in question.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he lied, trying to keep his breath steady as he summoned the remains of his occlumency garden, fortifying its hedges and gates in preparation.

“Did you really think you’d succeed in your little scheme?” His father scoffed, contemptuous sneer framed by the dungeon’s bars. “That you could wipe my memory and run off with your dirty muggle bitch, to live amongst the filth? It took a half-dozen sessions within my pensieve to realize my memories of my dear wife’s supposed death had been very much *altered*...once I’d realized, I could see the true events of that day lurking behind your facade. I must admit, I remained uncertain of how you tricked the Dark Lord into presuming you dead or how you survived such a betrayal of your oath and Mark, but I knew that despite what you’d have the world presume—you were most certainly alive. A simple check of the Malfoy legal ledgers revealed that your inheritance remained in your name rather

than being automatically transferred to your next of kin, nor had your signet ring returned itself to the estate.”

*Fuck.* Draco hadn’t thought Lucius would come looking, the result of foolish, wistful thinking and too much trust in the infallibility of memory charms. He hadn’t considered legal documentation, the inheritance, or any of the other official pureblood markers of death. He’d been so absorbed in the war he’d forgotten about the details from his world before, a world full of contested wills and meticulously documented family histories.

“I knew that to find you,” Lucius continued, having always enjoyed a good monologue, and seemed to especially relish delivering this one in the face of Draco’s palpable dismay. “I’d have to find Potter’s little gang and the rest of the Order— your mudblood certainly has a *knack* for obliviation, but because she was unwilling to leave permanent damage, it wasn’t difficult to unravel. As soon as I noticed the letter missing from my study, I realized exactly where you’d absconded to: Alphard Black’s country home. Of course, I’ve known the location of every property in the Black holdings since our betrothal contract was signed, but I found that Andromeda had somehow warded the location with particular severity against *me*.”

Lucius snarled in irritation, before reassuming his haughty disposition again, as if delivering a parenting lecture and not an explanation of his dastardly plotting. “If I have taught you anything, my son, it should be that patience is rewarded— I waited, biding my time, to find a way in. And as luck would have it, young Theodore caught the scent of the Order’s werewolf, but the beast led him and his compatriots directly to your enclave’s doorstep before I could arrive.”

“An entire raid party being present to pay witness to your betrayal was admittedly not ideal. You see, I have plans for you, Draco. Plans that require minimal witnesses to your *miraculous* rise from the dead. Ensuring discretion in the matter cost me a fortune in gold, although dear Mulciber will find it difficult to collect the rest of his finder’s fee with his head separated from his shoulders.”

It occurred to him that by leaving his father breathing that day on the Manor grounds, Draco had all but guaranteed his own downfall; Lucius was not the type of man to allow his property to be taken from him—and that was very much how he viewed Narcissa and Draco, as his belongings by right. He not the kind of man who would allow his heir to flee the familial seat without giving chase.

But despite his plotting, Lucius had once again failed, having lost his wife to the detonation of her own magic, a degradation of spirit that was firmly his own fault. Now, his son and Heir was disgraced and detained and Lucius was still preening, like he'd somehow *won*.

Draco, feeling half-mad over the sheer futility of his father's plotting, began to laugh. His emotions felt severed from his body, blunted by the realization that every step of the way, his father had led to his own family's downfall. Pansy touched his shoulder in alarm as his laughter echoed around the dungeons, the sounds of his mental break amplified. He bent at the waist, breathless, his eyes streaming from the exertion.

"Stop your idiotic blithering and face me," his father snarled, looking deeply disturbed by his son's display, his hand gripping his ivory cane tightly, as though it were the only thing keeping him steady. His sharp features contorted with a mix of rage and something almost like fear.

"Don't you see, Father? You're like a reverse Midas," Draco managed, face twisted in savage mirth, once he'd caught his breath. "Instead of gold, everything you touch turns to shit."

"You insolent little—"

"Mother was *alive*. I took her to Aunt Andromeda's to recover...and now, she's dead thanks to your blundering efforts to regain a control you never even had. No matter what you plot and plan, no matter the outcome you try to force— you destroy yourself at every turn. Fuck the Dark Lord, all you needed to obliterate the last of the Malfoy name was a wand and a mirror. If I'm your biggest disappointment,

you made me so. You created your own punishment, Father. You killed your own wife and burned your own holdfast.”

Lucius’ gaze grew murderous. In an instant his wand was ripped from the sheath in his cane, pointed in between the bars. “You’re lying.”

“Do it,” Draco snarled, ignoring Pansy’s sound of distress as he stepped towards the bars until the tip of his father’s wand dug into his chest, right above his heart. “Curse me, torture me. It won’t make it any less true. Kill me and you’ve ended the Malfoy line, ended everything you’ve ever cared about. Don’t you see, father? Every one of your efforts.... *shit*. You’ve made it so you lose either way.”

Lucius stared at his son with glittering malice, shaking his blonde head slowly as if Draco had missed something quite obvious. When he finally spoke again, his tone was lower and much more venomous.

“The name Malfoy is not a cloak you can shed, Draco. No matter how many mudbloods you stick your prick into. It is a natural born *right*. It cannot be taken away, by you or anyone else. Even by your father, as much as he may wish it.” Lucius’ lips curled up into something that may have once been considered a smile, but now resembled the expressions on the gargoyles that guarded the castle ramparts. “You foolish boy. I’ve not destroyed the Malfoy name. By facilitating your retrieval, I’ve *ensured* it.”

“Why *am* I here, Father?” He asked quietly, the single question that had yet to be answered. Why, after everything that Draco had done, would Lucius want to drag him back? To risk his own neck defying the Dark Lord by harboring a traitor?

“Yes, and why my esteemed family’s dungeon?” Pansy added, stressing the word *family* with no small degree of detestation. “What do the Parkinsons and their embarrassment of a daughter have to do with any of this?”



Lucius looked between him and Pansy curiously, as if surprised they had yet to figure out the meaning behind their imprisonment. He shook his head, chuckling darkling to himself.

“You should both understand that my duty as the head of my house is to assure, above all else, the continuation of our line. To ensure *progeny*. It was Narcissa’s greatest failure, providing me with only a single child to rest the entirety of the fate of the Malfoy lineage upon. Of course, I contemplated siring another heir—” Pansy gagged loudly and Draco felt similarly nauseous at the thought but schooled his face into blankness— but I am afraid the Blacks were always quite diligent about their marriage contracts; it was ensured in my own that there would be no remarriages for the Black consort. And given that no bastard could ever inherit the name Malfoy, the fate of our very family depends on you, my son.”

To Draco’s horror, he flicked his gaze to Pansy, the suggestion in his words beginning to become clear. His blood ran cold, overcome by the sheer magnitude of the abomination his father was hinting at. Surely he couldn’t be saying that Draco had been imprisoned in order to—that they would— produce *offspring*?

“You can’t mean—” Pansy sputtered, her complexion going ashen as she came to a similar conclusion.

What did Purebloods traditionally do with unruly daughters? Forcibly marry them, of course.

“I can and I do.” Lucius narrowed his eyes, addressing them both with equal insistence. “It was nearly impossible to find an acceptable prospect who would have my son in such a state of disgrace. It was fortunate that the Parkinsons have been so amenable to my offer, thanks to the foolishness of their own child. Your nuptials will have to take place immediately, of course. And you *will* do your duty, Draco. Whether by will or by force.”

“Nuptials?” Draco croaked in horror. Oh, his father had gone mad, had truly lost whatever dregs of sanity he’d once clung to—

“Oh, you can get bent,” Pansy snarled, standing shoulder to shoulder with him in an uncharacteristic show of bravado. “I’m not marrying anyone, you miserable old piss stain.”

With a snap of his fingers, Lucius silenced her, leaving Pansy reddening in outrage as she mouthed a variety of threats and foul language to no avail, as he continued his orders. “Despite her protests, you will find that you and Miss Parkinson *will* marry quickly and quietly. You *will* sire children as soon as biologically possible. I must warn you, Draco, you should be grateful at this extension of your miserable existence— in honor of your mother’s memory, I am giving you the opportunity to provide the world with a new generation, one that will not be as easily swayed by the lies of our enemies as *you* were. It is a mercy you hardly deserve.”

In that moment, Draco realized in full exactly what he and Pansy had been spared for: they were to be the stud and the broodmare, the assural of precious legacy. He’d been saved from the Dark Lord’s wand, not because Lucius found him redeemable, but because he wanted to raise another son, *Draco’s* son— he nearly vomited at the thought— to be the Heir that had failed to manifest the first time around.

It was an unsavory, although not completely foreign concept in pureblooded circles: difficult heirs that posed dangers to the family name were occasionally skipped over and disinherited, their more suitable children appointed in their place to be raised by careful grandparents. But it had been a few centuries since a family had done what Lucius was proposing— breeding their two unsuitable children like cattle, for the purpose of producing a new set— much less *two* families.

“You’re *mental*. Do you even think the Dark Lord will allow us to waltz off into the sunset, after what we’ve done? What *I’ve* done?” Draco tugged his sleeve up with a snarl, and Lucius blanched momentarily as he took in the ugly, reddened scar where the Dark Mark’s black ink had once marred his forearm. “Have you forgotten that if that

lunatic finds out you've harboured me— a fugitive blood traitor— he'll kill you all?"

Lucius' eyes lingered on Draco's arm, glittering with something fearful and uncertain, before he regained enough control to snap at his son. "What the Dark Lord doesn't know will not hurt him. I've disposed of enough bodies to ensure the news of your *survival* will remain firmly on a need to know basis; you and your new wife will be confined within a private family estate for the foreseeable future. With his attentions devoted to Potter and the wand, he will hardly concern himself with the contractual unions amongst his followers' unruly offspring. I have served the Dark Lord loyally for many years and have sacrificed more than enough for our cause. How am I to fight in a war for a future that, without an Heir, I will never see the fruits of?"

"Confined? You meant, you want to jail us until we give you a *baby*. No, I won't participate in this fucking circus," Draco insisted, fighting the urge to spit at his father's feet. At his father's *face*. "Why even bother marrying us at all? Why not just Imperius us until you have your precious Heir secured?"

"Come now, Draco. We're not *savages*," Lucius laughed, a nearly arctic sound that resonated chillingly across the dungeon. "You and Miss Parkinson will serve your purpose and then once the children are born, you will relinquish their guardianship immediately. Because your transgressions have proven that you are far beyond rehabilitation, once your union has proved fruitful, I'll take the heir to be raised under a careful eye as the inheritor of the Malfoy line, and Percival and Amaryllis will take the spare as the successor to the Parkinson name. You will be allowed to live until you've completed your familial duty, and then..."

He shrugged, giving Draco a very good idea of what *and then* comprised of, a glimmer of ruefulness crossing his countenance. Draco was expected to live only long enough for his spunk to be useful, and then he'd be put out to pasture, so to speak.

Draco stared at his father: the man who'd taught him to fly, who'd had him caned for poor performance in school, who'd led to his being Marked. The cognitive dissonance was never stronger than at that moment, as Draco wondered briefly what it could have been like, to be raised by a man like Ted Tonks. A man who moved through the world with kindness in every step.

"Kill me, then." He lifted his chin, looking Lucius in the eye. His father had the good sense to look away, whether from regret or self preservation was anyone's guess — Lucius was not nearly as adept at mind magic as his wife or son. He cleared his throat and repeated himself. "Kill me, because I'd rather fucking *die* than do your bidding for one more second of my life, even if that means it's my last."

Eye-to-eye for the first time in months—irises the same distinctive shade of grey—Draco had to reckon with the thought that he *was* built in Lucius' image, or at least, parts of him were: the covetous side that insisted he take what he wanted, the part of him that hungered for power and control, that had tormented Potter and Weasley and to a lesser extent Crabbe and Goyle, the part that did whatever he wanted simply because he *could*.

He wished he didn't know that about himself, wished he didn't understand who his father was, and in the same breath he warned himself not to ever forget again.

Lucius clucked his tongue, flicking his gaze towards the heavens as if summoning the dregs of his patience.

"I don't think you understand, Draco." His father's grey eyes were a blizzard stricken tundra, devoid of warmth or light. "Let me put it more plainly: if you do not do as you're told, I'll hunt that mudblood girl down and flay her as you're made to watch, inch by filthy inch. You'll be married by tomorrow or you'll watch every drop of her diseased blood drain from her veins. It's your choice."

And then, as if they'd been dismissed, Lucius turned his back with a flutter of his velvet cloak, leaving Draco and Pansy to stew in the

inevitability of their cursed future with just the faint clicking of his walking cane echoing in the distance.

---

They were quiet for a long, long time. Only the dripping of the leaking dungeon or the occasional muffled footfalls from above penetrated the thick, oppressive silence that Lucius had left in his wake. The revelation of their parents' scheme felt like a strange and cruel twist of fate that seemed to mock their younger selves, the ones who acted out shadowy wisps of their decreed future. If only they had known their miserable destinies then.

"Alright, I'll say it." Pansy's brittle voice rang out against the chamber's stone ceilings, finally breaking through the hazy sheen of horror that had enveloped them. "Our parents are cunts."

"An understatement, I think."

She made a small angry noise. Draco had to squint in the dim light to realize she had tears in her eyes, albeit furious ones. He stared rudely, realizing he could count on a single hand the times he'd seen Pansy Parkinson cry. The collected moisture spilled over and streamed down her cheeks as he looked away hurriedly to afford her some semblance of privacy, casting half-heartedly around the dungeons for the hundredth time that night. For the hundredth time, he found no possible escape. He'd already wrenched at the bars and tried to scale the walls in order to break through the magically reinforced slitted windows, and attempted countless times to use wandless magic to set them free, all to no avail.

When he glanced back at his companion, Pansy was wiping her cheeks furiously, preempting his concern with thorny words. "Just so we're clear, I'm not fucking you just to survive under my parents' thumb while they use me as a human incubator." She hunched her shoulders in a huddle that made her look a bit like an owl, puffed up and miserable in the frigid underground air. "We're going to die, aren't we?"

“If we’re lucky.”

“You must— come on Draco, you must have an idea to get us out of here. A plan, a way we can— fuck, I don’t know—anything!”

Draco closed his eyes and ignored her because he had nothing. No plan, no idea, no saving grace. No *deus ex machina* to call upon or conjure. Without the bond, he couldn’t even feel if Hermione was alive, much less hope that she could somehow find him. No one knew where he was and even if they did, who would come for him? His traumatized aunt and cousin? Whatever was left of his—of Granger? Potter and the Weasel?

All Draco could do—all he could ever fucking do— was beg, and when that failed, succumb.

“Let’s go to sleep.” He didn’t have anything else to offer, just moved to curl up on the single hay pallet they shared. An offhand attempt by the Parkinsons to procure their grandchild, he thought darkly.

A child. A bloodline, extended at any cost. How many fallen Heirs before them were subjected to—or escaped— this same fate? Andromeda, Sirius, Alphard... and that was just the Black line. The illustrious promises of his future were really just leading a lamb to slaughter, plying it with sugar cubes so that it would not bleat and struggle. What a fool he’d been.

“That’s it?” Pansy scoffed, her eyes bugging from her head in furious disbelief. “Let’s go to *sleep*? You’re going to just lie down and accept this?”

“What else do you want me to say?” His voice was plaintive and defeated, one complaint away from a petulant *go away*. “It’s your bloody dungeon, you find a solution.”

Pansy parked herself in front of the pallet with arms crossed over her chest and kicked him lightly in the ribs. When he failed to respond, she did it again, slightly harder. Her sock covered foot connected

with his side, not hard enough to leave any sort of mark, but enough so to irritate him.

“Ow!” He drew back, sitting up with a scowl painted on. “What’s your fucking problem?”

“That didn’t hurt, you whiny little toad.” She looked down at him with something strange in her eyes, a fire of sorts. A determination he’d not previously seen her wield. Not loud and brash, but quiet and certain and *strong*. “I followed you around for years, you know, basically worshipped at your altar. We all did— you called the shots, and not just because of your surname or your family’s Gringotts fortune, but because you’re the one who had the stones to steal McGonagalls gin, and found ways to sneak us all out past curfew, and wrote all the stupid fucking Quidditch chants that you somehow got the whole house to memorize overnight. I want you to be Draco *fucking* Malfoy. If there’s no solution that’s presented itself, then *create one*.”

He felt so far from the foolish boy who’d strutted around Slytherin House like the second coming of Merlin that he almost laughed; that boy had died the night he was Marked.

“Joke’s on you,” he responded, watching the light fade from her eyes. Somehow it was even worse than seeing her insistent and stubbornly full of belief. “As it turns out, Draco *fucking* Malfoy only makes awful things worse.” He looked at the vestiges of his Dark Mark, sleeve still bared from when he’d shown Lucius the evidence of his treason. Its remnants a reminder of his weakest moment, his beastly cowardice. “That boy you’re talking about? He got everyone he cared about killed or maimed and yet, somehow managed to survive like a fucking cockroach. Like a parasite.”

“What about Granger?” Pansy insisted. “You’re just going to give up on getting out of this shithole and finding her again? What if she’s looking for you? What if—”

*"Don't."* His breath hitched embarrassingly. He shook his head furiously, trying to knock the thought of *her* from his consciousness, stricken by the tightness it brought to his chest. "Don't, okay?"

Pansy was quiet. He didn't dare look up to see the pity that had undoubtedly made its home on her face, keeping his eyes fixed firmly on his scarred forearm. He felt used up and hopeless, like an old quill that no longer held ink.

*That no longer held ink?*

He inhaled sharply, something pressing at the seams of his subconscious. Something he'd not dared consider previously... *the Mark*.

"What?" Pansy urged, taking in the change in his body language, the sudden stiffening of his back. "Draco, what is it?"

"I don't know," he breathed, but he did know, didn't he? He'd known ever since that night in the Room of Requirement all those months ago, when Hermione Granger had tethered her magic to his and severed his Mark's connection to Lord Voldemort, leaving a different, more insistent bond in its wake. But if the roots of the Mark linked them now...who was to say the function hadn't remained as well? He'd explained it to her, hadn't he? *Many see the Dark Mark as a sort of Protean Charm, making it so his followers will come when called...*

Could he call to her with it, like the Death Eaters called their master? Their bond lay dormant, burnt out on both sides. He'd know if she was dead, he was sure of it, but he'd not felt her once since he'd been stuck in Parkinson Manor. But what if...what if that was because he hadn't really *tried*? What if they'd been subconsciously wincing away from the bond, too afraid to feel the damage that was undoubtedly on the other side. What if what he thought was a ruination was really just another measure of self protection, their magic enveloping their soft, wounded brains.



He screwed his eyes tightly shut and focused. Practiced locating his magic in the same ways he'd practiced occlumency at the start, by relaxing each muscle in his body one by one. Conjuring a blankness in his mind, shoving away any intrusions of thought or emotion. He was suspended in himself, floating, searching aimlessly for the start.

He thought of her and it hurt. The ache all encompassing as he imagined her eyes, always so expressive, warm brown turned to singed honey in the sunlight. The way he felt when they fixed on him during the ritual's unbinding ceremony, like he was being flayed alive under the intensity of her gaze. The pink flush he'd seen for the first time in the Prefect's bath that complemented the coloring of her coppery skin, creeping from her cheeks down her neck to rest prettily on her collarbones. Her lips pulled up into a roguish smile, her bright infectious laugh—the sounds she made when she was pleased with him were enough to put him on his knees. The way she'd arched and undulated under his shaking hands on the floor of the Second Son's estate, the first time they'd bared themselves to each other in full. The way she said his name— *Draco*, only two syllables but so sweet it nearly freed him from the cold shackles of *Malfoy* . He thought of the long nights before they'd been *anything* , when he'd lay awake in his dormitory at Hogwarts separated from her by floors and corridors and classrooms, and yet he swore he could feel her presence through the walls.

Something golden sparked in his peripherals—a subtle presence, growing more solid under his attention. It seemed to beckon him, as if it had been patiently awaiting his call. *Come closer*, it urged. *Where?* He wondered, feeling the response—a gentle yet undeniable pull, drawing his mind toward an unseen place, a part of him that was outside his own body. A part of him that felt like it stretched over an unfathomable abyss, so faint and far away that he could hardly follow. *Here*, his magic demanded.

With his eyes still closed, he pressed two fingers firmly to the place where he was once branded and thought about the blazing look in

her eyes when she'd told him she loved him, bold and triumphant, like she was daring him to disagree.

The bond burst to life. Blooming furiously, like spring had arrived all at once. His magic, swirling as it yanked him through foreign meadows and over cresting earth, closer and closer until—

He couldn't see Hermione Granger, but oh, he could feel her— her magic fragile, but alive. *Hold on*, it seemed to pulse. *Help is coming*.

---

It was barely morning when Draco and Pansy were roused and unceremoniously bound at the wrists by snaking ropes by one of the Parkinson elves, an ancient thing with big dark eyes and uncommonly enormous ears that Draco vaguely remembered seeing.

The help Hermione's magic had suggested was nowhere in sight.

"Drippy is very sorry," the elf moaned, rending her filthy garment in distress. "But Mistress says I must escort Miss Pansy and the younger Malfoy—" The elf burst into tears and Pansy sighed heavily, doing her best to pat the creature reassuringly on the head with her hands bound. Draco gritted his teeth, eyeing the elf rather unkindly.

"No waterworks, Drippy." Pansy put on an encouraging—and very, very false— smile. "After all.." She grimaced horribly. "It's my wedding day."

Together, they were herded upstairs and through the Parkinson manor's halls at Drippy's bidding. It was night, Draco thought, examining the meager moonlight filtering in the tinted windows as it distorted the shadows into elongated grotesque shapes that slithered and shifted with a life of their own. They stumbled through the corridors where they'd once played, compelled by magic, licking at their heels. Their dirty, limid appearances were starkly at odds with the elegant manor's high ceilings and dark wood paneling. Portraits of ancestors hung in gilded frames, exchanging scandalized

whispers at the sight: the Parkinson heiress and the Malfoy heir, reduced to shackles and filth.

“Disgrace!” One of the old witches depicted in muted oils spat in Pansy’s direction, and the dark haired girl sneered, before spitting at the portrait in response.

“Oh, go fuck your brother, Clymmenstra, you foul inbred hag.” A glob of saliva trailed down its surface, as the witch in question cried out in offense.

Finally, they were brought to the drawing room, where both Lucius and Pansy’s parents were waiting. Mrs. Parkinson in particular—a loathsome older woman with a wan face that looked a bit like a melted candle—seemed disgusted by her daughter’s reappearance, hardly paying Draco a second glance; Percival Parkinson had hardly looked up from where he stood at the drawing room’s desk, examining an assortment of scrolls, before picking up a very particular sort of quill—the kind that sealed blood signatures—and etching something into the parchment.

The light cast by the fireplace flickered ominously, casting distorted shadows that danced across the dark-paneled walls. The chandelier overhead, wrought of tarnished silver and glinting crystals, dangled from wrought iron supports in the glass ceiling, swinging faintly as though disturbed by an unseen force.

The air grew thick, heavy with a tension that pressed down on his chest, as if the room itself were alive—waiting, *watching*. The faint scent of burning wax mingled with a metallic tang, sharp and out of place, adding to the unsettling atmosphere.

“You couldn’t have had the elves clean her up a bit?” Mrs. Parkinson addressed her husband, nodding in the direction of her daughter with plain disgust. “She positively *reeks*.”

Pansy’s face twisted into a murderous scowl, glaring at her parents with the sort of hatred one usually reserved for warlords and mass

murders.

“Mother,” Pansy snarled with malicious cordiality, bobbing her head mockingly in the older witch’s direction. “Father. I hear that I am to be wed?” She looked around with evident disinterest; only Draco seemed to notice she was visibly vibrating with anger. “Is this the extent of the guest list? Rather austere for your darling daughter’s big day.”

“The fewer witnesses to this *farce*, the better. No one can know that the boy lives— I presume Mulciber has been taken care of, Lucius?” Pansy’s father—of the sort that spent the majority of his time at the gambling halls— ignored his wife and daughter’s commentary in the practiced manner of a long-suffering husband.

“You presume correctly,” Lucius drawled. He strode over to the drawing room’s desk, shoving Pervical out of the way in a performative display of strength, before bending to examine the scrolls spread over its surface. He ran a finger over the neat lines, and occasionally tutted, as if he were examining a business contract of which he was obtaining the worst end.

“Really, Percival? Half the silver mine holdings and no dowry? A less generous man might consider this taking advantage of our... unfavorable circumstances.”

“I hope you understand, Lucius, that this matter must be handled with the utmost delicacy. This is not the time for solicitors or bargaining. Should the Dark Lord even become aware that your son survived—”

Percival cut off abruptly at the look on his father’s face. The bored aristocrat was suddenly gone, replaced by the Azkaban escapee, madness and rage warring for control on his countenance.

“I am very much aware of the consequences of the Dark Lord’s ire,” Lucius said softly, twirling his wand in one hand in an implicit threat

of consequences of his own. “More so than you will ever understand.”

“Y-yes, of course. I only mean to caution—”

“Let us form an understanding of our own, shall we? You will not question how I handle the disgraces to *my* house, Percival, and I shall not look into how your foolish daughter has sullied your good name. We will agree to the aforementioned terms and you will thank me for my generosity and hold your tongue otherwise. Does that sound amenable?”

Pansy’s father swallowed, looking like he’d tasted something phenomenally bitter, and gave a sharp nod before turning his attention to his wife.

“Sign here, Amaryllis,” he barked, and Pansy’s mother stiffened at the order, but took the quill nonetheless, scribbling her signature on the parchment in scarlet blood. “I take it Narcissa is—”

“Dead,” Lucius said, as if it cost him nothing, but Draco noted the tightening in the corners of his eyes, the hard line of his mouth. Draco wondered if he’d have to mourn his wife twice. If it mattered to him either way. “With no Black representative at hand, my signature should suffice.”

Lucius scrawled something on the parchment, slicing open his hand and pressing his signet ring into the wound, before stamping the parchment with its customary engraving.

“And the notary?” Pansy’s mother fretted, smoothing her robes with nervous fingers. “Lucius, you said you’d secure a discreet man—”

“Calm your nerves, Amaryllis. He’ll be arriving momentarily,” Lucius snapped, directing his sharp chin to the fireplace. Then, he turned to Draco with an unfeeling derision on his countenance, looking nothing like the man he remembered from his childhood. “Come here, both of you.”

“Get fucked, Malfoy,” Pansy said bluntly in response. Draco nearly smiled at the offended look on his father’s face, despite the dire nature of their situation.

“*Pansy*,” Amaryllis Parkinson warned quietly, taking all the air from the room with two measly syllables. She pulled her wand from her skirts and pointed it at her daughter’s throat. “Do as you’re told.”

“This is fucking sick,” Pansy muttered. There was an uncharacteristic air of defeat to her, like she’d understood and accepted long before Draco ever could that they were simply pawns in their parents’ chess games. “Signing me away to the Malfoys and for what, Mother? To continue the Parkinson name? Don’t you understand— I *am* the Parkinson name. I’m your *daughter*. Your blood.”

“You are my daughter. And your foolish behavior has made it so it rests upon me to secure your future, quickly and quietly, with the only man who will take you,” Amaryllis declared coldly. “Your disgrace is a disappointment you could never understand one that with our assurance, you will never have to. Now, if you abide by the contract at hand, and you will be compensated fairly for your silence and your efforts—”

“Oh, drop dead, you miserable old cow,” Pansy snarled. “I don’t want your bloody money and you can’t *make* me marry.”

“I can make you do anything, you little idiot,” Amaryllis snarled. “Now sign the decree and be done with it.”

“The contract won’t stand under a court of law if we’re forced to sign it against our will,” Draco interrupted, adding to Pansy’s defense. “And even then, you certainly can’t make us *produce progeny* — which is just polite phrasing for *rape*, just so everyone is on the same page.”

“Do shut up, Draco.” Lucius rolled his eyes at his son’s proclamation. “You’ll be lucky to see a lavatory, much less a court of law. You forfeited the right to having your impassioned speeches considered

with any sort of regard when you stuck your cock in a mudblood. Now, in the interest of speeding along the proceedings, why don't I —" He removed his wand from the sheath of his cane, and cast before Draco could protest. "*Silencio.*"

As Draco fought his father's silencing charm to no avail, the fireplace flared green and a familiar figure in all black robes swept into the drawing room. A dark travelling cloak fluttering behind, leaving ashes swirling in its wake. The hood fell back to reveal Severus Snape's sallow face, caught the firelight, twisting with savage shadows as he took in the scene.

"Lucius, Percival," Snape greeted, nodding as if he'd intruded on a dinner party and not a forced matrimony under penalty of death. "Amaryllis. I'm afraid I cannot leave the castle unattended for long—as you can assume, the Carrows rarely flourish in my absence—I presume you have the documents in order?"

"Thank you, Severus," Pansy's mother gritted out with her nose in the air, as if it cost her greatly to offer any sort of gratitude to an untitled half-blood. "We would have preferred to handle this in house, but I'm afraid marital contracts require a witness without blood relation and we've found ourselves requiring a *discreet* hand. You will be handsomely compensated for your services, of course."

Snape scowled, clearly distasteful at being regarded as a mere provider of services, a contract laborer. "Should my participation in this endeavor be revealed in any way—" He warned, eyeing the Parkinsons with particular admonition.

"You have our assurances, Severus." Pansy's father sounded rather offended at the suggestion, only to be cut off by one of the former Potions master's signature withering looks.

"*If* my participation as your signatory is in any way revealed," Snape continued, only slightly louder. "I will make it so that you *beg* to be fed to the Dark Lord's snake."

He raised his head, meeting Draco's eyes for a brief moment in which he tried desperately to communicate, his occlumency wards abandoned. *Help us, help us, help us* —

Snape tore his dark eyes away, the pools of black ink revealing nothing of his intentions. Severus was his godfather, and above even that, Dumbeldore's spy. Would he truly allow Draco to be forced into this sham of a union to maintain his cover?

"I must agree with our new Headmaster," Lucius said silkily. "Let us be done with it. Amaryllis— the girl?"

Pansy's mother lunged for her daughter, dragging Pansy to the drawing room table by the scruff of her neck, kicking and writhing all the way. "Hold still, you little beast—" Amaryllis grunted, before slicing into her palm with a ceremonial silver knife, spreading Pansy's blood across the page. "I'd hate to use the Cruciatus— it's been known to detrimentally affect fertility— but if you're going to struggle—"

Behind him, Severus Snape's jaw tightened almost imperceptibly.

"Don't be so brutish, Amaryllis, it's unbecoming," Percival intervened, striding to place his wand between Pansy's eyes. "The girl is stubborn as a mule. I've no interest wasting the night wrestling her into submission like common muggles. *Imperio.*"

As if dragging her body through thick molasses, Pansy slowly picked up the quill with shaking hands. She twitched in Draco's direction but Percival grit his teeth and jerked his wand so that she was forced to scrawl her name across the parchment. This was not the traditional exchanging of cloaks or mingling of blood, none of the ancient vows his parents once took. But even in the absence of ceremony, it was nonetheless a legalization of marriage.

His father turned to him, snapping his fingers as he'd done to the House-Elves in a past life, back when Draco questioned nothing and obeyed without discernment. A life he was proud to have shed.



“Come along, Draco,” his father instructed. “Don’t be difficult.”

Draco—silenced and unable to speak— made a phenomenally rude hand gesture.

“I grow weary of this game, Lucius,” Snape’s voice cut in before his father could retaliate. “If you won’t corral your spawn, I will.” He pointed his wand at Draco’s temple, a blank expression revealing nothing but his annoyance. “Don’t make me resort to anything unsavory, Draco.”

Draco heard his godfather’s voice in his head as clear as a bell: *No sudden movements. Do as you’re told. The Order is sending someone, but they’re having trouble with the wards. You’ll have to buy time.*

With leadened limbs, Draco moved to where Pansy stood looking downcast at the drawing room desk. Snape carefully followed each step, keeping his wand pressed threateningly at his temple; his father and the Parkinsons watching over them, cold and imperious under the light of the flickering chandelier. Careful to look glazed and dizzy, he forced the quill into his own hand until his blood dripped from its point, and then hesitated over the page.

Draco had never truly believed in serendipity, but the events that happened next were nearly enough to convince him of the true propitiousness of the universe: just as he touched the tip of the quill to the parchment of his ill-fated marriage decree, a blur of motion crashed through the drawing room’s glass roof, sending the chandelier crashing down around them in a violent spray of crystal shards, knocking Lucius and the Parkinsons’ clean off their feet, their limp bodies hitting the marble stone with a sickening crack.

Pansy threw himself to the side, but Draco was not nearly as quick; the sharp detritus left fresh bloodied lines across the backs of his hands as he hurriedly covered his face in the explosion.

“Oh dear, am I late?” The person-sized wrecking ball who’d crash landed dusted himself off, seemingly unbothered by his own fresh wounds, courtesy of the tremendous amount of broken glass. “Hate to have missed my two best mates on their wedding day.”

Theodore Nott, sporting a wicked black eye and looking significantly worse for the wear, had arrived just in time.

Even though Draco wasn’t certain of things like loyalty or logistics, even though his immediate future looked to him like a black hole of uncertainty, he saw his chance of escape and he took it— promptly rearing his head back and smashing the back of his skull into Severus Snape’s hooked nose without a second thought, just as Tonks had taught him in her makeshift Auror Training sessions, knocking the older man out cold.

“Sorry, godfather,” he muttered as Nott reached Pansy, grasping her forearm and yanking her upright.

“Brooms,” he insisted hurriedly. “The floo won’t—and the apparition wards are back up by now—where are the brooms?”

“I’ve got a better idea— the stables.” With a wild glint in her eye, she took off at a sprint. Nott rounded behind her, gesturing for Draco to hurry.

"C'mon, Malfoy! Let's go!"

“Why should I trust you?” Draco asked his former friend turned recent foe, hesitating, and Nott, seeming to understand his trepidation, gave him an exasperated eye roll.

“This isn't about trust,” he said, like this was obvious. “I needed to make it right.” He flushed, chagrined, and seemed to rethink his strategy before adding, “You don't need to trust me. Trust Granger, okay?”

Draco's jaw dropped open, eyes bulging at the implication that Hermione not only had a hand in this reckless plan, but sent Theo , the source of their current misery and, Draco realized begrudgingly, the only wizard besides the heinous Nott patriarch adept enough at undoing pureblood wards, to save him. The incredulity of the thought had him reeling.

"She's the one who gave me this," Nott continued, pointing ruefully at his black eye. "Hell of a right hook, your witch."

"You probably deserved it," he managed. From under the wreckage of the chandelier, Lucius was starting to stir; whatever decision he made would have to be made now. Draco said a silent prayer to every deity he could remember, asking them for guidance as he made a choice between the lesser of two evils, hoping it would not lead him to his doom.

With Theo at his heels, he ran for the stables.

---

Mere moments later, they were on the back of three massive winged Palominos, soaring above the Parkinson estate with the cold winter air on their faces, far too high for their parents' shouts and curses to touch them. The horses' wings beat wildly, jostling Draco far more than a broom would have, and he hung on for dear life. To his right, Theo was struggling to stay upright in the leather saddle.

"Why couldn't we have ridden brooms?" he roared, as his Palomino dove fluidly, sending him yelping in fear.

Ahead of them, guiding her winged horse with perfect riding posture, Pansy tipped her head back and began to laugh. At first silently and then with abandon—so wildly Draco couldn't help but join in. The relieved sounds of her rejoicing linger momentarily on the air before being eaten up by the roaring wind.

---

---

Beloved readers! Apologies for the absence, finals are kicking my ass. But here we are, at the moment of jailbreak (the alternate title for this chapter was "The Redemption of Theodore Nott")

- This chapter is the big reckoning between Pureblood children and their parents; the moment where Draco thinks of a world where he was raised by a Ted Tonks is maybe the saddest yet.

- Pansy and Draco's forced marriage is based loosely on olden time Laws of Compulsion/Illegitimacy and Inheritance Laws in Anglo-Saxon England, where children of unsuitable unions were forcibly fostered.

- The idea of reversing the Dark Mark (Draco being able to call Hermione with the scar in the way that the Death Eaters could call Voldemort) has been hinted at in earlier chapters, especially in Chapter 16 ("So what, now I'm bound to you?" Malfoy sounded pained. "Like the Death Eaters are to the Dark Lord?"). While their bond is very different, our Draco is realizing there might be some rare pluses to the residual magic of the Mark.

- Had to have my canon rewrite of the chandelier moment! But instead of a House-Elf, it's a teenage werewolf turned fallen star.

Love you all, thank you for every comment cheering me on! Your care for this story and kindness towards its author is what propels me to write. Next chapter: "Shell Cottage" in which the explanation of Hermione and Theo's collusion is revealed.

---

# Shell Cottage

## Chapter 42: Shell Cottage

---

Draco and Hermione reunite.

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

The Palominos were neither as fast nor as nimble as brooms, but they were proud and resilient creatures, able to fly straight through the night hours and into the dawn; by the time they reached their apparent destination, Draco's backside was numb.

The winged horses nickered quietly as they circled a clifftop, the chalky rock face streaked with veins of flint and worn smooth in places by centuries of pounding waves and salty winds. The air had carried the sharp tang of salt, mingling with the distant cries of gulls that wheeled overhead, their white wings vivid against a grey-blue sky.

"Is this it then, Nott?" Draco cried over the wind, as the horses began their descent, a steep dive that sent his stomach plummeting. No, not nearly as nimble as brooms. Draco had a strong stomach for flight—he was a Seeker, for Merlin's sake—and despite his hunger, he was glad there was nothing in his stomach for their landing.

"Looks like it," Theo hollered, looking about as pleased with the Palominos as Draco was. His horse was far less accepting of its rider and kept trying to buck him off mid-flight, undoubtedly sensing the dark creature on its back. "Oi, Pansy! How do you get these bloody things to land?"

Pansy was flying circles around them, her horse looking immensely pleased with itself and it pranced on the air like a show pony. "Pull

your reins, idiot," she chastised, "they're not just there for decoration. For Merlin's sake, didn't either of you troglodytes take riding lessons?"

"Why would I learn to ride a bloody horse when I have a broom," Draco grumbled, earning himself a dissatisfied whinny from his mount, who could apparently both hear and understand his commentary.

After some wrangling, they finally landed too near to the edge of the craggy cliff for Draco's taste, close to where it rose sharply from the restless sea.

Pansy, of course, slid from her mount perfectly, landing on her feet: Draco and Theo fared less elegantly, both tumbling out of the saddle in a rather ungainly fashion. His proximity to the waves below reminded him painfully of Narcissa and her terrible occlumency haven.

The cliffside was barren, dappled with lichen and nettles but otherwise desolate, with no sign of either animal or human life. A few hardy tufts of grass clung to the edge of the cliff, flattened under the force of the wind. There was nothing here that even hinted at civilization, Draco realized as the longer bits of his hair whipped into his face. Just a lump of desolate rock and the sea, whispering from below.

His neck prickled in suspicion as he turned to examine Theo with unsentimental eyes. In the cold light of morning, Draco caught sight of several new silvery scars, one bisecting his neck and throat in what looked to be a rather purposeful design. Why had Nott saved them? And why on earth had he brought them *here*?

"Well? Did you bring us here to kill us and throw our bodies off a bloody cliff?" Pansy asked Theo expectantly, voicing Draco's thoughts bluntly—trust Pansy to forgo subtlety entirely.

She patted her horse on its flank twice, sending it and its compatriots back into the skies before turning her attention back to Nott. “Seems a bit counterintuitive to save us first, but you’ve never been the sharpest quill in the inkpot, have you Theodore?”

“Not another peep out of you Parkinson,” Theo warned, giving Pansy a rather annoyed look in warning, wagging his finger in a chiding manner than Draco though ridiculous. As if he—the murderer of Headmasters and destroyer of wards— had the moral high ground to be scolding *anyone*. “I told you not to involve yourself with their bloody cause and keep your head down with the Carrows, Pansy, and what did you do? You’re supposed to be the sensible one!”

“You’re one to talk!” Pansy countered, crossing her arms firmly as she stood her ground, not looking chastened in the slightest. The wind wildly ruffled her dark hair, pinkening her sallow cheeks. She already looked more alive than she had in the dungeon. “You just dive-bombed into my drawing room ceiling—which mother just had redone last year, she’s going to go absolutely *spare* — like you’re running a bloody search and rescue! I know you’re a dab hand at wards and all, but to get through the Parkinson ones is no easy fucking feat. How did you even know we were there?”

“Wards always have a weak spot.” Theo shrugged. “Ancient ones require fortification, don’t they? Your parents have to recast them on the grounds with their blood and whatnot, but because it’s such a hassle, it’s rare that anyone remembers to fortify the dome overhead. So I slipped in and uh, accidentally fell through the skylight. As for how I knew you were there...well...” Theo looked pointedly in Draco’s direction and Pansy followed his gaze, swivelling her head along with his. “Suppose you should ask him.”

Theo’s casual delivery left something noxious in the back of Draco’s throat, his pulse jumping in the way it did before he got into a fight. Those weren’t the only wards Nott had permeated recently, and the previous set had had far more dastardly consequences to Draco and those he held dear.

“Wards always have a weak spot?” Draco reiterated, his voice deadly quiet. Theo looked disconcerted by the sudden spike in his fury, his pallor losing a bit of color. “Is that how you brought the Death Eaters into my aunt and uncle’s house? Found the weak spot, did you?”

Nott averted his eyes, taking a step back instinctually; given his lycanthropy induced strength, he could most certainly overpower Draco in his weakened, wandless state, but something on Draco’s face must have given him pause, sending him scrambling for an explanation.

“Listen, I didn’t know that you or Narcissa were there. Granger took my memories, I couldn’t have—I never would have—!” He lifted both his hands in a demonstration of surrender, but Draco wasn’t in the mood for platitudes.

There were a series of curses he’d memorized in the case of moments like these, moments that called into question his family’s honor. Of course, he’d never thought he’d want to urge them against *Theo*, but had he been in possession of a wand, he’d have rectified that delusion quickly.

“Perhaps you were not expressly aware that my mother or I were inside those wards, but you did know it was an Order stronghold, didn’t you? You were the one who followed Lupin. You’re the one who reported it to the Dark Lord. Having Bellatrix Lestrange at your side disqualifies you from ever saying *you didn’t know*. You very well knew what happened when she went on raids. And still, you helped her figure out how to get past the blood requirement, for which she killed some poor muggleborn witch. Do you remember what she sounded like weeping for her children? Or had you already fucked off by then, you great sodding coward?”

Theo took a step back and Draco, a step forward. *Nott wasn’t allowed to run away*, he thought savagely. If Draco had to live through it, he’d make sure the bastard at least had to see the consequences of his actions.



“Theo?” Pansy looked at him beseechingly, a small frown on her face. She’d heard Draco tell the story of the night of the raid, but had not heard just how culpable their friend had been in its orchestration. “Tell me you didn’t.”

Theo averted his eyes, all but confirming his accusations. Standing slight and hunched, like a blot of ink on the otherwise immaculate horizon, he looked nearly ashamed.

“Oh, *Theo*.” She sounded far too sympathetic for Draco’s debilitating anger to comprehend.

He barked out a laugh of disbelief, devoid of mirth as his jumper billowed in the wind. Strangely, he could hardly feel the cold.

“Are you really surprised, Pansy?” He narrowed his eyes as he went for the jugular. “After all, Theo’s only proved that he *is* his father’s son after all.”

“Fuck you, Draco.” Theo’s voice was resigned, but not devoid of a bitter little ember, sparking to life in his own defense.

“Even if my mother and I were across the bloody continent, you still would have allowed my aunt and uncle’s family— my *family* to be slaughtered,” Draco spat, not backing down. “Just because you didn’t intend it to hurt *me*, doesn’t mean you didn’t have the same fucking intentions as the rest of them.”

“I—I went to get help,” Theo defended himself, wringing his hands as he spoke. “Who do you think called those bloody elves? I tried to find you a way out as soon as I realized you were inside!”

Draco ignored his admission, unsure if he even believed it. After all, what authority did Theo have over two elves that weren’t even part of the Nott estate?

“My uncle and mother were dead by then, and Granger—” He swallowed, his throat suddenly as dry as parchment. “Granger had

spent far too long under the cruciatus by the time your precious *rescue mission* arrived.” He shook his head bitterly, as if trying to dislodge the memory of Ted’s final act of protection. His mother, going up in blue flames. Hermione, screaming herself hoarse. “You lead the Death Eaters—led *Bellatrix* to our doorstep— so don’t you dare try to tell me you had no fucking idea who was inside; I’ll bet she was *quite* vocal about the things she wanted to do to her disowned sister, but you didn’t care what happened to the Tonks family, did you? It was no skin off your back.” Draco spat at his feet, disgusted. “You’re just as bad as they are. No— you’re worse.”

Theo looked up slowly from where his gaze had been fixed on the frozen ground. A muscle jumped in his cheek; somehow, he had the gall to look angry.

“What would you have had me do, Draco?” He countered furiously, doubling down instead of reaching for any sort of contrition. He rolled up one sleeve, holding his wand between his teeth, as he bared his Dark Mark for Draco to see, stark against his skin. Unlike Draco’s, it was dark and swollen with ink. “We don’t all have the luxury of defecting without certain death! Would you have had me tell the Dark Lord *no*? Sorry, my Lord, can’t assist with this raid— it’s an old school chum’s disinherited family, you see—”

Draco, having reached the limits of his patience, saw red. He launched himself at Nott, getting in one good punch before they were tussling, rolling and they fought to pin the other on the cold earth. Despite his slight build, Nott was stronger, but Draco was angrier and grief had given him a strange sort of immunity to physical pain.

“Ow—stop hitting me, you lunatic!” Theo cried, trying to defend himself and hold Draco still at the same time. “He would have killed me! Don’t you get it? The Dark Lord would have *killed* me, if I refused! And then someone else would have done it anyway!”

“Then you should have *died*!” Draco roared, struggling out of the hold and scrambling to his feet. “I would have died, rather than do what you did.”

Nott flinched like he'd been slapped.

The moment Draco said it, he knew it was true. Once, at his most hateful and afraid, he had been put in Theo's position, when he was tasked to lead the Death Eaters right to Granger's family home. And he'd refused.

If he were a more sentimental man, perhaps he'd be able to identify the feeling that overtook him for what it was: *pride*. Not in his lineage or name, but in his character.

At his proclamation, Theo's face darkened; a shadow cast over the night sky, blocking the moonlight. His expression twisted into something unsuitably cruel, lashing out as he nursed the wound into which Draco had poured salt. "Well bully for you, Saint Malfoy. You think you're so much better than the rest of us? I remember when it was you, who was bragging about what you'd do to the muggles—"

Theodore Nott was capable of many things; apparently, an apology was not one of them. Draco's temper soared once again, and he probably would have tried to hit him again, had it not been for Pansy, preemptively moving to stand between them.

"Oi! That's enough," she barked and, all too familiar with the authority in her tone, Draco and Theo both instinctively obeyed. "Nothing is going to be resolved by you two fighting like muggles in the dirt."

Theo dusted his clothes off, eyes darting to Draco and then away again until he gathered the nerve to speak. His anger had faded, replaced with a twitchy sort of contrition.

"I'm not like you." His voice carried quietly in the cold air. "I'm not a martyr, Draco."

"Tell it to my mother," Draco responded, armed only with brittle words. "Oh wait, you can't. She's dead."

Theo dipped his chin, looking chastised. Draco wondered if he could ever forgive him for his part in Narcissa's death. In Granger's torture—*his* torture. He didn't know if he could ever forgive him for the terrible fate that befell his benevolent uncle Ted, and even for Lupin, who deserved a death with far more dignity than the one he'd received.

In his dark, hardened heart, he found an unsavory answer: he doubted it.

"Okay, we get it. Theo did a bad thing," Pansy interrupted Draco's brooding with all the sensitivity of a rampaging erumpent. Both boys tried to interrupt, but she held up an imperious finger, stopping them in their tracks. "Under duress," she stressed, added the addendum for Theo's benefit. When she saw the murderous look on Draco's face, she amended, "Fine, a *really* bad thing. But he also saved us from the certain misery of breeding a bunch of little pureblood heirs set to be raised by my *parents* ." She shuddered at the thought. "Now, as it seems rather unlikely you two will kiss and make up anytime soon, I'd quite like to get on with it so that I can get back to the castle. I'm not about to let MacMillan fuck up my project by leaving the senseless moron to research Pureblood cultural indoctrination on his own."

Draco and Theo both stared at her as if she'd sprouted horns and hooves. In all the time he'd known her, Draco had never heard Pansy refer to anything with such vehemence and dedication; he didn't think he'd ever heard her refer to academic research as *hers* before .

"Sorry, you want to go back to where the Carrows are by all accounts stringing people up in the dungeons and crucioing them within an inch of insanity?" Theo's eyebrows neared his hairline. "Good heavens, why?"

"I told you," Pansy snapped. "I've got a rather time sensitive project to complete. I'm not going to be traipsing around the castle; Neville has got us set up quite nicely in the Come-and-Go room—"

"Sorry, who the fuck is Neville?" Theo interrupted, looking bemused. "Do we even know a Neville?"

"Longbottom," Pansy snapped, coloring as she realized her misstep. Draco fought the urge to smirk. "I meant, Longbottom. Surely you're not this dense, you only had classes with him for six bloody years."

"And apparently, he didn't leave an impression."

Pansy glowered. If they'd been on better terms, Theo and Draco would have exchanged knowing looks, perhaps even teased her over her alarming slip up. But they weren't and so, Draco was relegated to curling his lip in distaste.

"Alright then," Theo sighed. "Let's get you back to *Neville* and return Draco to the bushy-haired lunatic herself." He touched his face ruefully, prodding at the greenish bruising around his eye. It was a comfort for Draco; it meant that Granger was at the very least well enough to hit someone (and speaking from experience, she tended to leave a mark).

With his back to the cliffside, Theo began combing the landscape, looking around shrewdly for something Draco could not see. He held his hands out in front of him, like he was bracing himself against some invisible force. Wards, he surmised, from the look of concentration on his old schoolmate's face. "This safehouse is unplotable and under the Fidelius," Nott explained, raking a hand stubbornly through his wind-mussed curls. "Which means even though I can feel the wards, I can't see or even attempt to locate the house without the Secret Keeper's express permission."

"You haven't even been inside?" Draco asked, raising a brow. "Thought you colluded with the Order on this little rescue mission."

"Yes, they welcomed me with open arms," Nott snorted, beginning to pace in agitation. His curls had grown agitated by the wind, flying every which way. "Laid down the fucking red carpet for Albus Dumbledore's murderer. Use your brain, Draco; do you really think if

I'd stepped into Order territory they would have let me *leave*? I'd be locked up to rot until this whole mess was over and then sent to Azkaban. No, you dolt, I parlayed with Granger, here on neutral territory. This way neither of us would have the upper hand. Not that it did me any good," Theo added darkly, shuddering under the memory. Draco wondered, not for the first time, what had occurred at that meeting to have shaken him up so much and left him with a bruise as a souvenir. "Either of you have a way to send a message? I'm reluctant to shoot up sparks in case there's Snatchers lurking about— nasty sort, they'd do just about anything for the gold. Might as well be goblins."

"Yes, my captors left me with a plethora of stationary." Pansy rolled her eyes with magnificent drama. "The lovely embossed sort, with a monogram— no, you daft twat."

"Bugger," Nott sighed, turning up his collar to protect himself from the cold. The sky stretched above them, pale and lifeless, as the light struggled to pierce the overcast cloud cover. "Reckon it'd be quite helpful right about now to know how to cast one of those chatty Patronus blighters."

When Draco had learned that Potter had managed it in third year— *third year* — Draco had quietly attempted to teach himself to produce a Patronus, terrified that he'd discover he'd never actually known the joy required to master the charm. He'd failed to make anything other than a few silvery wisps back then and was certain that now, after knowing what he did of the world's cruelties, he'd be raving to even attempt it.

Pansy cleared her throat.

"Erm," she muttered, eyes darting between them. "Funny you should mention it."

Both the boys gaped at her in disbelief. Pansy had learned to cast a Patronus? Pansy, who hated Charms so much, she loudly wished each year for Flitwick's violent demise at her hands?

“No way,” Nott breathed, and as he was the only one with a wand, promptly shoved it into Pansy’s hand. “Go on then, let’s see it.”

“I don’t know if it’ll even work using anything but my wand and I certainly can’t do it while you’re gawking at me! I have to think of something happy and believe it or not, your ugly mug doesn’t exactly inspire joy.”

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, leaving them suspended in anticipation for what felt like hours but could have only been a few minutes, before she whispered, “ *Expecto Patronum.* ”

Some ethereal creature, skeletal and silver emerged from the tip of Theo’s borrowed wand. A spindly, four legged beast, one that Draco had only been able to see at the start of sixth year. Pansy Parkinson, who’d always hated Charms so much that she’d mastered a spell that allowed her to have a nap during class without being unnoticed, could produce a corporeal Patronus.

“Circe’s tits,” Theo gasped, his foul language at odds with his look of pained reverence. “What exactly have you been up to at that school? Have they actually managed to teach you something?”

Pansy gave him a two fingered salute. “Find Granger and tell her she’s got a delivery,” she told the thestral, patting its ghostly head with affection. It galloped off to do her bidding, leaving a trail of silvery mist in its wake that dissipated instantly. To Draco’s great surprise, she didn’t even gloat.

“Right,” Theo said, breaking the silence that had fallen as they watched the Patronus gallop through the air in a ghostly recollection of the Palominos. “I guess that’s my cue.”

“You’re leaving?” Pansy asked with concern, pursing her lips disapprovingly. “You can’t just run off alone, Theo. It isn’t safe. I highly doubt our parents are going to let your part in this go, and they aren’t exactly the forgive and forget type.”

Draco snorted, despite himself; this was an understatement of the highest degree.

“I won’t be alone.” Theo shrugged, unbothered. “They can’t exactly tell the Dark Lord without revealing that they’ve harboured a fugitive.” He chuckled his chin at Draco, who scowled in response. “And they won’t be able to follow me where I’m going.”

“Come on, be sensible,” Pansy urged, tugging on the sleeve of his winter robes. “I’m sure we can work out some sort of bargain with Goody-Two Shoes Granger—”

“Oh, Granger and I have worked out a bargain alright.” Theo grimaced. “I did this for her, and in return, she let me live without having my brains scrambled. Absolute nutter, that one.”

“Theo, stop being silly and just come with us—”

“He can’t,” Draco interrupted, giving Nott a cool look. “It’s the full moon tomorrow night, isn’t it?”

Nott clicked his tongue in affirmation.

“Look who remembered.”

“I brewed quite a bit of wolfsbane, as you can return.”

There was a charged beat of quiet, guilt thrumming through the air like humidity, and then Theo arranged his face back into an ill-suited sneer.

“I’ve got plenty of half-breed business to occupy myself with. Nothing for you two to worry your precious little heads about.”

Pansy dug in her trouser pocket to find a crumpled bit of parchment, smoothing it out so that it resembled the well worn page of a library book. She pressed it into Theo’s hands alongside his borrowed wand, closing her fingers around his fist.



“What’s this?” He asked, bemused. “Love letter? It’s a bit late to declare your intentions now, isn’t it? Please lover, wait till the war’s over, then we’ll talk about dowries.”

“You idiot.” She licked a thumb and reached up to smooth his mussed curls until he pulled away, scowling. “Don’t say I never got you anything.”

He gave her a little salute in thanks, before hesitating, and then turned to Draco with a pained expression. For a moment, it was the summer before sixth year again: both of them, terrified and freshly marked. Doomed, but at the very least, doomed together.

Then, he remembered what Theo had done.

“I never wanted this.” There was something heart-rending and pleading in his expression that made Draco’s stomach roil, his conflicted emotions effectively mimicking the effects of nausea. “You of all people should understand that.”

Draco remained silent, stoic. If Nott wanted absolution, he’d knocked on the wrong fucking door. After lingering a moment too long, Theo gave him one last agonized look, before turning on his heel and disappearing, leaving a stagnant, miserable sort of quiet in his wake.

As soon as he’d disappeared, Draco’s chest sagged and heaved, a pressure building in his head, demanding release. He turned his back to Pansy, looking out over the bluff’s edge with stinging eyes. The view stretched on endlessly, the horizon a hazy blur where sea and sky met in muted tones, waves crashing into the rock below. The cliffs held their own, although their crumbling edges bore the unmistakable marks of erosion; surely there was a metaphor there, but he could not quite bring himself to make the comparison explicit.

“Draco—” Pansy started, her voice taking on a reproachful tone, but he cut her off.

“Don’t start making excuses for him.” His anger was gone, his shoulders slumping tiredly. “I don’t think I can bear it. It’s not your mother whose death he’s responsible for.”

“If only,” Pansy muttered darkly, as the air began to shimmer in the distinctive fashion of wards being breached. There was an isolated gust of wind and two red-headed figures materialized seemingly from nowhere, jerking to life against the bleak landscape as if they’d apparated.

“You didn’t tell me there’d be two of them.” The taller one complained. The older Weasley had a borderline theatrical look to him, with a fanged earring in one ear and long red hair tied back in a ponytail with a leather band. This was the cursebreaker, Draco realized, putting the man in front of him together with the figure he’d seen in the papers; he’d long suspected Pansy had once harbored a crush on him during the blight of their youth. “It’s bad enough harbouring a Death Eater fugitive, but two? Fleur will have my head, Ronald.”

“I didn’t know he was bringing Parkinson,” the other redhead—who had become very familiar to Draco in the past months—responded grumpily, as if the two of them could not hear. “Hermione never tells me anything, it’s just do this, Ron, fetch that, Ron. Thinks I’m a bloody terrier, she does.” He shook off his annoyance, and offered Draco a wide, easy grin, extending a hand in his direction. “Alright there, Malfoy? You gave us a bit of a fright by disappearing.”

“Thought I turned traitor twice, did you?” Draco asked coldly, only for the ginger to laugh as if he’d told a particularly biting joke. Perhaps it was his stint in captivity, or his recent brushes with death, but whatever the culprit, Draco found himself nearly glad to see Ron Weasley, freckled and fully intact. At least someone had made it out unscathed.

He accepted the offered handshake, only to be pulled into one of those terrible uncouth back-slapping hugs that the Gryffindor blokes were so fond of. Beside him, Pansy made a noise of muted horror.

*If she thought this was bad, Draco thought, smirking internally. Just wait until she saw him acting civilly with Potter.*

---

After proving their identities with a series of deeply uncomfortable personal questions courtesy of Ronald, they trudged forward against the wind for about a kilometer or so, before Bill begrudgingly did something to the wards that wrote their names mid-air in a scarlet lettering before disappearing. This apparently was to allow them though; as soon as he gave his permission, a modest structure materialized in the distance, revealing itself to them in full.

A white cottage stood perched at the edge of a rugged cliff, its seashell studded limestone exterior weathered by years of salt-laden gales. The sky above was a tumult of grey, heavy clouds rolling in from the sea as a biting wind howled through the cracks in the shutters, rattling them insistently and sending a faint draft through what looked to be a relatively barren, but coldly beautiful landscape. Bill started for the house with Pansy, Draco and the younger Weasley brother, bringing up the rear.

“How is she?” Draco asked immediately, not bothering with pleasantries. “And don’t coddle me, Weasley. I need the truth.”

“Resting,” Ron said simply. His grin slipped from his face, replaced with something far more forced. “Dunno how she figured out where you were, but if anyone could do it, it’d be her.” He nodded at his older brother, adding, “She’s not been sleeping well. I didn’t bother waking her since Bill’s the only one who can let you through the wards anyway.”

“Where exactly is *here*?” Pansy asked critically, as they approached the house. Draco could feel her tensing up, jumping at any small crack of dead bracken under their feet. They were on foreign soil; even if she’d joined Longbottom’s efforts at school, that was not nearly as serious as being taken in under the protection of the Order — a line that could not be uncrossed.

“Shell Cottage,” Bill Weasley replied tersely. “Used to be our aunt’s summer place. She gave it to me when Fleur and I got married, although she probably didn’t intend for it to be used to house half the bloody Blacks left in Britain—”

Draco’s heart skipped like a stone over a still surface. “Are Andromeda and Tonks staying here too?”

“Were,” Bill corrected gruffly. “Our Floo is connected to Muriel’s, and she’s got a bit more space for guests to convalesce. Andromeda was a bit...overwhelmed with all the commotion here, and we thought some peace and quiet in the country would do her good.” He took in the worried look on Draco’s face and softened, marginally. “They’re strong witches, Malfoy and I can promise you that they’re in good hands. Mum and Ginny are there too, and they’ve promised to look after them.” He paused before adding on, even more gently. “Sounds like a pretty rough thing that you lot went through.”

“Rough,” Draco snorted, clenching a fist and digging his nails into his palm, the pain giving him something to ground himself with as he was flooded by unwanted memories. “An understatement, I think.”

“House is still a bit crowded,” Bill continued; to Draco’s immense gratitude, he did not inquire further. “But we’ll make do.”

“Don’t listen to his whining. Bill loves having us,” Ron interrupted with a good natured grin, loping to the cottage’s entrance with a gangly sort of grace. “Gives Fleur someone else to yell at, now she’s up the duff.”

Bill swatted at his younger sibling, nearly knocking him off balance. “Don’t say my wife is *up the duff*, you disrespectful little snot.”

Ron just barely caught his balance before he went sprawling, and amended his statement. “Sorry, since Bill and Fleur have been, er, blessed with the promise of new life.”

“Congratulations,” Draco mumbled, his mind elsewhere. He was going to see Granger again. He thought at least twice in the past week that he was going to die without ever having that opportunity, and the cognitive dissonance of it nearly sent him spiraling. His heart picked up speed, as if sensing his proximity. *Closer*, it seemed to urge, straining in his chest like a thoroughbred against its bridle. *Closer*.

“Yes,” Pansy added dully, her stuffy pureblood manners engrained so deeply they were automatic, despite the strangeness of their situation. “May your line be blessed and bountiful. Not that you Weasleys have ever had problems in that department.”

“Er, thanks, Parkinson.” Ron gave Pansy an odd look, as if trying his hand at a crossword in the Sunday edition of the Prophet. “Oi, why’s Neville writing the Order asking to keep an eyes out regarding your whereabouts anyway? No offense, but how in Merlin’s balls have you got him vouching for *you*?”

Pansy colored and opened her mouth to undoubtedly snap something rude, but seemed to remember her current predicament—trapped among an abundance of Gryffindors—and think better of it just in time to temper her response.

“That’s actually very offensive, Weasley,” she said coolly. “And as it just so happens, it’s also none of your business.”

Ron made a bemused face at Draco, who shrugged, deeply unwilling to approach the quagmire that was Pansy Parkinson’s love life.

The cottage door swung open as they approached to reveal the messy haired menace himself; Potter, looking surprisingly relieved to see Draco alive.

“Christ, you gave us a scare!” He dragged Draco forward and clapped him on the back heartily in another one of those terrible embraces. He was close enough to see the smudges on Potter’s

glasses, which was to say, far too close. He extricated himself as quickly as possible.

"We didn't know where you'd gotten to after the raid," he babbled in Draco's direction. "And then Hermione said she had this weird dream that you were being held in a dungeon—she is not keen on divination, so I guess it must have felt quite real—how'd you manage to get out, anyway?"

"Oh, do shut up, Potter," Draco snapped, as he shouldered past the bespectacled boy through the doorway, single minded in his objective. "Where's Granger?"

Inside the cottage, the scent of burning wood hung in the air, the fireplace crackling as it fought back the encroaching chill. The old wooden floor creaked as it shifted slightly with each footstep and the kettle on the stove whistled, its steam curling upwards in the dim light of the kitchen. The windows were fogged over, offering only blurry glimpses of the restless sea.

He bounded up a rickety wooden staircase, not bothering to wait for the tour. Pleasantries could wait until he confirmed she was alive and breathing with his own eyes.

"Hermione's is the third room on the left," Potter called behind him, sounding more than a little disgruntled. "Thanks for saving my life. And uh, Draco— why is Pansy Parkinson here?"

Draco ignored the question shot him a backwards victory sign over his shoulder in response, not bothering to turn around. He reached the door in a few long strides, wrenching it open with enough force to rip it from its hinges.

"Draco?" Hermione's voice was raspy, far weaker than he would have liked, but there she was, blinking blearily from under a cocoon of blankets, curls terribly askew. Alive. For a moment, he stopped in his tracks, just staring at her as the word played over and over in his head. *Alive, alive, alive.*

“Is it really you?” Her words were filled with an exhausted sort of wonder, an unmistakable relief. “I’m going to be rather cross if this is another dream.”

“Fuck,” he managed, sounding quite strangled, and then he was leaning over her on the bed, her face caught between his freezing hands. Before she could say another word, his lips were on hers, swallowing any sounds of surprise as he kissed her soundly. *Mine*, his Black side roared *triumphantly*, weaving a hand into her hair as he tilted her head back for better access. If there were any question as to why Draco Malfoy had survived the horrors of the past, the answer was undoubtedly to do this. *Mine*. He deepened the kiss, licking into her hot mouth as he adjusted himself, pressing into her more intently and then—

She winced, a marginal expression of discomfort.

He retreated immediately, sending a lamp crashing to the floor in his haste to move away. From across the room, he touched his hand to his mouth with a sort of muted horror. What was *wrong* with him? She’d nearly been killed by his own aunt’s wand and here he was, mauling her at first sight like some sort of uncontrolled beast.

“I—” Whatever words he thought he might have said dissolved, his clever tongue failing him as he rambled. “Fuck, Granger. I’m so sorry. You’re injured and I just— Merlin, am I glad to see you, but I probably shouldn’t be doing any of *that* if you’re in pain—”

“It’s alright.” She interrupted his babbling with the sort of fondness that robbed the breath from Draco’s lungs, touching a hand to her side gingerly to demonstrate that she was fine. In their newfound proximity, the bond between them flared determinedly to life, healthier than it had been since they were parted; if Draco concentrated, he could feel her injury, a dull pain skittering along his ribs. They must have been bruised while she writhed under the *cruciatus*, when her spine bowed off the ground in pain.

It did not escape him that there were an assortment of potions and tinctures for the mediation of nerve damage on her bedside table.

"It's alright," she repeated, bringing him back to the current moment in an instant. "I didn't want you to stop."

"Well, I did." Pansy's disgusted voice floated in from the doorway, where she was leaning with a hand on her hip. "Let the poor girl breathe, Draco, you're supposed to be a gentleman. Didn't I train you better than that?" She nodded very stiffly in Hermione's direction, reminding him of the fact that there had never been any love lost between the two witches. "Cheers, Granger. Heard you fought the mad old bitch and lived to tell the tale."

"Fought is a bit of a strong word. All I did was just not die," Hermione admitted bitterly, far too hard on herself. She blinked several times, clearing her thoughts, before commenting rather slyly, "I heard you learned to cast a Patronus Charm."

Pansy's spine stiffened under the scrutiny, but she did not look away. Instead, shrugged in an uncharacteristic display of modesty, examining the white lace curtains in the little room's window with heightened interest. "Yes, well. Longbottom taught me. Total pain in the arse, took bloody ages to get right."

"That's fairly difficult magic." Hermione's words were begrudging, a carefully extended olive branch, but naturally, Pansy bristled, having expected them to carry their usual malice.

"Oh, come off it," she snapped, sounding much more like herself. "I don't want your patronizing gold star, alright? By all accounts, you managed it in fucking fifth year."

"Just take the compliment, Parkinson," Hermione said irritably, eyes narrowing. Draco, sensing that nothing good could come from a prolonged interaction between the two, gave Pansy a rather pointed look and cleared his throat.



“Isn’t there something you had to discuss with Weasley the Elder? Your grand return to Longbottom’s resistance, to which you are indispensable?”

“You’re terribly transparent, Draco,” Pansy sniffed, tossing her bob in dismissal, but nonetheless moved to leave, her hand on the doorknob. “Just be gentle when you ride him, Granger, he’s been knocked around a fair bit—”

“Goodbye, Pansy!” Draco insisted firmly, and then the door was slamming and they were finally, blessedly alone.

Hermione very much looked like she belonged in a little cottage by the sea, swathed in a cocoon of flannel bedding and wearing a long billowing nightgown made of touchable ivory silk. Her gentle brown eyes were fixed solely on him, like she was afraid that if she should look away for even a moment, he would disappear. Draco understood this innately; he was terrified to so much as blink in her presence, lest he lose her.

The world worked in cruel and mysterious ways: it took and it took, so much that it nearly broke him. And then, when he thought there was no way he could go on, it gave him this: a cotton-soft reprieve.

“How are you feeling—”

“Are you still hurt—”

Blundering, they interrupted each other. Hermione grinned bashfully, her cheeks growing pink. It took all the self-control in Draco’s arsenal not to kiss her senseless again.

“Can you...” She hesitated momentarily, and then patted the spot next to her in bed. “I know it’s silly, but I just need to touch you. To make sure you’re real.”

“Yes,” he breathed, crossing the room to sit at her bedside. Carefully, so as not to jostle her. She reached for his hand and he gave it

freely, marveling at how delicate hers looked in contrast. The bond between them hummed, re-enforced by every touch.

“I couldn’t feel you,” he said quietly, looking down at their interlocking fingers, positive he had to be palpably exuding relief. “After it happened—after I was captured, that is— I couldn’t feel you any more. I thought you were—”

“Me too,” she managed, looking agonized. “I thought—” Her bottom lip began to tremble, and Draco reached out with his free hand to trace it gently as her eyes filled.

“It’s okay, Granger,” he murmured very quietly, leaning down to rest his forehead gently against hers. “Look, I’m here now. We’re both still here.”

She promptly burst into tears, ducking her head into the hollow of his neck and he held her, allowing her to collapse against his solid frame. In his arms, Hermione cried for a long time, longer than Draco thought it possible for someone to cry. Big heaving sobs interspersed with little snuffles, the way children cried when badly injured. He felt quite useless, holding her and smoothing her hair soothingly, reminding her to breathe. She leaned against him, nearly in his lap as she calmed down, taking long shuddering breaths and he fought his own urges to catalogue every inch of her body, checking for potential injury.

Finally when she’d quieted into little hiccups, she murmured something heartbreaking against his throat. “I’m so sorry about your mother. I fucked up, Draco. I never should have tried to go back for the sword—”

“Stop.” He shook his head, drawing back to wipe the tears from under her eyes. They were rimmed with red and devastatingly sad.

“My mother gave her life for mine,” Draco whispered, the magnitude of Narcissa’s final sacrifice hanging between them. “I would be

dishonoring her memory if I spent a single minute of the rest of my life forgoing the future in favor of dwelling in the past.”

He knew he was compartmentalizing; as he recovered and his occlumency returned to him, it became easier and easier to lock his mother’s death away in the garden with all her other memories of her. Kept safely behind the gate until he could handle the flood of emotions and the crackling, mind-altering rage they would inspire. *She didn’t need him to be angry right now*, a voice inside him insisted firmly. *She needed him to be strong*.

“Hermione.”

“Yes, Draco?” His name on her tongue did something mildly insane to his heart.

“There is a tremendous amount to discuss, but first— I’m afraid I very much require a bath.”

“Ah, there it is, the Malfoy vanity,” she joked weakly, scrubbing her face with her nightgown. “A bath can be arranged.”

She pointed to the little door in the corner of the room. The ensuite, he supposed, a small one at that. “I’m afraid the tub isn’t quite as large as in the Prefect’s bathroom, but I’m sure you’ll fit.”

“Just me? I seem to remember missing the opportunity to enjoy that bath as I should have with you in it.” Draco wondered at the memory of their interaction in the community baths; he’d been such an idiot, obviously gone for her, but too scared to admit it. And now— “Shall we rectify that?”

---

He occupied the tub alone first, citing a week in the Parkinson dungeons as he used a fragrant lavender soap to wash the layers of grime from his skin— he was truly, inexcusably filthy and imagined Pansy was similarly disgusting—before sending the foul grey water down into the plumbing and refilling the bath from the steaming tap.

The clawfoot bath rested gracefully beneath the small, ivy-framed window, its porcelain gleaming faintly in the gentle glow of the late afternoon light. The white enamel was smooth and inviting, framed by delicate brass fixtures that bore a gentle patina, evidence of their age and charm. Around the room, sprigs of lavender and bundles of dried herbs hung from wooden beams, their soothing scent mingling with the faint aroma of beeswax from a candle flickering on a nearby shelf.

The tub was indeed far smaller than the Prefects' baths, but this proved quite fortuitous for Draco, who had to keep Hermione's back pressed firmly to his chest, his legs bracketing her own so that his body enveloped hers deliciously. Her curls brushed the skin just under his chin, soft and sweet smelling.

"May I wash your hair?" He asked, his lips brushing the shell of her ear. She shivered, nodding in response.

"It tangles easily," she explained quietly, as he deposited a dollop of shampoo into his palm. "Just ignore it, I'll get the knots out later."

"Yes, I think I've had enough of Notts," Draco muttered darkly, reminded of the surname rather than the snarled curls at hand. He began working the shampoo into a lather, working it into the roots of her hair as he carefully massaged her scalp, and he nearly got a stiffy from her little moan of relief. He averted his eyes, focusing on the job so that he did not focus on her breasts, little pink nipples partially visible through the froth and water, begging for his mouth—Merlin, he needed to get a grip. She needed comfort and rest, not some randy teenage wizard poking her arse with his misplaced enthusiasm.

"Speaking of the devil," Hermione murmured. "How did Nott end up extracting you? And how did Pansy Parkinson of all bloody people get mixed up in all this?"

Draco pulled a face that she could not see. "Ugh, can we not discuss Pansy? Or *him*? I was having a rather lively fantasy about your

lovely tits—”

She huffed out a laugh and pinched his knee lightly in response, her fingers skating under the water and down his thigh. Gods, he never wanted to leave this tub. He'd regale her with tales of disemboweling flobberworms so long as her skin was touching his so entirely.

“Fine,” he acquiesced, slightly hoarse. She traced circles lazily on his leg as she listened to him recount the story of his capture and subsequent escape. He felt her tense beneath him when he told her of his father's disgusting intentions and Pansy's heinous parents' involvement, reassuring her of his safety and lack of bride while he rinsed her curls with cupped palmfuls of water.

“Now, I'd very much like to know how you gave the bastard that shiner. Or perhaps why you even let him live long enough to beg for your mercy, in the first place,” Draco concluded. Hermione turned her neck in surprise, twisting in the tub and sloshing water over the sides accidentally.

“He didn't heal it?”

“Didn't.” Draco shrugged, unsympathetic. “Couldn't. Who's to tell. The bastard was never any good at healing charms.”

“Hm.” Hermione hummed in consideration, running something over in her mind. “That's strange. It was a decidedly Muggle wound, he could have gotten rid of it quite easily.” She settled back against him, tipping her head back so it pressed against his shoulder, giving him a tremendous view of her creamy throat. “It's a rather long and difficult story to explain. Could you—?” She tapped at her temple, indicating legilimency.

“I don't have a wand.” His had been snapped back at Tonks house; he'd longed for it for every moment since. It had been like losing a limb, something that had part of him since he knew he had parts.

“Oh,” she said, sounding strangely nervous. “Right. Well, I suppose you could use mine. Well, not really mine, it’s—” She silently summoned the wand in question and it came zooming into the bathroom with nearly too much velocity, nearly having gone through the window had Draco not caught it in time.

He recognized it the second it was in his grasp: the distinctively curved wand of the late Bellatrix Lestrange. The wand that had tortured them, that had killed Ted. Draco was filled with the sudden furious urge to snap it, then and there.

“Why the fuck do you have this?” He asked, his voice wound as tightly as an instrument's string.

“Tonks went back to the house,” she whispered, and he could feel her chest contract, as she took a deep breath, bracing herself to deliver bad news. “Once it was cleared of any threat. She wanted to...salvage what she could, I suppose. And then there was...” Hermione swallowed, her voice going thin. “The matter of the bodies.”

“Right.” Draco’s stomach tightened, and he fought the roiling wave of nausea. His mother had been turned to ash, but he’d not thought of what had happened to Ted’s body. Lupin’s body. The rest of the corpses, both Death Eater and civilian, the terrible residue of war. Andromeda’s scream played in his mind on an excruciating loop. He’d go to them, to his aunt and cousin, as soon as he could. As soon as he’d made it so they were safe.

It was the least he could do for Ted.

“I know you would have wanted to be there.” She reached up behind her to stroke the hair at the nape of his neck. A small gesture of comfort that had him blinking back tears. “To pay your respects to Ted, and to support Andromeda and Tonks. I was—” She hesitated, like she was unsure of how much to reveal. His fingers gripped the rim of the bathtub, knuckled whitening. “Well, I was still unconscious when they buried him, not that I’d be able to go even if I wasn’t. It

took me about three days to regain motor function, according to Fleur.”

He held his breath for a moment, gripping the porcelain lined cast iron as he fought to keep his temper in check; his grief came in waves but his anger burned in, a constant. He pulled hard at his ability to occlude, weaker than it usually was, but with enough muscle memory to damper his reactivity.

“Three days,” he managed tightly, when he’d gotten himself mostly under control. “Three fucking days to regain motor function.”

“It could have been much worse.”

“I know that,” he snapped, his occlusion cracking slightly, and she winced under him. He lowered his voice into something far more measured. “I know that better than most.”

“Oh Draco,” she said sadly. “Your mother—”

“Please,” he begged. “Please just continue.”

She turned so that she could more comfortably face him, contorting herself so that she was on the opposite end of the bath with them facing each other.

“Alright.” He got the sense she was choosing her words carefully. “When Tonks went back to the house, she recovered some of our belongings. That’s where she found the wand. The sword disappeared—” she shook her head bitterly “—but she got my beaded bag out from under some of the rubble. Meanwhile, I was going mad trying to find you; when I couldn’t feel you through the bond, I had this mad idea to break the taboo, say You-No-Who’s name so that I’d maybe be taken to wherever they were holding you, but Ron stopped me.” She laughed nervously. “When *Ron* says it’s a bad idea, that’s when you know it’s really shite.”

"Remind me to thank Weasley for his rare use of good judgement," Draco sighed irritably. "You know, that quality I thought you had, Granger. Once, long ago? Perhaps, before I knew you whatsoever?"

"Trust me," Hermione muttered. "My judgement is only questionable when it comes to you."

"How did you get into to contact with Nott?"

"I was looking for something—anything personal of yours, so as to try and conduct a location ritual with a scrying mirror, when I remembered the journal you gave me. And what did I find in it, but a new entry from—"

"Theo," Draco sighed. "I'd left it behind at Snape's cottage when we fled. He must have gone through my things."

"He did," she confirmed grimly. "Trying to find you, the same as I was. He seemed quite unhinged— some well-earned guilt will do that to a man—and kept insisting he'd do anything to find you. He even offered to make an Unbreakable Vow."

"You made an Unbreakable Vow with Nott?" Draco spluttered. "What are you, collecting them? Merlin, Granger— they're not trading cards!"

"Not exactly," Hermione hedged, pink rising high on her cheeks. "You see, the effects of the cruciatus have been...lingering."

"What does that mean?" Draco regarded her worriedly, fighting the urge to inexplicably place his head on her forehead and take her temperature. Hermione saw the look and understood his fear immediately: his mother's slow and excruciating descent into madness.

"Nothing like that," she hastened to correct herself. "I wasn't losing myself in my occlumency or anything of the sort. I think it's because



my occlusion didn't hold up very long under Bellatrix." She smiled sadly. "All those blasted lessons you gave me, and for nothing, huh?"

"It wasn't *nothing* . You were under the cruciatus curse long enough to fry every synapse in that enormous brain of yours," Draco reminded her fiercely. "It's not your fault your defenses fell or that she got in."

"That's the strange thing," Hermione murmured, meeting his eyes. There was an intensity to her gaze he'd not expected, something that felt almost primal in how it held him still before her, helplessly. "She *didn't* get in. I—I felt you, Draco. Your magic, enveloping mine, creating a protective barrier...I think that's why even after so much exposure, I'm not mad or completely mentally vacant and drooling. God knows I should be, but I'm not. Your occlumency...it protected me."

He inhaled sharply. *He'd protected her.* The agony, the suffering, the moments he'd nearly lost his grip on his sanity— they'd been worth it, because they'd kept her here, with him. Something golden lit up in his chest, turning his throat into a column of flame. It was lifegiving and excruciating all at once, the fear of losing her combined with the triumph of finally being able to keep someone he loved safe.

"Draco," she said gently, her expression falling inexplicably. What had made her so sad? "Draco, why are you crying?"

He swiped under his eye with the back of his hand, catching a tear with surprise. Merlin, what was *wrong* with him? If the war went on much longer, he'd surely turn into a blubbering fool.

"I'm not crying," he muttered gruffly. "We're in the bath, you know. Droplets of water are an understandable byproduct."

"Right," Hermione smirked, and he nearly interrupted her explanation to kiss the look off her face and show her exactly what real smugness looked like.

“Go on,” he reminded, after lingering too long on her lips. “You were explaining the curse had aftereffects?”

“After I woke up, I couldn’t feel you at all,” she said, with a shuddering breath. “I think I might have unknowingly put a mental barrier up, trying to prevent the bond from passing any more pain or suffering to you. I was pretty beaten up physically—my hands still shake something terrible and I stabbed Ron’s hand clean through with a fork the first time I tried to use silverware again— but everyone was shocked by how intact my mind was.”

“And your magic?” He asked, swallowing down his choice words at her casual reveal of her physical distress .

“Well, that was the other bit,” she admitted. “It was like—I swore I could feel the Dark Magic from the curse accumulating in my blood, building and building like it had no outlet to escape. Maybe because of my cursed scar.” She absently touched the space between her breasts absently, where the tip of the purple mark peeked out. “Since I couldn’t get a sense of you, I arranged to meet with Nott through the journals; at the time, he seemed like my best bet of infiltrating anywhere they might be holding you prisoner. Harry and Ron came with me under the cloak to meet him outside the wards; they weren’t exactly keen on the idea, but they knew if they didn’t go along with it I’d just do it on my own. I think I scared them quite a bit.”

“Fuck, now I have to thank Potter too,” he complained, eyeing her grumpily. “You’ll be the death of my reputation, Granger. I used to be feared, you know. Now, I’m practically shaking hands and kissing babies with tears in my fucking eyes because of you.”

“You’re still very dangerous, dear,” she placated with a grin, patting the top of his knee before continuing her story. “When Nott showed up on the cliffs, something in me just...snapped. All the Dark Magic that was in me kept rushing out. I couldn’t control it, Draco. And then my magic— my legilimency—just took over. Ripping through his mind, planting these things in his head, really terrible things. He fell to his knees screaming, begging me to stop. But I just...wouldn’t.”

Draco had experienced a similar power rush while wielding Dark Magic; it hadn't occurred to him that were he to lose control, Dark Magic could wield *him*.

"It's difficult to explain. See for yourself," she sighed, and he got the sense that she was nervous but determined to show him her account of the altercation. "Using the wand is foul, but it's seemed to develop a sort of begrudging respect for me...maybe you'll fare better."

He picked up his dead aunt's wickedly curved wand. To his horror, it seemed to recognize him as kin, fighting him minimally until he managed to subdue its rebellion.

"You sure?"

She nodded, meeting his eyes, and he cast the spell.

*Instantly Draco was transported back onto the bluffs; this time, the cold winter sunlight brilliant against the stark landscape. The jagged edges of the rocks were dusted with frost, their surfaces glinting in the sun like shattered glass. Below, the sea churned violently, its steel-gray waves crashing against the frozen cliffs with a sound that was both thunderous and lonely. There was a raw beauty to the place: a fierce, untamed splendor that made the desolation feel almost alive.*

*He approached the sole figure, huddled in the dead grass: a boy, brought to his knees with his hands up above his head. Nott, looking distressed and exhausted, dark circles deepening under his eyes.*

*"Please," he called hoarsely. "Please, Granger. You have to help him."*

*"I warned you, Nott." Invisible within the memory, Draco whipped his head around, taking in Hermione as he'd never seen her. At first look, s he was frail—too thin, bruised and cut-up and limping— but her eyes were like coals. She radiated a strange, dangerous sort of*

*energy, one that he'd only felt after he'd successfully cast the Killing Curse for the first time.*

*Dark Magic. He'd protected her mind, but her body had soaked it up, attempting to integrate the foreign force with her own power, leading to the schism of self before him.*

*"I told you— if we survived this war, that you and I would go wand to wand for the things you'd done. And you...you have the gall to write to me, asking for my help with Draco. Draco, who you betrayed. Why?" Her curls streamed out behind her, crackling with magic. Draco thought he could hear Nott swallow in fear from his crouch position.*

*"I didn't mean for him to get hurt—"*

*"Wrong answer."*

*He felt something akin to lightning, shooting through him without inflicting damage; Nott, however, began to scream.*

*"Make it stop!" He writhed on the cliff side, clawing at his eyes and ears, as if he were seeing and hearing something Draco was not privy to. It was horrible to watch— still he could not avert his eyes. "Please! Make it stop!"*

*"I begged too," Granger murmured quietly, her words a sharpened blade. "Quite a bit, if my nightmares are an accurate reflection. I thought you should get to experience it too. Perhaps it will be good for you to understand the consequences of your actions."*

*She was using legilimency, he realized. Channeling the Cruciatus curse's residual magic, even in her weakened state, to place her memories in Theo's head. To force him to experience them as if they were happening to him. It was a terrifying twist on the mind magic's intention, and a fitting one at that.*

*"I didn't know!" Theo panted, clutching his stomach. He fought for air in between bouts of whatever visions she was inflicting upon him. "I didn't know you were in the house!"*

*"And yet, we were still slaughtered, tortured. Tied up like animals. If you think this is bad, Theo— you poor thing. It's only been minutes... I was under this wand for over an hour." She spun Bellatrix's blackthorn wand in her hand, giving it a look of disdain. "Apparently, it only really works when I try to use it for harm. Rather useless, magically speaking. But it's quite handy in situations like this one, where I don't care what happens to it's victims."*

*"I'll do anything," Theo moaned, tears streaming down his face. "Anything!"*

*"To save yourself? Yes, I've gathered that."*

*"Not myself...him. Draco. I need to make it right, Granger." He hacked something from the back of his throat and spit red: blood. He'd bitten down hard, probably on his own tongue. "Please, let me help him."*

*"Where is he?" She insisted, dragging herself slowly over Nott's snivelling form. "Tell me where he's being kept. Is he...is he alive?" Her wand hand trembled noticeably.*

*"I don't know!"*

*"I think you're lying, Theo." She raised the wand again. "But I'll do you the kindness of checking, first. Legilimens!"*

*This time the spell was exploratory, and she tore through his memories with brutal efficiency. Draco could only see flashes of what she could from the perspective of a bystander to her memory: Theo as a child, watching Draco enviously as Narcissa ruffled his hair; Theo alone in a dark bedroom, wincing at the sound of heavy footsteps in the hall; Theo sitting with the elves while the other children played— including Draco's elf, he realized bizarrely,*

*recognizing Dobby—the elves, who were always so kind to Theo, perhaps because he knew what it was like to be physically punished. There were flashes of later years: he'd gone to them at Hogwarts too, spending time in the kitchens when he needed comfort. Draco had never realized his nighttime absences.*

*Theo, older now, crying over his mission to kill Dumbledore for the Dark Lord; Dobby in a tea cozy stamped with the Hogwarts crest, offering him a cup of tea. The flashes picked up speed: Theo the night of the raid, the moment he realized what he'd done. Theo, vomiting post apparition, begging the only creatures he knew to be able to permeate apparition wards to help him, to help him fix it—*

*Hermione withdrew suddenly. Draco could feel her shock, her anger cut with a deep pity: Theodore Nott had done a horrible thing, but he'd also once been a boy. A scared, lonely boy with a horrible childhood, who searched for scraps of kindness like a niffler looking for buried gold.*

*And he hadn't lied when he said he didn't know that Draco would be there, that night. Hermione didn't know if that made it better or worse. From his vantage point outside her memory, Draco didn't either.*

*"You called the elves." Hermione's words were blunt; not kind, but no longer as determined to be cruel. "You got us out."*

*"Dobby— I called Dobby," Nott rasped. "Kreacher must have come too, once he realized it was Draco. He's mad for him, last of the Blacks and all that."*

*"You undid the wards."*

*"I'm sorry—"*

*It was the first time Nott had uttered those words. Hermione didn't allow him to continue the sentiment, cutting him off immediately.*

*"I know. I could feel it in your memories."*

*"Just let me make it right. Let me help him."*

*"You undid the wards," Hermione repeated, the gears turning behind her uncharacteristically cold eyes. "Ancient blood wards that had stood for decades." She lifted an eyebrow, contemplatively. "If I could find out where he was...could you do it again?"*

*"Yes," Nott gasped. "Where?"*

*"I don't know yet. I'll send you the location in Draco's journal. Be ready and be quick." She looked at Nott with a single question usurping all her confusion, all her empathy, leaving only the uncertainty of confronting someone you knew, deep down, that you'd never understand. Why had he done it?*

*"You— You're a fool, Theodore. He loved you, you know that?"*

*This was enough to turn Theo from the weeping mess to something different, darker. The switch was immediate; he rose to his feet, spitting mad.*

*"Fuck you, Granger." He wiped his mouth with the back of his wrist. "You don't know anything. You stupid mud—"*

*Hermione moved faster than either of them thought she was capable of in her weakened state, driving her clenched fist into Nott's face before he could finish. He groaned, doubling over and clutching at his eye.*

*"You—you hit me!"*

*"I did. You're lucky I resorted to muggle violence," she said disdainfully, turning away. "A tribute to my heritage, if you will. Had I used this wand, I suspect you'd not be nearly as lucky." She looked over her shoulder once, a warning. "It's unyielding."*

---

With a sudden gasp, Draco was back in the tub, looking at Hermione with wide eyes, his pupils dilating rapidly at the change in perspective. “Salazar,” he panted. “You weren’t playing around.”

“I’m not proud of it,” she squeaked, looking amusingly diminutive in the bath, a bit of shampoo bubbles still caught in her hair. “I was—well, I was awful to him.”

“He deserved it,” Draco said darkly, thinking about everything Nott had done, the least of which being the ease with which he used the slur. “He did far worse to us.”

“That’s the thing,” she murmured, tilting her head in consideration. “Maybe he’s like this because it’s all he’s ever known. And if we keep responding with it— maybe it’s all he ever will.”

“Don’t tell me you’re saying you think Theodore Nott is redeemable, Granger. Or that he needs *saving*,” he scoffed, pulling himself from the bath. He handed her a towel, trying to minimize his own dripping with another. “He’s a murder, not a House-Elf.”

“I’m not saying that at all.” She took the offered towel, wrapping it around her bare figure before he could get as long a look as he would have preferred. “I’m just saying it’s not up to me to decide who is capable of redemption and who isn’t.”

Draco contemplated the words, thinking inexplicably of the deceased Headmaster as they returned to the bedroom and Hermione toweled herself off. Not bothering with her nightdress, she cast a drying charm on her hair—the wand only partially complied, leaving her curls looking a bit crazed— and slipped back into bed.

“You need to rest,” he realized, shaking the lingering discomfort over her memories of the confrontation with Nott from the forefront of his mind. “I should—I can debrief with Potter and Weasley—” He trailed off as she smiled, biting her lower lip coyly. “W-What?”



“Draco, I just woke up. I don’t have any intention of going back to sleep.” She grinned, an invitation sparkling in her eyes. “I missed you.”

His body moved before his mind had even processed the suggestive nature of her statement. Still damp, he flung back the covers and joined her on the mattress, careful to be gentle with his weight. Upon contact, he sighed, basking in the luxurious feeling of her bare skin brushing against his.

“Fuck,” he whispered as he leaned back, sitting on his knees between her thighs. “Thank the gods for that.” He touched her hesitantly, brunching the pads of his fingers against the underside of her breast, the soft curve of her stomach. She inhaled sharply, and he drew his hand back, unsure.

“Are you alright?”

“You won’t break me, Draco.” Hermione laughed and a bell went off inside of him, bright and clear. “And I already cast a silencing charm, so I highly recommend you at least try.” She sat up, lacing her fingers around his neck and pulled him down, down until his lips were level with her breasts. “Please. I—” She hesitated, a blush blooming on her chest. “I want you.”

Even from her relatively tame words, he was so hard it hurt. Abandoning hesitation, he licked the curve of her breast, leaving a hot wet stripe where his tongue had been. She moaned as he took a rosy nipple in his mouth and sucked, laving his tongue against the sensitive peak. Her skin, gently perfumed with lavender from their bath, was intoxicating; he wanted more, and moved from her other breast down her stomach, peppering kisses as he went, in order to get it. For once, he didn’t care how urgent or intense he seemed, did not worry about putting her off with his desperation. They were both desperate— both in awe of the fact they were somehow together again, safe and alive, and eager to act upon it.

“Fuck *me*,” he groaned, as he neared the apex of her thighs. “Look at you, Granger—” He broke off to swipe his tongue through her center, sending her bowing off the bed. For a terrifying second, he was reminded of her body under the cruciatus, but then she made a sound that no one could possibly constitute as being born from anything but pleasure.

“Don’t stop talking.”

He looked up from between her thighs, parting them wider as he grinning wickedly. “I always knew you’d like that. *Words*.” He kissed the crease of her hip. “But I currently have a better use for my mouth, so you’ll have to be patient.”

Her hips bucked and he bracketed an arm around her lower stomach, pressing them firmly to the mattress.

“Hold still.”

She did a very poor job of that, writhing under him; if only the Draco from the Prefect’s bath could see him now, face pressed into Hermione Granger’s cunt. Echoes of her building arousal ricocheted through their bond, lighting up his nerves as she was built up to her climax. When he sucked her clit into his mouth, she finally broke: shuddering and pressing her hips up against him with pleasure, wanton and so *fucking* lovely.

“Wanted to do that since I saw you,” he panted, wiping his mouth with his forearm as he caught his breath. “You’re fucking *fit*, you know that?”

“*Draco*.” She looked up at him through glossy, hooded eyes, body gone soft and malleable from pleasure as he positioned her, pulling her hips closer to where he knelt and lining them up without further hesitation.

“Please,” she asked, looking up at him from under dark lashes and how could he resist such a sweet invitation?

Draco gritted his teeth while he pushed inside her slowly and tried very hard not to come right away from the sensation of her body pulling him closer, tightening around him. *Fuck*. Every time, it was a revelation.

“I’m going to move now,” he managed, quite choked up at even the thought of introducing movement. “Does that—does that sound alright?”

In reply she wound her legs around his waist, pulling him even deeper. “Merlin and Morgana,” he swore, eyes fluttering back at the sensation. Every drag of his hips made it better, the friction driving him past the point of sanity. Better than good wine, than muggle spliffs, than flying, than freedom.

Back when he’d attempted the Patronus charm, he’d never had this weapon in his arsenal: the memory of her, gasping a little with every thrust. Face screwed up in delight every time he angled himself like she liked, her tits bouncing obscenely beneath him. He leaned down to cup them in his hands, plucking at her nipples until she made the exact noise he was seeking.

“Oh, fuck.” He started running his mouth in earnest, filthy words spilling from his lips without permission; a telltale sign he was going to come soon, too soon. “Do you like this, Granger? You like having your tits played with while you take it?” He increased his pace, moving one of his hands to the place they were joined in order to rub her clit roughly with his thumb. Her eyes rolled up into her head and he redoubled his efforts, thrusting in earnest. He wanted to feel her come this time. “You feel fucking amazing....gonna make me come. Let me feel you—that’s it, you’re doing so well— ”

It was bliss, pure bliss; the most unencumbered by darkness that he’d felt in a long time, more restorative to his soul than any healing charm.

“Fuck, *Hermione*—”

Her eyes flew open, locked on his as she bore down on him with a hiccuping gasp, plummeting over the edge. He managed a few more deep strokes and then, he was coming, emptying himself deep inside her.

Pleasure rolled through his frame like a breeze through a field of wheat, crisp and golden. For the first time since that terrible night, Draco felt like there was something good for him in this brutal, terrible, hateful world.

With a soft murmur of his name, she pulled him down into the nest of mussed bedding, and he was careful to roll to the side before collapsing onto the mattress so as not to crush her anywhere she was sore. He flung his arm over his eyes as he basked in the afterglow, the other reaching out to lazily trace patterns on the smooth skin of her stomach.

They lay like that for a long time. Silent. Touching the parts of each other that weren't exactly sexual, but certainly could be, under the right circumstances. The slope of her shoulder, the curve of his jaw. Assuring the other of their wholeness, their lack of injury. She let him double check the places he was most concerned about with his lips; gently, he kissed the base of her skull, the dull ache between her ribs, each of her unsteady, shaking fingers. When he grew too concerned with their tremors, she pulled her hands away, carding them through his hair and smoothing it back from his face.

Her expression grew serious. He admired it that way, too; the furrow of her brow, the determined set of her plush lips. He contemplated sticking a finger between them, encouraging her to suck, to ready him so that he could touch her again.

"Draco," she whispered, her teeth playing with her bottom lip. If he wasn't completely spent, it would have made him hard.

"Yes, love?"

"I think I know how to get the cup."

"The cup? What cup— Oh." He'd forgotten, for a brief moment of bliss, about the horcruxes. He took a deep breath, terrified of the answer to his question. "How?"

She turned her head slightly, and he followed her gaze to where the blackthorn wand lay innocuously on her bedside table. Draco looked at her, a question in his eyes.

"Harry told us what you said, before everything. It has to be in the Black or LeStrange vaults. It *has* to." Her eyes were shining as she explained her plan, bright and clever. "With Bellatrix dead, you're the heir to the Black fortune, aren't you?"

He hesitated; was he the heir to anything, when he was legally supposed to be quite dead?

"Yes, I know," she interrupted his thoughts, waving preemptive concerns away. "There are some complications, surely. Contestations to consider. Especially if she named a different recipient in her will. But as we saw with Dumbledore, wills can be amended. And as it just so happens, I am in possession of a very particular form of identification. Her *wand*."

He sat up and leaned over, examining his deceased aunt's weapon up close, the wand that killed his uncle Ted. He could feel its devastating power cracking between his fingers, unsure of its new master. A reminder that the war —although held tenuously at bay by their reunion, the miraculous joining of their bodies— was not over.

Not yet.

---

Thank you beloved readers, old and new, for tuning in for the long awaited reunion! And thank you for recommending this story to so many others, I am so happy it is being received with such warmth. As always, I humbly offer up my excessive notes:

- Theodore Nott's redemption is not a straight line. It's a more treacherous up and down; as Draco points out, there have been multiple instances now where he had a choice, albeit a terrible one, to make. It is the oldest of wartime moral questions: do you agree to inflict violence you believe to be wrong, or do you risk receiving it yourself? Because they've had such different life experiences, Draco and Theo have very different answers. To be honest, Theo deserved that tongue lashing from him; now that it's done, let's all cry about how he always befriended the elves because they were the only ones in his home who were kind to him.

- In this chapter, we see Draco started to truly come to terms with his mother's death. So far, he's compartmentalized it; however, we see a lot of that bottled rage erupt in his confrontation with Theo. Still, we have miles to go! Theo and Draco's relationship continues to be the most complicated in the text.

- Hermione takes the exact opposite philosophy as Dumbledore did when it comes to violent boys redeeming themselves: "it's not up to me to decide who is capable of redemption and who isn't."

- There were a lot of theories about how the Cruciatus would affect Hermione, points to you if you guessed that Draco's occlumency had protected her mind! The lingering Dark Magic of the curse, of course, needed somewhere to go...the astute reader might wonder about why she's managed to tame such a terrible wand with such relative ease.

- So many call backs to the Prefect's Bath scene (Chapter 16 if you want a refresh!) And, Chatty-in-Bed Draco Malfoy strikes again. Also, if you're worried about the contraceptive charm, don't be. Molly Weasley was not going to let her girls out in the world without the Plan-B style potion-- let's pretend that unlike the actual Plan B, there are absolutely no nasty side effects. Magic!

- As far as this story's timeline goes; the trio doesn't have Griphook on their side, but do you know who they do have? Cursebreaker Bill

fucking Weasley; Gringotts baddie, Fleur Delacour; and (god help us) Pansy Parkinson.

- I sadly couldn't fit every reunion into this chapter in depth, as it grew into another 12K word behemoth. More on Harry, Ron, and the others (including the Tonks fam) very soon! Next chapter will be out shortly after the New Year as I take a little break from school and writing! Chapter 43: "Enter, Stranger, But Take Heed."

And happy holidays for those who celebrate at this time of year! I'll be humming Auld Lang Syne somewhere with a glass of champagne, thinking about how you, dear reader, made my year so wonderful and worthwhile. Until next time.

---

# Enter Stranger, But Take Heed

## Chapter 43: Enter Stranger, But Take Heed

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

As spring began to peek through winter's cloak, an urgency infiltrated every nook and cranny of Shell Cottage, which for Draco constituted a swift toppling of priorities. Injuries, reunions, hopes and fears— they were all put aside in service to the one thing that would finally set them all free: destroying Lord Voldemort. The sharpened focus allowed him to stifle his cruciatus shocked nerves and compartmentalize his loss in favor of his new mantra: *The cup. The snake. Something of Ravenclaw's.*

He ran the words over and over in his head compulsively as he strengthened his occlumency, rebuilding the gates of his mental garden until they were once again impermeable. Shuttered away the flashes of agony that sometimes stole his breath after loud noises or bright lights. He couldn't afford to mourn— if he started he feared he would never stop, that he'd fall to pieces without means to put himself back together. Draco knew the crash was coming, but for now, his doubts would have to be levied by the whispered belief that the war's end was finally in reach.

His compartmentalization only failed at night. Given the cottage's limited space, he and the three Gryffindors hunkered down in sleeping bags on the living room floor; Pansy was far less concerned with being courteous to their hosts, and quickly snapped up the bedroom that Hermione had occupied until she'd recuperated, citing an allergy to "senseless altruism." Draco didn't complain, mostly because he could only fall asleep once he heard Hermione's breathing even out beside him, and despite Potter and Weasley's disgust at sharing a sleeping situation with the two of them, they could see that Hermione slept better with Draco around.



Whenever he did manage to get some rest, dreams infiltrated his consciousness: his mother, picking stalks of delphinium, their deep blue petals opening and closing in the wind. His aunt towering over Hermione's prone body, laughing. Ted Tonks, standing at a stove, twirling his wand in figure eights until it shrank down to the size of a matchstick and ignited— *do you remember what I taught you, Draco?*

The dreams were slightly better, now that they were under the same roof again. But sometimes he could not discern her screaming in his nightmares from her screaming in her own. He'd pull her to his chest tightly as she whimpered and writhed in her sleeping bag, her face screwed up in agony. Hold fast until she woke up panting, silent tears streaming down her face.

More often than not they'd give up on sleep altogether, joining Potter, who was nearly always red-eyed and awake, slumped on the sofa. Poring over Hermione's book of children's stories as if it contained the secrets to the universe, muttering nonsensically about Dumbledore. Of the four of them, Weasley was the only one who had proved capable of sleeping through anything, his snores providing the less than ambient noise that made up the soundtrack of their sleepless nights.

On one such night, Potter clapped a hand to his forehead, hunched over in pain, and shouted. The floorboards above them creaked—he'd woken someone up. For all of their sakes, Draco hoped it was not Fleur.

"Fuck!"

From his sleeping bag, Weasley mumbled something about spiders, before rolling over and resuming his snoring.

"Harry?" Hermione whispered, her curls flying over her shoulder as she looked up from her cup of tea, dark circles under her eyes.

"The wand," Potter moaned. "He's got the wand."

Draco had his hands on Potter's collar in a heartbeat. He shook him, forcing him back into his body. "Didn't I give you those dratted lessons for a reason? Use your occlumency, you fool."

"I told you, it doesn't bloody work for me!"

"What wand?" Hermione asked, dread imbuing her words. " *Harry*, what wand?"

In answer, Potter simply pointed to an open page in Dumbledore's damned books of children's stories. The illustration of a bearded wizard brandishing a wand. A wand more powerful than any in existence. A wand that would always win battles for its owner. A wand worthy of a wizard who had conquered Death.

A wand fashioned on a fiverbank, from the branch of an elder tree.

"The wand in the story isn't a real wand," Draco warned, a thread of doubt weaving itself into his voice. "There weren't really three brothers. It's a *metaphor*, Potter. Absolute power corrupts absolutely."

"It's not just a metaphor," a new voice piped up. Pansy, rubbing sleep from her eyes, stood on the last step of the staircase. Wearing a silky nightgown borrowed from Fleur, and a disgruntled expression. "For Circe's sake, Potter. What's with the shouting and carrying on in the middle of the night?"

She flounced over to where they were huddled around the fire. Outside, the sea winds blew against the window pains. "You'd know about this if you weren't our Governess' favorite, Draco. The old bat had me copying down genealogies every time I smudged my penmanship. While you and Theo were off playing wumpus and warlock, I had to trace the Sacred Twenty-Eight back to the bloody stone age—"

"Focus, Pansy," Draco sighed. "What genealogies?"

“The brothers in the story were real,” Pansy explained. “Even after the Perverell name faded, their bloodline continued on. The descendents of Cadmus, the middle brother, became known as the Gaunts—”

Hermione and Potter exchanged startled glances. Something passed between them.

“Did you say *Gaunt*?”

“Yes,” Pansy snapped, growing frustrated at the interruptions. “Why are you two so riled up? The Gaunt line is just as extinct as the Perverells.”

“It’s not,” Potter countered, staring into the fire. Something haunted came over his visage, making him look much older. “Like you said. The name may have died but the bloodline? Very much alive.”

Draco had no idea what the ominous statement meant. Given the expression on Potter’s face, he very much doubted he wanted to find out.

“What about the other two brothers?” Hermione prompted, shifting focus. She had the knife sharpened look of a logistician, mind whirring as she put together a puzzle only she could see. “What happened to their bloodlines?”

“Funnily enough, the last of the Perverell lineage is right here in this room.” She looked to Potter and then to Draco, smirking. “The eldest, Antioch, had his line eventually merged with the Blacks. Eventually Ignotus’ line also married into a new surname. *Potter*.”

Green eyes blinked behind spectacles in confusion. “M-Me?”

“Harry,” Hermione breathed. “It makes perfect sense. Your cloak. The Gaunt ring. The Hallows are—”

“Where’s the wand, then?” Draco interrupted. “It’s not exactly a family heirloom, is it? If the myth is to be believed, it’s been jumping from Dark Lord to Dark Lord throughout history. If the Blacks don’t have it, who does?”

“Dumbledore,” Potter sighed. “He had it. Won it off Grindelwald. It was buried with him.”

“I’m sorry,” Pansy said. “You’re telling me Albus Dumbledore, widely regarded as the most intellectually prominent wizard in Britain, had the most powerful wand in the world *buried with him?* ”

“Vol—You-Know-Who, sorry— took the wand. It’s what he’s been looking for all these months. Now he’s...celebrating finding it.”

“Bollocks,” Pansy said, succinct as ever.

Hermione shuddered, cupping her mug of tea with both hands, as if trying to warm herself from an internal cold. Draco felt her flare of worry and pulled her in by the waist, stoking his thumb soothingly against her lower back. *The cup. The snake. Something of Ravenclaw’s.* It had to end. If it didn’t end, none of their sacrifice would have been worth it, and Draco was not sure if any of them could live with that.

---

The plan to infiltrate Gringotts came together rapidly. Before the war, Bill Weasley had a relatively specialized position as a Cursebreaker at Gringotts, making him somewhat of an expert on the various dangerous enchantments surrounding the vaults and how to escape them intactly. Although he didn’t approve of their refusal to reveal *what* exactly they were looking for, Bill begrudgingly gave them a crash course on the vault system. Each chamber was protected by layers of magical defenses: runes indicating blood curses, vaults that relocated themselves within the bank’s subterranean structure, even a rumor of beasts used as guardians: sphinxes and chimeras and, if whispers were to be believed, dragons.

Fleur, whose mood had soured alongside her morning sickness, helped them annotate a complex map of the bank's layout between bouts of vigorous vomiting. "Your fault," she threatened her husband, after losing her breakfast out an open window. "My mother never had to deal with this indignity. These are Weasley genes."

Draco watched her add to the map, wondering how she could possibly remember the bank's inner workings in such detail, only to catch Hermione mouthing a word at him from across the room: *Veela*. Right, Delacour was part Veela, a species known for their inherent direction and evocation magic, hardwired to remember flight and migratory patterns.

Fleur's map was a labyrinthine masterpiece, rooms labeled in shimmering enchanted ink. The main atrium was depicted at the map's center, dominated by an enormous domed glass ceiling studded with glowing crystalline stalactites. From there, the etchings spiraled outward in a dizzying array of corridors, vaults, and chambers. Each wing of the bank seemed to serve a unique purpose: one for enchanting currency, another for storing magical artifacts, and yet another deeper still for safeguarding the most dangerous treasures, with monikers such as the "Gold-Fanged Treasury" or "Hall of Whispering Keys."

Their biggest issue, according to Bill and Fleur, was that Gringotts maintained a complex network of secret tunnels leading to caverns that only the goblins themselves could navigate, and that some vaults were accessible only through those passageways. "The goblins did not trust us fully," she lamented, flicking her silvery ponytail over her shoulder. "Wizards were not allowed to enter."

"Won't the goblins just look the other way?" Harry griped. "It's not like You-Know-Who is offering them a better life. Why not help us?"

"We're talking about a different species of being, Harry" Bill sighed. "Dealings between wizards and goblins have been fraught for centuries. You remember that from History of Magic, don't you? Goblins, those at Gringotts in particular, believe that wizards cannot be trust-

ed, either in wartime or during peace, in matters of gold and treasure.”

“Er,” Harry said, flushing. Hermione looked very smug, an expression Draco found particularly becoming on her. “Yeah. Right.”

“Both sides have done terrible things—”

“Mostly, the wizarding side,” Hermione interjected. “Wizards have tried to enslave them just like the elves. The most recent goblin uprising was only in the 1800’s, and goblins have long memories. You can hardly blame them for their hesitation.”

“You’re not wrong, Hermione,” Fleur added, playing with the end of her silky blond ponytail. “Goblins are like Veela in that they are not forgiving creatures. They do not take sides in wizarding wars; in fact, I suspect they hope that in fighting each other, we will destroy ourselves.”

Bill placed a hand on his wife’s lower back, hovering protectively. He had been exhibiting what Narcissa would have called *first time father jitters*—buzzing around Fleur and attempting to manage everything from her bathwater to her slippers for her. “Darling, shouldn’t you rest? Your health is fragile right now...”

Fleur batted his hand away and said something rude in French. “It’s a baby, Bill, not a disease. I’m fine.”

“Of course,” Bill agreed, not looking convinced. He wrapped an arm around his wife, stroking a thumb along her belly in a way that made Draco quickly avert his eyes. When they weren’t bickering, the couple were positively saccharine. “I’ll bring you tea and some ginger biscuits to settle your stomach, alright, love?”

“Oi, bring me some biscuits!” Ron piped up. “Actually—have you got the chocolate kind?”

“I wasn’t offering you any, bellend,” Bill snapped, but returned with a packet of biscuits and chucked them at his brother’s head.

Thanks to a hair found on her robes and the wickedly curved wand, the plan was for Hermione to enter the bank disguised as Bellatrix accompanied by a transfigured Weasley and Potter under his infamous cloak. Draco would accompany them under his own reluctant disguise as his father, courtesy of an aging potion and a few appearance-altering charms. Under the guise of their aliases, the goblins would lead them to the Black family vault, where the search for the cup would begin. To Draco’s chagrin, their escape plan was far less formulated.

“Run,” Potter summed up when asked how he planned on extricating them from the bank in question.

“Fast,” Weasley added, ever the wordsmith.

“The fact that the fate of our entire society rests on you two astounds me,” Pansy piped up. She was lounging on the sofa reading what appeared to be a filthy romance novel starring a brawny centaur and a buxom young witch, clearly eavesdropping on their planning session. “Granger will need my help, of course.”

“And what exactly do you bring to the table, Parkinson,” Hermione sniped. “Besides hair charms and withering commentary.”

“Yes, hair charms are a good start.” She gave Hermione a look of distaste, missing her irony completely. “Do you really think you’re adept enough to pass yourself off as one of the most notorious witches of the century? Please. I’ve seen you try to put lipgloss on your eyelids in the girls’ lavatory, Granger. There is an art to embodying someone like Bellatrix.”

“I still don’t get how it isn’t an issue that she kicked it,” Ron reiterated stubbornly. “You don’t think the goblins are going to know she’s dead? Won’t they be a little suspicious seeing Bellatrix Lestrange,

back from the other side of the Veil and asking to be let into her vault?”

“Inheritance laws will be enacted, but a common goblin teller won't know that. Bellatrix's death isn't public knowledge,” Draco explained, for what felt like the millionth time. “Look at the papers. There's no way the Dark Lord wants it to get out that his most fearsome general has been taken down. That would make him look weak and he can't afford that right now. According to your brother, the Ministry is hanging on by a thread. People are seeing the mass destruction and getting cold feet.”

“More like the war has threatened their precious tax dollars a bit more than was anticipated.” Pansy said coolly. “What about the bank's ledgers? Won't the inheritance have changed? To Rodolphus, or even to you, Draco?”

“Bellatrix would never allow the Black fortune into Lestrangle's hands,” Draco countered. “She hated her husband almost as much as she hated muggleborns. The goblins won't know Bellatrix is dead, the magic will. That's what'll get me into the vault— it's mine both by legal right and by blood.”

“All the more reason to make sure Granger doesn't show up tripping over her shoes and thanking servants. If she can't pull it off, your little heist will be over before it even starts!”

Hermione tossed her curls, eyes sparking to life with a fury that Draco remembered well from the many times it had been directed his way. “Oh, because it'll be so difficult for me to embody the complexities of a stuck up blood supremacist? Please, I've had plenty of practice just watching you do it for years.”

Pansy glowered. “Alright then, let's see then. Do your best imitation.”

Hermione, cheeks pink, drew herself up to her full height and took on an expression she might have intended to be menacing, but in reality made her look a bit queasy.



“Excellent, Granger,” Pansy snorted. “We’ll all be in Azkaban in a fortnight.” Draco, although he would never be so stupid as to say it aloud, thought she had a point.

“Er.” Potter scratched his head. “She might have a point, Hermione.”

Thus began Hermione’s “comportament” lessons from Pansy, which reliably left her in a furious mood. Draco tried not to be amused as she learned all the pureblood mannerisms that had been ingrained in them from childhood, after which she’d stomp up the stairs and lock herself in the bathroom with a slam of the door.

“Perhaps you might consider being a little nicer?” Draco asked Pansy, raising an eyebrow after one such door slam. “I know you’re playing at governess, but there’s no need to include the stinging hexes every time she trips.”

“Oh, please. We were laughing off those hexes when we were first years . It’s not my fault your girlfriend is a savage little beast with terrible posture, nor that she *hates* me.”

“It’s not you, Parkinson,” Ron, who was flipping through an old curse breaking manual of Bill’s nearby, chimed in. “I mean, you’re not her favorite person, but that’s not what’s got Hermione upset. It’s what you represent, all the bowing and scraping and pureblood shite. I reckon she’s spent the last seven years being told she’s below it, fighting back with everything she has to prove it’s all bunk, and now Parkinson is correcting her walk so she can imitate the lunatic who tortured her a few weeks ago.” He shrugged. “Simple, really.”

The sitting room was silent. Ron looked up from the manual to see Pansy’s stunned expression, Draco’s tight jaw working furiously in his cheek.

“Don’t beat yourself up, mate,” Ron offered, leaning over to slap Draco on the back. “Took me a while to understand witches myself. Lavender Brown—” He sighed dreamily, completely missing Pansy’s

look of abject disgust. “Now *there’s* a mystery wrapped in an enigma.”

---

The morning of the planned heist brought a double departure from Shell Cottage: the three Gryffindors and Draco, along with Pansy, who’d received directions on how to sneak back into Hogwarts via the Hog’s Head.

“Remember what I told you.” Pansy was lecturing Hermione furiously, trying to cram in as much information as possible in the limited time they had left. “Demand and threaten. And don’t—”

“Take no for an answer,” Hermione finished, wearing Bellatrix Lestrangle’s cruel smirk. Draco had a hard time looking at her without being overcome with loathing. She was much taller than her normal height, wild black curls tumbling down her back, her heavily lidded eyes just as disdainful as Draco remembered his aunt’s being. Pansy had almost done too good of a job enhancing the Polyjuice with dark kohl running her lashes and lips stained a shade of red so dark they were practically maroon.

It was almost as discomfiting as looking into the mirror to take in his own disguise: thanks to an aging potion and Pansy’s hair lengthening charm, he was the spitting image of Lucius Malfoy. He was sure it would haunt his nightmares for many moons.

Pansy embraced him quickly, admiring her handiwork. “Your father is an evil brute, Draco. But at least you can look forward to looking fit while middle aged.”

“After this war’s over,” Ron—who looked nothing like himself, sporting a bulbous nose, waist length beard, and about forty pounds around his middle—said, looking between Draco and Hermione in dismay. “I’ll need to check myself into the St. Mungo’s mental ward.”

“I’ll need a lobotomy,” Draco muttered. “It’s not your girlfriend dressed up as your insane, murderous aunt.”

“Don’t fuck this up, Granger” Pansy instructed before taking her leave. “And take care of him, would you?” To everyone’s surprise, she pulled Hermione into a bone crushing hug. She struggled against it momentarily, before patting Pansy gingerly on the back, wearing a bemused expression that Draco would bet had never before appeared on Bellatrix’s face.

Weasley elbowed Draco in the side. “Watch your back mate. They’ll have you running circles, those two.”

Bill shook all of their hands, even Potter’s invisible one under the cloak. “You won’t be able to come back here, of course. But if you can send word when you’re safe—”

“We’ll be fine,” Ron said, with a bit of bravado. Draco got the sense he was trying to put Bill at ease, even if he didn’t fully believe his own sentiments. “Give Fleur a kiss from me, yeah?”

“You cheeky bastard—”

In the turn of a heel, they were gone.

---

Although Diagon Alley had fallen into apocalyptic disrepair— empty shops with boarded up windows, Squibs begging in the streets, patrols of Snatchers and Hit-Wizards roaming the alleys— Gringotts was just as splendid as it had been when Draco had first seen it, brought by his father to learn the codes to the family accounts. He’d been seven or eight, and had to pretend he was not completely in awe of the hushed grandeur, marble floors gleaming under the flickering light of enchanted chandeliers. Malfoys were not to act impressed, at least, not publicly— it was considered simple behavior.

Now, the bank provided a stunning contrast to the all-encompassing misery around it. Hermione, jarringly wearing Bellatrix’s face, gripped his elbow and squeezed. She felt it too: the specter of the past, haunting the very cobblestones over which they stood.

The four of them walked through the towering stone pillars lined the space, their surfaces etched with ancient runes that whispered of long-forgotten magic. Above them, a warning etched in stone: *Enter, stranger, but take heed of what awaits the sin of greed...*

They passed the guards waving secrecy sensors— confounded, thanks to some quick thinking on Potter’s part—and into the bank without interruption. Inside, goblins scuttled behind high counters, their quills scratching against parchment, weighing coins with meticulous precision. Shadows danced on the domed glass ceiling, cast by the flickering torchlight, while the low murmur of business hummed beneath the clatter of shifting ledgers. Beyond the grand hall, dark passageways twisted downward, spiraling into the depths where vaults slumbered behind iron doors, secrets locked away in the cold embrace of stone.

The air smelled of ink and aged parchment, laced with the faint metallic tang of hoarded wealth. Draco felt almost at home.

“Lord Malfoy,” the goblins greeted him hurriedly. “Madam Lestrangle! And your companion—?”

“The esteemed Baron Dragomir Despard,” Draco intoned, doing his best imitation of Lucius’ drawl. By Ron’s slight flinch, he knew he was succeeding. “One of the Dark Lord’s finest associates from the North. He’s thrilled at the change he’s seen in our fine society, aren’t you, Dragomir?”

Ron grunted, putting on a truly strained Viktor Krum imitation. Worryingly, the goblin’s gaze lingered on the space where Potter hovered under the cloak. Draco got the feeling his invisibility did not fully extend to other magical species: while they could not see the boy in question, they could certainly sense his presence.

“We will require your wands,” one of the goblins said, holding out a bony hand. “Part of our new identification measures.”

“My wand?” Hermione thrust out Bellatrix’s prized possession, just as disdainful and haughty as any pureblood witch he’d grown up around. Pansy would be proud. “I’ll show you my wand.” Without missing a beat, she fired off a sizzling dark curse, that just barely grazed the top of the goblin’s wizened head.

The threat hung in the air magnificently— Draco marveled at Hermione’s composure, her smooth facade.

“Lord Malfoy?” The goblin managed weakly. “Your wand? If I may?”

“How’s this for identification,” Hermione snarled, yanking her robe’s sleeve up to reveal her Marked forearm and thrusting it into the goblin’s face. The sight of the ink made Draco’s blood run cold. “How dare you question us? I’ll have your head mounted in my study for your sheer impudence.”

“Now, now, Bellatrix,” Draco drawled as Lucius, extending his left hand so that his signet ring was on full display. The one his father had given to him before he’d left for Azkaban, all those moons ago. “Only a Malfoy could wear this ring. Now, let me remind you, goblin. You are a servant and I expect to be served. You will take us to the vault or I’ll let my dear sister-in-law make it so there is nothing left of you to merit even a mounting.”

“Nutters,” Ron, disturbed by their performance, muttered under his breath as they were escorted to the vaults by a trembling goblin.

“Nutters, the both of you.”

They stunned the goblin and climbed into one of the carts, whizzing along the track through the darkened stone passageways until they careened into an enchanted waterfall, one of the Goblin’s cautionary protections they’d been warned against. But they hadn’t accounted for the speed of the cart, the dim lighting and by the time they approached it was too late. The thief’s downfall soaked them all, washing away their enchantments. Only Potter’s invisibility cloak remained in place— he yanked it off from around his head, spluttering.

“They know there’s an intruder,” Hermione muttered. To Draco’s relief, she was herself again, albeit a bit drowned. “They’ve set off their defenses.”

“Then we better move fast,” Weasley said, leading them down the dark passage. “Bill said the oldest vaults are the deepest. I figure if we just keep going forward we’ll hit—”

Draco saw its shadow before he saw the beast itself, opened his mouth to call out a warning, but no sound emerged.

A colossal dragon lay bound before them. Age and captivity had dulled its once-magnificent scales to a pallid, crumbling ruin, while its eyes, now clouded and pink with blindness, spoke of long-forgotten skies. Its vast, spiked wings, though furled tight against its wasted frame, were large enough to engulf the entire chamber.

When it turned its monstrous head, a terrible roar shuddered through the cavern. Then came the fire—a searing, furious jet of white-hot rage—that sent them fleeing back into the shadows.

“Get back!” Potter shouted, ducking into an alcove. The dragon strained to follow them, pulling against heavy iron manacles clamped its hind legs, chains connecting to immense stakes driven mercilessly into the stone. Draco caught a glimpse of something familiar etched on its iron collar: *Toujours Pur*.

The Black family sigil was burned into the beast's wing like a brand.

It thrashed and pulled hard, snapped free of a restraint. Having shrunk back to her normal height, Hermione tripped over her too long cloak in her hurry to get back, tumbling to the cavern’s floor. The dragon inhaled deeply, opening its jaws to strike, and something in Draco snapped. Without thinking of the lunacy of his plan, he stepped in front of her, wand trained on the dragon. His only defense. If he could afford her even a second, maybe...

The dragon reared back at the sight of his wand. He shut his eyes, prepared to feel the flames.

"Bloody hell," Weasley gasped.

Draco cracked his eyes open. The dragon had lowered its scaled neck, resting its head on the floor at Draco's feet. A position of deference.

*Blood of my blood.* It made a low, growling sound. *Blood of my blood.*

"Is it...talking to you?" Potter said in a strangled voice, his eyes the size of dinner plates.

Draco moved on instinct. With shaking hands, he reached out, laying a palm on the beast's rippling snout. The dragon closed its enormous, scaly eyes and moved back, exposing the Vault door.

"Oh my god," Hermione breathed as she came to a realization. "It knows you're a Black. The *last* Black."

"How is that possible?" Weasley asked. "It's a bloody dragon!"

"Riddle did it with the basilisk," Potter said. He edged around the dragon, eyeing the vault's door. "It obeyed him because he was the Heir of Slytherin."

"We can argue about blood bound reptiles another time. Let's get that blasted cup and leave before we're barbecued." Draco regarded the beast with no small degree of nervousness. Hermione moved through the defenses on the vault door using Bellatrix's wand. The door responded to the magic, releasing its exterior security measures. Still, the door would not budge.

"It needs blood," Hermione realized, running her finger over the runes engraved on the largest lock. Careful not to make any sudden movements, he moved away from the dragon slowly, slicing his hand

open with his wand. Ignored the sting, smearing his palm against the lock. The line of fifty locks clicked open simultaneously.

The vault was a cavernous chamber, its walls lined with towering shelves stacked with heaps of glittering Galleons, Sickles, and Knuts. The flickering torch light reflected off the treasure, casting golden ripples across the cold stone floor. Ornate goblets encrusted with rubies and emeralds rested atop chests overflowing with ancient coins, while jewel-encrusted daggers and delicate tiaras lay scattered among enchanted artifacts. A set of heavy, rune-carved cabinets stood at the back, their doors slightly ajar to reveal rolls of parchment bound in dragonhide and vials of shimmering potions. Cursed Dark Objects lay untouched behind glass in darkened corners, their magic thrumming in the still air. At the very center of the vault, atop an obsidian pedestal, rested a heavy golden chalice.

"There!" Potter lunged forward, but the moment anything was disturbed, the treasure began to multiply, flooding the vault with an avalanche of scorching gold, a final safeguard against the unworthy. "Fuck! It's hot!"

"The Germino and Flagrante curses," Hermione cried. "Don't touch anything!" She turned to address him. "Draco, it's your inheritance. Can you touch it without burning yourself?"

In answer, he strode through the vault, kicking aside valuable antiquities without even looking. He scrambled up the slippery piles of gold, casting charms as he went. When he reached the chalice, he felt it—the same pulse that the locket had emitted.

As soon as he lifted the horcrux, a siren went off in the bank, causing iron bars to descend at the entrance of the vault's cavern.

"Uh...Hermione?" Ron said, panicked. "How are we supposed to get out?"

"Move out of the way," She snarled, sending every variation of a blasting curse that Draco knew, and some he did not, at the bars.



“Confringo! Repulso! Bombarda Maxima!” The curses were no use. Hermione intensified her efforts, her curses growing darker and darker. Finally, a blast of dark magic tore through the bars, barely bending the iron.

*Blood of my blood.* The dragon began to thrash at the siren’s blaring. *Blood of my blood.*

“The dragon,” Potter said breathlessly.

“Yes, we know,” Draco snarled. “It’s kind of hard to miss.”

“No,” Potter corrected. “We’ll use the dragon. Blast through the vault’s other end and ride it out.”

“You’re *mad*. We’ll be thrown clear immediately!”

“Do you have a better idea?” Potter yelled. Behind him, Draco could hear the approaching goblins, wielding strange metal instruments making clanking noises that had the dragon thrashing in agitation.

Feeling deranged, Draco focused on the dragon, who was furiously pulling on its remaining chains. He raised his wand. “Diffendo!” He called, splitting the chains in two. When the dragon realized it had been freed, it roared and blundered forward, shoving its scarred muzzle into Draco’s side. Something in his magic glimmered in recognition: the Black side of him, raising its head.

Without giving himself too much time to think, Draco lifted Hermione by the waist and placed her in the beast’s wing joint, pulling himself up after her. “Get on,” Draco called to the other two. “And don’t fucking fall!”

The dragon charged forward, causing Weasley and Potter to launch themselves with running leaps onto its back. From where she sat, Hermione brandished her wand and sent the ceiling crumbling around them, working to create a gap for the dragon’s escape. Draco joined her, blasting away rocks and boulders, clearing a passage.

They tore through the earth's jagged shroud, breaking into a cavern that hosted the inky expanse of a subterranean lake, its obsidian waters lapping in uneasy ripples as the great beast beneath them surged forward. The dragon—even more scarred and monstrous up close, with scales that caught the dim glow of firelight in dull, smoldering embers—seemed to sense the first intoxicating scent of freedom.

*Blood of my blood!*

Behind them, the cavern was a maelstrom of chaos: the violent lash of a spiked tail rended stone from stone, as fractured stalactites went crashing down in great, splintering echoes. The metallic clamor of the goblins in pursuit faded behind them. Ahead, the dragon let out a peal of flame, burning a searing path through the darkness, blasting through any obstacle that stood in its way.

Unable to stand up against the beast's raw, unyielding power, the stone passage gave way, shattering in a thunderous explosion that sent shards of marble cascading like falling stars. They broke through into the vast hall beyond and entered the hall of cold gleaming stone. Goblins and wizards alike recoiled in terror, their cries lost beneath the dragon's guttural, triumphant roar.

"Fly," Draco instructed it urgently. "Please fly."

The dragon roared, blasting the bank's counters with a pillar of flame, but did not take off. The words on its collar mocked him, etched in French.

"*Vole!*" Draco tried, for the first time thankful to his heinous French tutor, and the dragon unfurled its ancient wings at last, great tattered sails stretching into their full, formidable span, and arched its horned head towards the glass ceiling, hinting at the promise of the open sky.

Thinking quickly, Hermione blasted a hole in the glass. The whisper of fresh air seemed to beckon the beast and with a mighty heave,

the dragon lunged forward, its immense bulk shifting as it launched itself through the ceiling and onto the bank's roof, perching above Gringotts famous columns as it fired a volley of dragon fire into the sky. The four of them clung to its ridged spine; Hermione shrieked, wild eyes as she began to slip from the wing joint, but Draco reached forward while tenuously maintaining his balance, wrapping an arm around her torso and pulling her into his chest.

The beast blinked, stunned by the blinding light of Diagon Alley. Its scales caught the sunlight, gleaming like hammered bronze, and then—with a final, breathtaking surge—it launched itself skyward, the wind rushing past in a triumphant howl as it carried them into the vast and boundless heavens.

---

---

Beloved readers!

It has been a minute, and for that I apologize. This is my last semester of coursework and it's also my heaviest, so I've been struggling a little to balance work and passion projects. Thank you for your endless patience.

- Behold, my version of the Gringotts heist! I considered what it might look like without Griphook and with the assistance of the delightfully snotty Pansy Parkinson. I always wondered in the canon why they didn't get Bill and Fleur (who literally worked for Gringotts) more involved.

- Tom Riddle, the last descendent of Salazar Slytherin could bring the Basilisk to heel. Imagine Draco's surprise when he learned the Blacks had their own magical reptile bound to their bloodline. I love an on the nose metaphor, and this is a literal dragon, breaking free of its chains.

-I love writing Bill and Ron's brotherly dynamic, a loving but long suffering barrage.

- This is the start of a series of plot heavy chapters as the plot picks up pace. Never fear, we'll still see our favorites interact plenty! Next chapter were going to see some long awaited reunions. Look out for Chapter 44 soon!

Love you all. Thank you for every comment and recommendation. You're the force that propels this story forward.

---

# Into the Breach

## Chapter 44: Into the Breach

---

A quick recap of relevant earlier going ons:

- Last chapter, Hermione (disguised as Bellatrix), Ron, Harry, and Draco (disguised as Lucius), infiltrated Gringotts, where they encountered a chained dragon marked with the Black family sigil. The creature sensed Draco's lineage and submitted to him, allowing them access to the Lestrage vault. Inside, they retrieved Hufflepuff's cup—another Horcrux—only to trigger deadly enchantments and a lockdown. As goblins close in, they freed the dragon and rode it through collapsing tunnels and into a subterranean lake, eventually blasting out through the bank's domed ceiling into Diagon Alley (Chapter 43).
  - When Draco successfully cast the Killing Curse for the first time, he was unusually affected and his magic became fragile and uncontrollable (Chapter 32).
  - Previously, the group discussed how a Killing Curse can destroy a Horcrux. Although Harry attempted to use it, he failed and was reluctant to allow the burden of Dark Magic to fall upon Ron and Hermione (Chapter 38).
  - Last summer, Draco and Hermione met at the Second Son's Estate to pass the Order information (a secluded country manor traditionally passed down to the second-born sons of the Black family), and were intimate for the first time on the rug in the study during a thunderstorm (Chapter 30).
- 

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

The dragon's wings sliced through the clouds like cleavers as they climbed higher and higher into the sky. Beneath them, the ruins of Gringotts were swallowed into a jagged mouth of flame and shattered glass, the bank's once magnificent marble façade now a nothing but a broken tooth in the rotten maw of Diagon Alley.

The wind whipped their skin raw as the countryside unwound below them in great quilted patches. Golden fields and black lakes, tiny gray specks that might have been cottages or dairies. The sun had begun to set, casting the four fugitives and their impossible mount in a coppery halo. Hermione trembled, her back pressed to his chest, and for a moment, Draco could not tell whether the movement belonged to her or to himself. She was hot to the touch, thrumming with adrenaline. When she looked back at him, her pupils were blown wide, and there was in them something that did not belong to any young girl, something scorching and hardened, bestowed upon her by the war.

Harry was behind Draco, legs locked around the dragon's spiny back, wand gripped so tightly in his fist that his knuckles had gone bloodless. Ron brought up the rear, arm hooked into one of the dragon's wing joints. His face—long returned to its normal freckled visage—was scraped, his hair matted with sweat and ash.

"Where's it taking us, Malfoy?" Ron shouted over the wind.

"The fuck if I know!"

"It's your dragon!"

"Just because it was chained to my vault, doesn't mean it's mine! It's a great bloody reptile. It'll do whatever it damn well pleases."

As if cognizant of their argument, the dragon descended, each beat of its wings a seismic shudder. "There!" Hermione screamed, pointing to a gash in the landscape ahead, where a bowl of shadow was nestled between tree-dotted hills. A lake, dark as spilled ink and utterly still.

“We’ll have to jump!”

“Are you mad?” Ron cried, as the dragon swooped even lower in a series of violent jerks, each movement pitching them perilously toward oblivion. When they were close enough that the dragon’s wing beats made the surface of the lake shudder, Hermione barked, “Now!”

Harry dropped first, a cannonball of reckless scar tissue. Ron followed half a second later with a strangled yell. Hermione took Draco’s hand and together, they pushed off. It was not so much a leap as a surrender, arms flung wide, his body slicing through air with the elegance of someone with plenty of practice falling from his broom.

They hit the water like meteors, overcome by its glacial, nearly prehistoric cold. Draco’s breath punched out of him in a silver burst. Then, he kicked upward hard, breaking the surface with a gasp. Harry was already up beside him, sputtering and wild-eyed, as Ron paddled for the bank, cursing the dragon, the lake, Celestina Warbeck, and the Dark Lord in a single breathless rant. Hermione emerged with less drama, her limbs slow and deliberate, curly hair plastered to her skull in wet ropes.

They dragged themselves towards the shore, soaked and shivering. The stones of the lakebed were slick and sharp, scraping against raw palms and knees. Overhead, the sky had deepened and the dragon, now distant, circled above them until it vanished gradually into a high cloudbank like an exhale on a mirror.

“The poor thing had been chained up for god only knows how long,” Hermione said, looking up from where she’d collapsed on the river bank. “It’s a miracle that it can still fly.” Draco could hear the softness seeping into her voice; her eyes had gotten all wide and glassy, the way they did whenever she passionately stuck up for the goblins or the House Elves or any other poor mistreated thing in need of her attention.

“Seriously?” Ron groaned, struggling to peel off his sodden jumper. “That thing could have killed us! Who are you, Hagrid? Does the category of destitute creature in need actually trump that of bloodthirsty reptile for you?”

“Worked for Malfoy, didn’t it?” Potter said, but upon seeing Hermione’s face, hastily turned his mirth into a false sneeze.

Draco ignored them, ankle-deep in the black water as the shock of the flight began to fade, replaced by something eerier. Memory, placing a hand on his shoulder. He turned in a slow circle, the back of his skull prickling, and scanned the mist-ringed shore until he saw it: a crooked birch tree, its trunk split by lightning and healed sideways, leaning out over the lake like a question mark. The moss-covered boulder beneath it.

“I know this place,” he murmured, half to himself.

Ron stopped wringing out his jumper. “You what?”

Draco ignored him, turning to Hermione, her heart-shaped face pale and bleak in the last of the dusk’s light. His voice came quieter, fighting down the bolt of pain at the memory. “When I was small my mother brought me here during the summers.” He pointed at the lightning-struck tree. “We’d picnic beneath that birch. I used to try and balance on that boulder—knocked two teeth out falling off of it.” He pursed his lips. “The dragon must have recognized it as Black territory. We’re near the Second Son’s Estate. Very near.”

Hermione’s eyes widened in recognition, but Potter and Weasley wore their usual befuddled looks on their gaping faces, exuding that perennial air of incredulity they wore whenever they were doled out detentions, as if they couldn’t possibly fathom *why*.

“It’s a family property,” Draco offered in explanation. “Warded by blood. Since I’m the sole Black heir, even my fa— even Lucius couldn’t get in. If we hike through the woods, we’ll be there by morning.”



“Why can’t we apparate?” Weasley asked.

“Shall we Floo the Dark Lord, too?” Draco asked, too tired to sound properly caustic. After the war was over— should they survive it—the Chosen Ginger should surely see a healer, get his frontal cortex checked for his inane lapses in critical thinking. “Using a wand in unknown territory is like setting off fireworks, you numpty.”

Hermione cut in before Ron could muster a reply, her voice efficient, already turning toward problem-solving. “How far is it?”

Draco cocked his head, considering. “If we don’t get lost in the woods? Maybe four hours, walking. Five, if Weasley twists an ankle.”

“Wanker,” Ron muttered, not bothering to be quiet about it.

Hermione reached into her beaded bag and pulled out a small compact with a floating needle inside, its face etched with letters and numbers. “Sticking Charm compass,” she said, tapping it with her finger. “A modification of the Point Me spell. I reworked it so it should guide us toward safe ground, terrain that hasn’t been tampered with magically.”

She set it on the ground. The little round case shuddered, then jerked forward across the moss, its needle glowing faint blue. “Follow the blue mark,” she said. “It’ll lead us around any Dark wards or cursed ground. I enchanted it to detect leyline fractures and trap sigils, too. Subtle ones, the kind even the trained eye might miss.”

They followed the compass into the woods, clicking gently each time it reassessed their course. The trees thickened quickly, branches reaching overhead in a kind of cathedral lattice, obscuring the waxing moon’s light. Behind them, the lake remained untouched. The dragon did not return.

Draco walked near the front, maintaining the sort of posture that suggested a lack of familiarity with discomfort and a determination to maintain a semblance of dignity despite that lack. Hermione moved

beside him, pausing every so often to scan for threats, and behind them, Weasley stumbled and muttered with the regularity of a broken grandfather clock. Potter brought up the rear, periodically affording them all unwanted bits of encouragement, like an obnoxious Quidditch captain.

"This is like following a Niffler on a leash," Ron muttered, as the compass took a sharp left.

"It's incredible," Harry corrected, his voice warm and full of pride. "You're incredible, Hermione. How do you always think of things like this?"

"It's nothing," Hermione said dismissively, brushing a damp curl from her cheek, although Draco could tell through the bond that she was pleased with the remark. "Just a little charm work."

"As the One-Bolt Wonder was so kind to point out, it's not nothing," Draco scoffed, irritated by Potter's fawning. "It means that while the rest of us would've ended up swallowed by bog-wraiths, you managed to chart a course by inventing a charm no one else would've thought of."

Hermione looked up at him, her movements barely visible in the dark. "Draco—"

"And Potter," he added, turning his eyes to Harry now, his tone suddenly glacial, "if you think that's impressive, you should see what she can do with some ancient runes and a vat of sanitatum."

Harry blinked, taken aback. "Right. Well. Good for her?"

Draco held Hermione's gaze a moment longer, the weight of it dense and deliberate. Then he turned back to the path, expression wiped clean, as if nothing had happened at all. Harry held back, falling into step with Weasley. Draco could still hear him from several paces behind him, muttering under his breath.

“Possessive fuck. Ten galleons says the nutter’s in love with her.”

“I’m not taking that bet,” Weasley whispered back. “I don’t have ten galleons.”

Eventually exhaustion set in and their progress through the woods slowed to a crawl, every step like wading through shadows. Their boots and cloaks were already soaked through, mud clinging to every seam. Their weariness led to a companionable silence, until Weasley broke the quiet.

“So... this estate we’re heading to. What’s it like? Should we be expecting platinum toilets?”

“No,” Draco said. “We only had those in the Manor. This one is modest by pureblood standards. Only three sitting rooms.”

“Sounds dreadful,” Harry murmured.

“It is,” Draco replied. “Some of the windows don’t even reach the ceilings.”

Distracted by the conversation, Ron slipped for the third time and landed with a squelch that made Harry wince. “Bollocks,” he groaned, yanking his foot from the mud. “My arse is killing me.”

“Tell me, are all Weasleys’ this clumsy?” Draco asked, unable to repress the snark in his tone. “A genetic trait, perhaps?”

“You’re one to talk about genetics,” Ron grumbled, without any true animosity, as Harry helped him up. “Cousin-fucker.”

“Please.” Draco brushed a leaf from his sleeve. “My bloodline has survived thirty-seven inbred marriages and two troll-related scandals. If I were going to fall, I’d have done it more demurely.”

“Oil!” Harry yelped. “That was my foot, Ron!”

"I can hardly see where I'm stepping," Ron whined. "Isn't there a candle or something in that bag of yours, Hermione?"

"Why don't you use your deluminator?" Hermione gritted out, at the end of her carefully threaded patience. "The one Dumbledore gave to you?"

"Shite, I forgot I had that!"

"You *forgot*, " Hermione repeated in disbelief as Ron held up the Deluminator and clicked it until a soft orb of light bloomed from its tip and floated forward like a will-o'-the-wisp. It bobbed ahead, settling above Ron's head until he fidgeted with the contraption again, accidentally sending them all plummeting into darkness.

"Sorry, sorry!"

"Brilliant," Draco said. "We've entrusted our navigation to a man who can't outsmart a pocket lighter."

"Jealous, Malfoy?" Ron shot back. Another soft orb of light swelled from the tip of the Deluminator and floated forward like a fat, glowing dandelion seed until it hovered over Draco's head.

"Yes, I'm positively writhing with envy. If only I had been bequeathed a sentient matchstick instead of a priceless sword, perhaps my life might have had meaning." Draco swatted the ball of light away from him. "Would you stop trying to blind us, and let Granger's miracle compass do its job?"

"It's not a *miracle* ," Hermione said, trying and failing not to sound amused. "It's a sequence of calibrated detection charms paired with a proximity-linked directional tether. Anyone could have done it."

Draco snorted. "And yet, no one else did."

"Would you lot shut up?" Potter snapped, having lost his senseless positivity somewhere in the muck. "At this rate, we won't get there till

year's end."

Draco muttered something about hurling himself into a bog before that could come about. Trudging through the dark with Potter breathing heavily behind him, he kept his gaze on Hermione, her face lit blearily by the golden orb of light. When she stumbled, he reached out and caught her elbow, sliding his hand down her arm until their fingers were intertwined.

"For stability," he murmured. He did not let go.

As they walked, his attention turned inward, as it so often did when he grew tired, which was unfortunately quite often these days. He was thinking—absurdly, involuntarily—about his shoes. Or rather, the memory of his shoes: polished dragon-hide loafers with silver buckles, the kind of violently impractical footwear one wore for the sheer factor of their opulence. Wearing them said: *I will not walk where you walk. I will never be mud-soaked and common.* And now, here he was, tramping through some ancestral woods in boots caked with sludge, his socks sodden with lakewater, holding the hand of a girl who once hexed him so hard he missed two weeks of school.

The thought made him smile, though he didn't let it show. He wasn't sure what to do with the intensity he sometimes felt toward her, the way it hummed under his skin. He'd become suddenly alert to it, as if some vital part of him had been lying dormant for years and was now only just beginning to stretch its limbs. A sweet and fragile sensation amongst his other, far baser emotions. The usual anger and lust, the ceaseless self-loathing. Like he'd been handed something delicate and luminous in the middle of a battlefield, and been told to protect it with his life.

For several hours, they plodded forward, exhausted bodies aching, until at last a shimmer in the air stopped him cold, a ripple of unseen magic. The wardline. He stepped forward, laid his palm against the invisible boundary. The air hummed in response, until the shimmer parted like a curtain.

Draco muttered an incantation under his breath. His wand cut across the flesh of his hand with the brisk efficiency of a barber's razor. He let the blood fall, slow and deliberate, onto the waiting earth.

"Mark yourselves," he announced, voice taut as he held out his hand. Harry grimaced, but did as he was told, and stepped through. Ron hesitated, flinching as the magic licked at him before dissipating. When Hermione stepped toward the threshold, Draco didn't lift a finger. She passed through it effortlessly, the wards parting for her like silk.

Ron's eyes narrowed. "How did she—?"

"No need," Draco drawled, already striding up the gravel path. "She's already bound to the estate by blood."

Ron choked. "What?"

Hermione gave Draco a warning look. Through their bond, her magic prickled with alarm and something else beneath it— annoyance, embarrassment, a dangerous amount of heat.

"It was necessary," she explained, massaging the truth. They still had not been honest with the other two about the ritual that resulted in the binding of their magical cores, but Draco could not resist taking jabs at the other two boys, hinting at the unapproachable level of intensity by which they were connected. "This past summer, when Draco was feeding the Order information, it allowed me access to this place as our meeting spot."

"It was *necessary*? To use blood magic?" Ron looked between them, suspicion flaring. "That kind of magic...it's not casual. That's old magic. Intimate magic."

Potter scratched his head, confused by the shift in Weasley's tone. "So?" He asked, a reminder that he'd been raised by muggles. "What does that mean exactly?"

"It's taboo." Ron made a disgusted noise. "Let's just say they'd be more subtle shagging in public."

"Oh, great." Potter winced. "Thanks for that, Ron. Now I'm imagining them shagging."

"Please don't," Hermione said through gritted teeth. "It's been bad enough sharing living quarters with you two always breathing down my neck. God forbid, I be in a room alone with my boyfriend."

"Oh, let them," Draco added, lips curling up in satisfaction at the term. *Boyfriend*. How silly it sounded. How sweet. "I'm sure it's aspirational for them to imagine giving a witch any sort of pleasure, rather than rutting like manticores in heat."

"Oi!" Weasley called, offended. "I don't rut! You can ask Lav, I give great—"

"Don't finish that sentence," Potter interrupted. "There's nothing left in my stomach to vomit up."

They crested a rise, and there it was: the Second Son's Estate. Not nearly as grand as the Manor, which had announced its own importance with marble and peacocks, but the bluestone facade nonetheless bore the particular arrogance of structures that have withstood the test of time. Draco unlocked the door with a spell, the wood groaning as it swung open. The scent hit him first—dust, lavender, old paper and dried flowers.

"Bloody hell." Ron stepped inside and let out a low whistle. "You could fit half of Ottery St. Catchpole in here."

"Please don't," Draco said. "We just had the floor polished."

The entrance hall was tall but narrow, the ceiling a crisscross of beams carved with Black family mottoes—most of them in Latin, some in older tongues not meant to be spoken aloud. A diamond chandelier hung in a frozen cascade above them, its candles unlit.

Carefully checking each doorway, Draco led them to the drawing room, where the pre-dawn light filtered through the floor-to-ceiling windows, falling in pastel slabs across seafoam walls and intricate crown molding. Portraits of the Black family's heads of household hung proudly in rows, some of them charred at wandpoint, others turned to face the walls. Above them, the names of second sons scrolled in endless, looping script. Draco caught sight of Orion, son of Arcturus, and, just below it, in a more recent hand, Sirius, son of Orion.

Harry had frozen mid-step, upon seeing his godfather's name. He stared up at the golden etching like it had struck him across the face. Draco looked away.

"Why are some of them burnt?" Harry asked, nodding at the portraits.

"Not all sons are worth remembering," Draco said darkly. "Some disgrace the name. Some vanish. Some marry unsuitable spouses. Some simply fail to be born first. Some—"

"Some are disowned," Harry said, still staring.

It appeared as if Hermione was also caught up in memory, albeit a very different sort. She was gazing at the carpet with an expression Draco recognized instantly. His stomach tightened. The rug had the same pattern as the one in the study. Nearly a year prior, he'd laid with her there, shaking and frantic and desperate for something real to sink his teeth into before everything fell apart. That was back when he'd been certain of his own death, certain it was only a matter of time before he was caught spying. He remembered her lips, her hands, the way she'd whispered his name like it was something combustible. The taste of the soft skin of her inner thighs. He remembered the storm outside and the worse one inside him. The gasp she'd released, when he pressed into her for the first time.

Draco cleared his throat. "We can camp here in the drawing room. Stay in each other's sight at all times. No one's supposed to be able



to get in, but we've all seen how reliable 'supposed to' can be. I'll put intruder charms on the window and doors. We shouldn't take any chances."

Ron, still muttering about the wasted luxury of pureblood estates, poked through the pantry and emerged triumphant with a tin of shortbread, several ancient jars of fruit preserves, and half a dusty flagon of firewhiskey. Harry conjured a kettle and set it to boil over the hearth where the fire burned sullenly. Hermione rummaged for blankets, careful not to meet Draco's eyes: one lingering look and they would both be transported to last summer.

Draco cast security charms on the entrances and exits, not one to try their luck. The window glass was cold beneath his palm. Outside, the grounds stretched out luxuriously, grassy knolls damp with morning dew. He remembered the odd summer here: the boredom, the brittle etiquette, his mother drinking Chablis in the garden, his father's voice echoing in reprimand. *Draco, get down from there this instant. Climbing the topiary is for commoners.* He had been so carefully made. Every piece of him assembled for display. Even his cruelty had been rehearsed, sharpened by reminders disguised as praise. And now? Now he stood in a dead man's house with three people whose mere presence would have him burned out of any portrait. He felt a strange, furious pride at the thought.

He felt Hermione's small hand, gentle on his shoulder and their bond hummed contentedly at the contact.

"You're thinking very loudly."

He turned, smiling despite himself. "I don't mean to."

"No," she murmured, her lips turning up to mirror his. "You simply radiate existential dread. Like a wireless signal. It can't be helped."

The settees were rearranged into a loose circle. They huddled like war orphans—which, Draco realized, at least two of them were—in borrowed cloaks, eating crumbs and drinking lukewarm tea from

conjured tin cups. No one said it, but they all knew: this was temporary. A pause, not a haven. A breath taken before the drowning began anew, before the Dark Lord became aware of their theft.

As the fire dwindled, Draco leaned back beside Hermione on the floor, arms folded behind his head, and stared at the ceiling. The golden names looked down, mocking him, until he finally closed his eyes. Sleep took him suddenly, a blow to the back of the head.

When he dreamed, he dreamed of rain hammering the Second Son's estate windows. Heat lightning. Bare skin on wool carpet, her breath: a hitch, and then, a plea. Hermione, mouth swollen, glorious mane of hair damp with sweat. Her nails, dragging down his back. *Draco*, she whispered. *Please*. He moved against her greedily, unbothered by the ridiculous, reverent desperation of it. The animal gratitude he felt. The rug beneath burned his knees, her fingers fisted in his hair, and he thought— *if this kills me, let it*.

He bolted upright, heart pounding, as sweat cooled on his neck. It was mid-morning and his erection was raging. Across the room, Ron was sprawled on one settee, snoring with his mouth open. Harry lay curled near the hearth, wand tucked beneath his chin. Draco exhaled through his nose, dragging a hand down his face. Beside him, Hermione shifted under her blanket.

"I felt that," she said, without opening her eyes. Good. If she'd caught the look on his face, the hunger, the memory still raw on his skin—he wasn't sure he could have buried it again.

"Go back to sleep," he murmured, reaching out to smooth her hair. "I didn't mean to wake you."

"I doubt the bond would allow that with you in this state." She sat up just a little, pulling the blanket tighter around her. Her voice was low, secretive. "I think it's stronger when we're unconscious."

He lay back down and shifted onto his side, facing Hermione. Her smile was almost invisible in the dark.

“I dreamed of that night last summer. Here, in the study.” Their eyes locked. For a breath, the air between them buzzed, the charged moment before a spell hits its mark. “Apologies for disturbing your rest— I assure you it was entirely inadvertent.”

“I didn’t say it was unwelcome.” She smirked, wetting her lips. “Perhaps inopportune, but not unwelcome.”

The beast in his chest roared in appreciation. He felt his trousers go tight again, his cock paying no mind to the sleeping witnesses in the vicinity. Yes, they were in the middle of a war, but he was a red-blooded, eighteen year old wizard in close proximity to his witch. A morning stiffy or two was inevitable.

He leaned in slightly. “When the war is over, I want to take you back to this house. Just us. No Potter, no Weasley. No firewhiskey breath and snoring.”

Hermione’s lips twitched. He lowered his voice.

“I want to fuck you in the study again, but slowly this time. I want to watch you fall apart on my cock. You make the sweetest sounds when you come. I want to hear them echoing through the rafters.”

She stared, wide-eyed, caught like a fly in honey. He reached out, fingers brushing a stray curl from her forehead. “I want to see you here in every season. Reading by that window in winter, trying to focus on your book while I bend you over the sill, take you right up against the glass. In the summers, we’ll sun ourselves on the grounds, and I’ll lick your sweet little cunt until you scream—”

She reached for him before he could finish. Her hand caught his shirt, and she kissed him hungrily, all slick tongue and fervent lips. Her hands threaded into his hair, and his fingers slid beneath the edge of her blanket to curl around her waist. She gasped, shifting closer, when he slid them under her simple cotton bra to palm at her breasts, ghosting over her sensitive nipples.

A muffled thud broke them apart. One of the logs in the hearth. Half asleep, Ron muttered something that sounded like, “five more minutes, Mum.”

Draco and Hermione froze, her fingers still clenched in his shirt. She pulled back, cheeks reddened and lips parted, looking thoroughly debauched. He exhaled through his nose and pressed his forehead against hers for a heartbeat. Her eyes still held that look, the one that made him feel like he was being studied, understood, forgiven. He wasn't sure how much more of her forgiveness he could survive.

“Later,” he whispered, although he had no idea when that could be. He'd never been more aware that the future he waxed poetically over was in no way a guarantee.

By late morning, they all gathered around a worn oak table Draco had floated in from the study. On it sat the Horcrux—Hufflepuff's cup—gleaming dully. It radiated a palpable aura of distress, as if it knew the end was near.

“I say we try and destroy it now,” Harry said, arms crossed. “We've wasted enough time.”

“With what?” Ron shot back. “The Sword up and disappeared during the attack on Tonks House. Have *you* learned to wield fiendfyre, cause I bloody well haven't!”

Hermione was silent, her eyes locked on the cup.

Draco leaned against the wall, arms folded. “We can't just stab it with a kitchen knife, Potter.”

“I wasn't suggesting—”

“You were,” Draco cut in. “Because you're always suggesting idiotic things without thinking of the consequences. It's about as predictable as you using the Disarming Charm.”

Harry rounded on him. "You want to just bide our time?"

"Haven't we had this exact argument before? I want to *survive*, you numbskull," Draco said coldly. "We try to destroy it the wrong way, it could backfire and kill us or worse."

"Stop," Hermione snapped. Her voice cut the room like a blade.  
"Both of you."

They looked at her.

"We know that the Killing Curse can destroy it. Not cleanly, not without backlash—but it works." She inhaled sharply. "I think we should try."

Ron blanched. "Hermione, that's—"

"Unforgivable," she said. "Yes. I know."

"But it takes real hate," Ron said. "That's why it eats away at your soul. You have to mean it. You have to want to destroy someone."

"Yes, Ronald," Hermione sniffed. "I, too, paid attention in fourth year Defense lectures. I think it's safe to say we *do* want destruction, not just of the object, but of what it represents. I don't know about you, but I *hate* it." Her voice grew quieter. "I hate what it's done to the people I love."

"We should think about—" Harry started.

"There's no time left to think!" Her voice grew louder, passionate.  
"There are people dying every day under You-Know-Who's regime. Muggles, like my parents. Muggleborns, like me. Why is the integrity of my soul more important than their *lives*?"

There was a long silence. Harry looked uncertain, as if warring with himself. Draco fought the urge to wallop both boys over the head. To pick up his wand and do it himself. He was unaccustomed to having

to come to a group consensus for such decisions, and found it remarkably inefficient. How had Granger managed it all these years?

“Hermione’s right,” Potter finally said, surprising Draco with his resolute tone. “We should at least try. We can’t just sit here and let people die for us, if we’re not willing to do the same.”

No one moved. Then, Harry stepped forward and raised his wand. The room was still. He closed his eyes, brow furrowed. His face tightened as he summoned something inside him. He opened his eyes, jaw clenched. The bolt of green flared from his wand and hit the cup—but it merely shivered, a faint metallic whine echoing in the air.

“I told you,” he muttered. “I tried with the necklace, and the same thing happened. I can’t do it.”

Ron went next, jaw tight. His wand shook. He said the words, but they came out thin, apologetic. Nothing happened. His face was ripe with shame and relief.

Weasley’s failure did not surprise Draco in the slightest: what hatred did The Crimson Calamity even *have* to summon? He thought sourly. The misery of a large, loving family? The fury of always being second-best? What ever loathing Weasley lacked, Draco had an abundance of. He lifted his wand as he called it all up. His father’s disappointed sneer. His mother, recovering in a hospital bed, her still, cold hands missing a ring finger. The look in Hermione’s eyes that night in the study, real and fragile and everything he wasn’t sure he deserved. Her screams during Bellatrix’s torture. The sight of her blood, pooling below her. Pansy’s dirty, determined face in her father’s dungeon. Even Theo, marked with the scars of his transformations, shaking on the Astronomy tower as he whispered, *I’m sorry, Headmaster. I don’t want to die.*

He conjured every lie the world had told him about power. Every truth Hermione had forced him to face. The loneliness. The fear. The loathing.

He aimed. Hermione blocked him with her arm.

“No.”

He blinked. “What?”

“Not you. You’ve used too much dark magic already. Don’t forget I saw you with Nott, after the Dark Lord made you—” She cut off, looking at Harry and Ron surreptitiously. “After what happened with Dolohov.”

His jaw clenched and with it came the memory: the sweet, sickening thrum of dark magic sliding through his bones. The pulse of power, absolute and seductive. The way it made the world slow, made everyone else feel smaller. It had terrified him, that first time. Intrigued him. Thrilled him.

“You think I can’t control it?” Draco asked.

“Yes,” she said simply. “I saw what you were like after. How unstable your magic was. How it wrecked you. I think you feel its effects too deeply.”

His voice dropped, dangerous. “You don’t get to decide what I feel, Granger.”

She met his eyes. “I do when it’s about protecting you from yourself.”

He stared at her, furious and hurt that she didn’t trust him not to fall—and underneath that, terrified that she was right. Even now, the idea of channeling that force again stirred something in him that had nothing to do with duty and everything to do with control and his constant desire to wield it. It whispered promises in the back of his skull, curling against his thoughts like smoke.

Hermione looked at each of them, then stepped forward. Bellatrix’s wand looked wrong in her hand, but she held it with conviction. The cup, as if sensing a worthy opponent, began to vibrate.

Ron backed away. “Hermione—”

She whispered something under her breath, a spell Draco couldn’t catch. The room grew cold. Then, the cup screamed.

A voice—not quite hers—began to speak. Soft and oily and precise. *Hermione Granger. Clever girl, so very clever. But that’s all they want, isn’t it? Your books, your brilliance. They wouldn’t look twice at you without your mind. You’re nothing without your cleverness, just an ugly, frumpy little know-it-all. A ghost in the room unless you’re solving their riddles, fixing their plans. You think they’d keep you around if you stopped being useful?*

Hermione froze, her wand shaking. Draco’s blood turned to ice. The silence in the room deepened, became taut. Ron and Harry looked between them with dawning horror, the weight of the Horcrux’s taunts pressing down on them like a thundercloud.

*You think he loves you?* The voice grew louder, fractured with malice. *You little fool. Who would ever want a ugly, scheming mudblood like you? Do you really think those nights in his bed were anything more than a distraction to him? You were just something dirty to touch in the dark. You know he regrets tying himself to you. He’ll find a way to undo it as soon as the war is over, finally be free of you for good.*

Draco’s stomach twisted. His chest burned with something wild and vicious. *How could she think that?* How could she think, after everything they’d shared, that he would want anyone else? Anyone without her sharp tongue, her terrifying mind, the fire that made him feel like he was finally doing something more than simply surviving? That he would want some random pureblood, some empty-eyed replacement to take to a bloody ball? It was madness.

He wanted to cross the room, wanted to snatch the wand from her hands, to tell her not to listen, to tell her that it was lying. But it wasn’t, not exactly, because that was the horror of it: the Horcrux



didn't invent, it simply excavated existing fears. It found what was already buried deep inside.

*And what of your parents? The Horcrux hissed. You wiped them clean. Like dirt from your shoes. What kind of daughter does that?*

Hermione gasped. Tears welled in her eyes, but she didn't lower her wand.

"Stop it," Harry whispered. "Hermione, you don't have to—"

Draco gripped his arm, pulling him back as Hermione raised her chin, eyes narrowed into slits, Bellatrix Lestrange's wand gripped tightly in her hand, as she cried out, strong and clear.

"Avada Kedavra!"

A bolt of green struck the cup. It screamed again, high and shrill. Then, the drawing room descended into total silence. Smoke curled from the cracked gold as the cup split in two, and clattered to the scorched table, lifeless.

Hermione stood over it, trembling as she breathed shallowly. She looked more like a storm than a girl. Her whole body hummed with residual magic, smelling faintly of scorched iron. Her hair clung to her temples with sweat, her fists still clenched. Her skin was bloodless, eyes ringed with something darker than exhaustion. Despite the shadows, there was no regret in her gaze.

Ron stepped forward first, tentative. "You okay?"

She didn't answer right away. Her lips were pressed together tightly.

Harry came to her other side, placing a careful hand on her shoulder. "That was... I mean, you did it. You brought us so much closer to ending it. To defeating him."

She gave a small, jerky nod, her eyes never leaving the broken cup.

Ron swallowed. “That thing was lying, Hermione. About all of it. Like the locket did with Malfoy. You know that, right?”

She nodded, but didn’t look at them.

Draco was already moving. He could feel the pulse of it through the bond—her magic, altered now, steeped in the residue of what she’d just done—electric and caustic and intoxicating. The darkness was inside her, clawing against her ribs. He could feel the echo of it in his own blood, a tuning fork struck too hard. It throbbed in his temples, a low ache originating in the place just behind his sternum, where their bond lived.

“Granger.” He touched her shoulder gently. She glanced up at him, expression terrible and raw, and Draco’s breath caught. An insistent pride swept through him, fierce and nearly psychotic in its intensity. She had wielded death and it thrilled him more than he wanted to admit. She’d done what none of them could, claimed the darkness for herself and used it to burn something evil out of the world.

“I’ve never been more scared of you,” he said, voice low. “Or more in love.”

Every window in the drawing room blew out, a glittering explosion of accidental magic. Hermione moved suddenly, falling into him. Her arms wrapped around his chest as her body shook against his, desperation finding purchase.

“It feels...” she whispered against his neck, her voice a crumpled piece of paper. “Draco, it feels like something died inside of me.”

Behind them, Harry and Ron watched in stunned silence, the weight of what they were witnessing anchoring them to the floor. Draco closed his arms around Hermione, one hand cradling the back of her head. She smelled like sweat and ash and salt as she buried her head in his chest.

“It’s alright, love,” he murmured into her hair, though he knew it wasn’t, though he knew it never would be, and still he said it, because sometimes you have to lie to the people you love, make false promises just to keep them going. “You did it.”

She trembled, her fingers fisting into the fabric of his shirt. “It felt…”

“I know,” he said, and he did. He pressed his lips against her temple. “I felt it too.”

He thought of the things the Horcrux said. What if she believed them? The idea that she thought he might discard her—that he’d ever want anyone else over her—gnawed at him with a vigor he wasn’t prepared for. He wanted to drag her into his arms and swear on every drop of his blood that she was irreplaceable.

Hermione wiped her eyes with the back of her hand, embarrassed by her vulnerability. “I’m fine,” she said as she pulled back from his embrace, her voice like scraped stone. “I’m *fine*.” She shook out her hair, pulling it up in a furious ponytail. “We need to keep going. There are still two more. The snake and something of Ravenclaw’s.”

Draco pursed his lips in displeasure. Her power was still surging. He could feel it, pacing under her skin like a caged beast, snapping and snarling through their bond. The Killing Curse had left a residue. It worried him—not because he doubted her control, but because he remembered how close *his* had been to slipping after the first time he successfully cast an Unforgivable. He wanted to force her to lie down. To wrap her in every protection spell he knew and tell the war to sod off for ten minutes so she could breathe.

“We should wait,” he insisted. “Your magic hasn’t settled.”

As if part of the universe’s ongoing vendetta on him, Potter took that moment to suddenly clutch at his forehead and drop to his knees, collapsing to the floor like a puppet with severed strings. One moment he was standing, eyes lingering on the shattered Horcrux, and the next he was on the ground, a rag doll of limbs and

breathless convulsions. From somewhere deep in his throat came a low, creaturely moan of pain. In a flash, Ron was beside him, fingers pressed lightly to his pulse as he writhed on the drawing room floor, face twisted like he'd swallowed broken glass.

"He knows," Potter moaned, eyes screwed tightly shut. "He knows the cup's gone. He's livid."

Hermione went to him immediately, one hand on his chest, the other gripping his wrist. "Harry," she said. "Harry, you're alright. You're with us."

"For Merlin's sake, try and use your occlumency, Potter," Draco snapped, a dense horror settling in his gut like a heavy stone. The connection between them, whatever it was, had opened like a wound, and through it, the Dark Lord was pouring in. "Don't tell me I wasted my time on those blasted lessons for nothing."

"I—I told you it doesn't work for me," Harry's voice came again, urgent and shaking. "He's at Gringotts. He's tearing it apart. Fuck, so many goblins are dead..."

There were theories—obscure, controversial, and explicitly banned from the standard most curricula—that addressed mind-binding spells between mortal enemies, born of mixtures of shared trauma and blood-tethering. The prime example, of course, was the binding he and Hermione had accidentally created via ancient ritual, but even though they could sense each other's presence, allow themselves to be pulled along by the current of foreign emotions, they could not slip into each other's heads without permission. Such things were unheard of. This sort of connection was invasive, violating. It blurred the boundary between self and other in unspeakable ways: if Potter had been linked to the Dark Lord since he was a baby, since the fateful day that Killing Curse backfired, then perhaps it was possible, horrifyingly possible, that he wasn't just *seeing* Voldemort's thoughts. Perhaps he was part of them.

"Easy now, mate." Ron helped him sit up. "Can you walk?"

Harry clutched his head, panting. “He’s moving. He’s afraid and checking the others. He’s—he’s going to Hogwarts.”

Hermione’s head snapped up. “Hogwarts?”

Harry nodded. “It’s hidden there. Another Horcrux. He’s going to check it— we have to get to it first”

Ron swallowed hard. “Do you know what it is?”

“No. But I know where to start looking.”

“No,” Draco blurted. “Granger’s magic needs time to recover. She could miscast and get herself killed. Get us all killed.”

“We have to, Draco. If we hesitate—” Hermione insisted. “You *know* we can’t afford to wait.” Her resolve burned clearly in her warm, amber eyes. There would be no talking her out of going, even though it was very likely they’d be caught. He imagined the potential firefight: the castle in ruins, the wards shattered, the bodies of children who once clapped at Quidditch matches strewn across staircases, limp and soaked in their own blood.

He didn’t want to die. He didn’t want *her* to die. His thoughts flickered, unbidden, to the litany of names that haunted the back corridors of his mind, the ones he usually kept sealed off with his occlumency. All those who had sacrificed so that he could stand here: his Aunt Andromeda, who’d sheltered them only to lose what was most precious to her; Ted Tonks, mangled and discarded for no crime greater than having the wrong blood and a brave heart; his mother—gods, his *mother* —who’d bartered her dignity and, in the end, her life, to buy him a chance at redemption. Even Dumbledore, that manipulative, half-mad old crackpot, who’d somehow seen something in Draco, who pushed him, tested him, demanded more of him. How many people had died so that Draco Malfoy—ex-Death Eater, failed son, reluctant traitor— could stand here, shoulder to shoulder with Potter and Granger and Weasley like one of the heroes?

Once, Draco Malfoy had been a coward. It had been drilled into his marrow by his father: not just cowardice of action, but of imagination. The failure to conceive of anything beyond the well-bred obedience of a Malfoy heir. But then, something had changed. Somewhere between the broken body of Ted Tonks and Theo's betrayal and Pansy's bruised face. Between Hermione's scream in the clearing and her lips against his throat on the study floor, between the crucios and beating he'd taken from his father and his Master— somehow, through all of it, Draco had found a way to become something else.

"Alright," Draco told her hoarsely. "Let's break into Hogwarts."

He didn't kill the coward in him with a wand. He did it with a choice. And he'd long ago decided: he would choose to follow her into the fire, into the fight, into a better world, or he would die trying.

---

- The semester is over! Which means, like Dobby, I am free and \*smoke signals\* gets my full attention once more. Thank you so much for your patience and continued support of this story! Even during my absence, I read every comment and they motivated me so much to return.

- I continue to avoid Horcrux camping trips at all cost (I raise you an uncomfortable trek through the woods).

- It's ever important to me that Hermione is not the sidekick, but the architect of her own fate. Her casting the Killing Curse to destroy Hufflepuff's cup is a pivotal inflection point in her arc, and a complication of the story's ethical framework. Unlike Harry, who is "chosen" by prophecy, or Ron, whose courage is often reactionary, Hermione's power is earned through study, discipline, and an almost punishing moral clarity: this is what actually leads her to make the "amoral" decision of using dark magic (we see this in her line, "why is the integrity of my soul more important than [other] lives?"). Ultimately, her casting the Killing Curse isn't a loss of innocence; it's a conscious sacrifice of it (and a full circle return to her decision to obliviate her parents at the start of the story).

- Draco's dream of returning to the estate with Hermione—"I want to see you here in every season"—is not romantic wish fulfillment. It's deeply fragile, almost delusional, and he knows it: this house is full of history that doesn't love them back.

- The title comes from Shakespeare's Henry V: "Once more unto the breach, dear friends." This chapter is less a resolution than a drawing of breath before descent: Hermione is not alright, Draco is not done fighting himself, and Harry is not safe from what's inside him.

- Coming soon! Chapter 45: "The General," where we (finally) reencounter many familiar faces and some new ones, too.

- [Come chit chat with me on Tumblr!](#)

---

# The General and His Labyrinth

## Chapter 45: The General

---

CW: Animal death

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

They landed on the outskirts of Hogsmeade like falling debris, hitting the hard dirt with a collective grunt. Four shadows at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, at the outskirts of the treeline. A full mile from the heart of the village, where warm lanterns burned late and low.

“We’ll never get into the castle undetected,” Ron muttered.

“Hogsmeade is overrun by Death Eaters, even the papers say so.”

“And yet, you’re the one who wanted to apparate directly onto Main Street.” Draco rolled his eyes. “There has to be an alarm system in place. Caterwauling Charms if we’re lucky. Spectral trace wards if we’re not.”

Potter frowned. “What’s that mean?”

Hermione stepped forward. “It means that if our magical signatures aren’t disguised, they’ll know who we are. Even after we leave.” She pulled something from under the neckline of her cloak: a slender chain with a single emerald resting on her throat. When she touched it, the necklace transformed into something much older and heavier. The pendant radiated something ancient, its runes glinting in the moonlight.

“You still have it,” Draco said, not quite a question. “I thought maybe...”



The sight of it—the same heirloom amulet he'd charmed in the privacy of the Manor, wrapped in protection spells and stained with his worst intentions—made something cold unfurl in his gut. He remembered fastening it around her neck at Christmas and the resulting blowout fight with Potter and Weasley that resolved in a tentative truce. He thought the necklace had been ripped from her throat the night Bellatrix had tortured her: blood, thick and bright on the clearing's floor as her body curled in on itself, a wounded thing made small. For weeks afterward, he'd imagined it trampled, buried under debris. Or worse, in a Death Eater's trophy drawer, coiled amongst other stolen relics...

He dug his fingernails into his palm, forcing himself out of the dark waters of catastrophic thinking. She was fine, he reminded himself. She was alive.

"It masks the magical presence of whoever wears it," Hermione was still explaining to Potter. "Sort of like the Fidelius does. I'm going to try and expand it to fit around us all."

Draco watched her lift her wand, the tension ghosting up her arm like a tremor. Ever since she'd cast the Killing Curse, her magic had pulsed strangely through the bond, unstable, and crackling at the edges. Now, when she reached for her power, something in him recoiled.

"Let me," he said hurriedly, taking out his wand. He ducked under the chain as it lengthened, dividing into four faint threads of light that curled around their necks, extending and coiling as needed. As the charm settled, Draco felt it shift across his skin, overwhelmed by the feeling of being blotted out. His magic muted, ensconced in an invisible bubble.

"Merlin's balls," Weasley swore, watching the arm shimmer around him. "That's mental. Like I'm barely here at all!"

"I can already feel the improvement," Draco muttered.

They slipped into the village disillusioned and mercifully unnoticed, mere ghosts of themselves. Draco felt the hitch in Hermione's breath. Her jaw was clenched tight, eyes wet and glittering with rage.

Hogsmeade was unrecognizable, full of Death Eaters patrolling the streets like wolves in bespoke uniform, black greatcloaks with silver ouroborous pins worn in the lapels, glinting faintly under the gas lamps. A few wore masks, but most had their faces bare and unobstructed as they lounged on stoops, drinking openly from conjured flasks. One of them was painting something crude on the side of Gladrags. In the square, a young witch scrubbed the flagstones with a bristled brush and no wand in sight, while a gang of Snatchers watched her from across the street with the slow, indulgent leer of animals playing with their food. The Three Broomsticks had become a *kommandantur* of sorts, where the Dark Lord's supporters gathered with the oily confidence of men newly accustomed to being obeyed. Outside, a pack of crups was tied up, neatly a dozen of them, whining and snuffling in the dirt.

Draco watched, aghast, as shopkeepers with trembling hands greeted the Death Eaters too warmly, hoping to buy another week of quiet. In the window of Scrivenshaft's, a sign had appeared overnight: *Keep Calm and Comply. Protect the Wizarding Way*. The few remaining villagers hurried through the streets, faces awash with the sort of dull apathy that follows prolonged despair. Every home had a rune carved into the wood identifying whether the family inside was of pure, mixed, or dirty blood. The homes with the latter were empty and looted, reduced to mere rubble. Photos of Undesirables had been nailed to the town notice board: charmed to smolder and blacken hourly, a rotating gallery of dissidents and mudbloods.

"This is what they do," Hermione whispered from beside him, her hoarse voice the scrape of a dull quill against parchment. "They're building a culture of terror. So that this is considered normal. And people—people *help them*."

"We just need to get into Honeydukes," Potter muttered. "There's a secret passageway in the cellar that leads to—"

Suddenly, there was a piercing sound. *This is a random Blood Verification Check*, a magically enhanced voice informed them from overhead. *Please proceed in an orderly fashion to your designated checkpoint.* Draco froze mid-step, his borrowed wand slick in his palm. As if summoned, the lounging Death Eaters poured from the pub's entrance, their uniforms cutting through the village like blades.

“Papers out. Wands down. Hands where we can see them!”

Draco barely had time to react before the town around them transformed, yanking the other three behind the shop's facade. All around them, the villagers complied robotically. The square was suddenly crawling with Snatchers, dressed in gray robes and dark sashes. An old man dropped to his knees, pulling a folded parchment from inside his robes. A witch drew a trembling line in the air, displaying the glowing runes of her clearance. A boy—barely past Hogwarts age—hesitated, then lifted the sleeve of his robe to show the Dark Mark, burned into his forearm. Draco fought the urge to vomit.

Hermione's hand found his, her breathing shallow. Beside them, Harry was hunched low, his invisibility cloak pulled tight. Ron was moving his lips soundlessly. The necklace's protection was still holding, the enchantment burning cold against his pulse. But they'd had made an error: the necklace didn't account for non-magical methods of detection.

Draco heard them first: low, predatory growls reverberating off the stone. The crups, tugged against their leads. He recognized the twitch of their ears as they caught an unfamiliar scent. One swiveled its head directly towards them and reared up on its hind legs, letting out a sharp, truncated sound. The others joined in, barking furiously. Suddenly it was all very real again: the inevitability of their failure, the futility of clever charms and gilded trinkets. Draco felt the sick swoop in his gut, a sensation he remembered from every meeting with the Dark Lord, the certainty that today might be the day he died for nothing. That this time there would be no escape.

“Something’s off,” one of the Death Eaters called, jerking his head toward their awning. “The crups smell trouble.”

“I don’t see anything.”

“There’s someone here. Someone invisible. *Accio Potter’s Cloak!* ”

“*Move!* ” Draco hissed, already sprinting, hand clamped around Hermione’s wrist. They tore through the narrow passage, the cobblestones slick with last night’s rain. Hermione whipped her head around, firing off spells as she went.

“Incendio!” She panted. “Confrigo!”

The mouth of the alley exploded in a shock of stone and fire. The blast wasn’t contained: windows shattered on both sides of the street, heat rolling off the cobblestones in a suffocating wave. Draco flinched as the wall beside him groaned and cracked, a chunk of plaster shearing off and slamming into the opposite building.

Hermione staggered, magic pouring off her in bursts like a cracked chalice, spilling wine. Draco felt it through the bond: her magic thrumming too loudly, too hot, frayed at the edges and beginning to bleed. She was coming apart.

“Granger,” he hissed, catching her elbow as she swayed. “*Stop*. Pull it back. You’re overcasting—”

“I *have* to,” she snapped, but there was fear beneath the anger. “They’re right behind us. Come on!”

Shouts erupted through the smoke and debris. “There! Spells in Sector Four!”

“Unregistered magic!”

A siren wailed, piercing and inhuman. Someone must have sounded the alarm. *Intruders detected* . Every door slammed shut, shutters locking. Overhead, a mechanical voice was crackling over magical

loudspeakers. *All residents report to holding zones. Identification to be shown. Compliance is mandatory.*

They ran, their cloaks streaming behind them as boots hammered cobblestone. Ron hit a crate and stumbled, but Draco flicked his wand and caught him mid-fall and shoved him upright without breaking stride. Ahead, Hogsmeade stretched like a noose: narrow, without any clean lines of escape. Behind them, Death Eaters were gaining ground, five at least, maybe more, flanked by growling Crups, their forked tails thrashing. They were visibly starved, ribs poking through their dark pelts, edged so close to hunger they'd become frenzied. Draco knew the signs; his father had kept his hunting dogs lean and vicious, so that when loosed, they tore after prey without mercy. Now, he was the prey.

One launched forward, jaws snapping inches from Hermione's arm. He reacted automatically. *"Bombarda Maxima!"*

The alley detonated in a roar of dust and splintered walls. The creature crashed back into a fruit cart, whimpering.

"C'mon!" Ron bellowed. "They're right behind us!"

They ran past the tailor's and through a gauntlet of alleyways, hurtling over shipping crates and under low fences, even scrabbling up a half-collapsed chimney, the air alive with the whistle of near-missed curses. A Death Eater dropped from the roof in front of them, wand raised.

*"Protego!"* Draco's shield snapped up just in time, flaring like a burst of sun. The force knocked the Death Eater back, his head hitting stone with a crack. Another rounded the corner, face twisted under his hood. They were boxed in. Pinned from either side.

*"Avada Kedavra!"*

Draco ducked. The green bolt passed so close it lifted the hair off the back of his neck, severing the magical thread that connected the four

of them. With the necklace's extension charm broken, their disillusionments fizzled.

"Down the alley!" Weasley pointed, breath ragged. Another Crup leapt for Potter's cloak, but Hermione's wand was already up. A stream of ice exploded midair. The creature fell, legs locked in frozen crystal.

"Dead end!" he hissed, slamming into a boarded alley mouth.

A door to their right burst open. "Get in here," came a gravel-edged voice, low and uncompromising. "Quickly!" A man in a weather-beaten cloak with a beard like a thundercloud stood in the frame. The barman from the Hog's Head.

Potter and Granger went flying through the door, Weasley right behind them. As he climbed through, a Crup lunged and sank its teeth into Draco's calf and he cried out in pain. The barman reacted quickly, drawing his wand, and the beast fell away, its throat slit. He shoved Draco in with the others and slammed the door behind him. The four of them collapsed on the bar floor, wheezing. Draco could feel Hermione's pulse through their bond, or maybe that was his own. They had gone completely still, wands leveled at the door. Draco listened as his breath sawed in and out of him, the adrenaline blurring the pain in his leg into static, unable to decide if he was more afraid of being caught or of what he might do if they were.

Outside, a handful of Death Eaters were arguing with the barman.

"They came running this way, I swear it!" A Death Eater said, his voice a nasally whine. "He's hiding intruders in that pub of his. There's nowhere else they could have gone."

"Only thing I've got on this property," the barman's voice came, dry as old parchment, "is a heap of rotten potatoes and an old sow. Unless You-Know-Who's started recruiting livestock, I suggest you get off my land."

A second voice piped up, uncertain. "But the crups smelled something. Hargle saw one of 'em go crazy just outside Honeydukes. And look, he's killed one of 'em!"

"Your mutt got into my goat pens," the barman said coolly. "I warned you lot. Should've kept it on a leash."

"They're highly trained security dogs." There was a sound of crunching gravel as a Death Eater stooped to inspect the dead crup. "That's Ministry property you destroyed, Dumbledore."

"*Dumbledore?*" Harry breathed. Ron slapped a hand over his mouth.

The barman scoffed. "That thing hasn't been useful since you bastards stopped feeding it. Look at its ribs. If you'd fed them, maybe they'd still recognize orders from instinct. Instead, they're tearing up livestock and leading you on goose chases."

"They smelled something," the other voice repeated, less confidently. "Unless—unless it was just a squirrel."

"You think a squirrel was firing jinxes at us?" The first Death Eater asked. "Are you thick?"

"Merlin's sagging bollocks, you lot really don't have a clue, do you?" The barman spoke again, his words dripping with contempt. "You're standing there accusing me of harboring fugitives— *me*, who's been running this pub since before you stopped pissing the bed— while you were the ones firing spells at *each other* like drunkards in a tavern brawl."

"That's a lie! There was an intruder—"

"I saw it, you daft twats," the barman growled. "Right outside my window. One of you tripped on the cobblestones by the flower cart, panicked, and let loose a jinx that nearly took your mate's ear off."

There was a pause. A shuffle. Someone muttered, "I didn't trip."

“Oh, didn’t you? Then maybe your friend there just decided to test his aim on your earlobe. Real tight-knit unit, you lot.” He laughed, a sound completely devoid of amusement. “You hear a noise, you jump, you jinx each other out of fright. Next thing you know, you’re banging on *my* door accusing *me* of harboring wanted criminals when really you’re just jumpy little cowards with bad aim and worse eyesight. Now piss off before I report *you* for disorderly conduct.”

There was a long moment of quiet, the air vibrating with unease. Then one of them piped up again. “We’re sweeping the southern ridge again, just to be sure. If we find out you’re lying—”

“You’ll what?” Aberforth sneered. “Threaten me some more? Get the fuck off my property, Hargle. And bring those two nincompoops with you.”

The Death Eaters left, boots crunching down the alley. Only then did the barman turn back, grumbling, “*idiots*,” as he wrenched open the door, slamming it shut with a flick of his wand and deadbolting it behind him.

“You lot are either brave,” he muttered, turning to face them in the smoky gloom of the tavern, “or very, very stupid.”

“I reckon we’re both,” Ron admitted, lips twisting up into a lopsided grin.

“Thank you,” Hermione breathed. “Thank you so much, Mister—?”

“Dumbledore,” the barman said gruffly. “Aberforth Dumbledore.”

---

The back room of the Hog’s Head smelled like pipe smoke, moldering wool, and the lingering scent of goat dung. A single lantern sputtered in the far corner, throwing long, quivering shadows across the peeling walls. The floor was covered in a thick, threadbare carpet the color of old tea. A squat fireplace was built into the far wall, its grate blackened with soot, the hearth ringed with mismatched



stones. Across from it hung a single oil painting, large and unignorable. A young blonde girl stared out from the canvas, her expression a study in docile serenity. There was something eerie in her vacant stillness: her eyes were wide and pale, just slightly off-center, giving her the disquieting air of someone always listening.

“Here.” Aberforth slammed down a tray without ceremony. It held a hunk of coarse rye bread, half-stale and dense as a brick, sat beside a thick slab of sharp, sweating cheddar. There was also a chipped tin dish of boiled eggs and a bowl of something that might once have been stew. Beside it, a flagon of mead and four cloudy glasses.

“Thank you,” Potter breathed fervently, as he and Weasley tucked in. Draco stared at the tray with the vague horror of a man raised on silver service. But hunger had a way of gutting pride, so he forced the stale bread past his lips, chasing it with the oaky mead, barely caring that it tasted like the bottom of a feed sack. Hermione nibbled on a piece of cheese, slightly green in the face.

The barman watched as they fell upon the food with his arms crossed, mouth twisted like he’d sucked a lemon. “I suppose this is what a generation of martyrs looks like. Starved, soaked, and stupid.” He shook his head. “What were you thinking, Potter? Running through the village like ninnies, lighting it up like its bloody Guy Fawkes night.”

“We tried to be careful,” Harry wheezed, surfacing from his bowl of stew. “The cloak—Hermione’s necklace—”

“Careful?” Aberforth’s laugh was a dry scrape. “You set off an intruder alarm and nearly collapsed half the alley. You call that *careful*?”

Hermione flinched. Draco felt it in his ribs, the bond between them still trembling with aftershocks. She’d hardly said a word since the explosion.

"You should've stayed gone," Aberforth muttered. He leaned against the old stone mantle, his gaze falling to the hearth. "Albus made a habit of leading lambs to slaughter. Now he's dead and you lot are still faithfully sacrificing yourselves at his behest."

"That's not true," Harry said.

Aberforth snorted. "Don't tell me about my brother, Potter. I know better than anyone what he was capable of."

There was something unmistakable in the slope of his brow, the depth of those glacier-colored eyes: something fiercely Dumbledore, though it had been stripped of all the theatrical softness that the former Headmaster had wielded like a velvet cudgel. This man had no patience for riddles or half-truths. Draco noted the tension in his jaw, the deliberate roughness in his movements. Here was a brother made not of Albus' flair for prophecy and polish, but of blunt edges and stinging truths.

Aberforth caught his eye, grimacing. "You're the Malfoy whelp, aren't you?" His chin dipped to where Draco had been bitten by the crup. "Better get that leg taken care of before you ruin my rug."

"What leg?" Hermione gave Aberforth a rather dirty look, already steering Draco into the washroom. "Are you *bleeding*? Christ, Draco, let me see." He leaned against the filthy porcelain sink and rolled up his trousers to reveal the bite: a ragged crescent of torn flesh, already purpling, the edges inflamed and weeping.

"Salazar," he swore through his teeth, knuckles white where they gripped the sink's edge. "Felt like that Crup took a chunk of me with it."

"It nearly did," she snapped. In the dirty mirror, he watched her reflection. Her face was pale with fury and fear. "Hold still."

"No," he gritted. "Not you. Weasley can heal me. I didn't need this leg anyway."

Hermione ignored him, batting his hands away to mutter an incantation under her breath. Her wand glowed a deep blue. Pain shot up his thigh, white-hot and biting—but then, just as quickly, it dissolved into something else entirely. A liquid warmth seeped into the muscle, slow and blooming, like slipping into a bath drawn too hot. His breath caught, eyes fluttering shut. The ache retreated, replaced by a heady rush that pooled somewhere indecent in his stomach. When overly concentrated, healing magic felt an awful lot like arousal.

“Fuck,” he hissed, voice low and ragged. “I’m going to need you to pace yourself or I’m going to embarrass us both.”

“Down, boy.” Hermione gave him a look of weary amusement. “I’ve closed the deepest tissue, but you’ll need not to exacerbate it before the skin fully regrows. It’s not my best work—unsurprisingly, this wand is rather resistant to healing spells—but at the very least you won’t be limping around like a Victorian governess anymore.”

Draco rolled his trouser leg back down, the skin beneath clean and unbroken save for a faint white seam. He caught Hermione watching, her lip caught between her teeth. Her hand hovered over his thigh a moment too long.

He cleared his throat. “Granger.”

She looked up quickly, like she'd been caught. “What?”

“You okay?”

Hermione opened her mouth, then shut it again. Draco didn’t push, at least, not immediately. He glanced down at Bellatrix’s wand, held loosely in her hand.

“You’ve been running hot,” he said. “Nearly incinerated that alley when we were fleeing.”

Her eyes flashed, the mask cracking. “I had to. I didn’t have a choice.”

“I’m not blaming you.” He lowered his voice. “I’m worried.”

She looked at him. Wild-eyed, pale.

“I can feel it,” she whispered, showing him her palms. They were riddled with casting burns. “Every time I cast, it’s like I’m pulling from the wrong place. And I don’t know if it’s the wand, or—” Her voice caught. “Or if it’s *me* .”

He knelt beside her, favoring his good leg, and touched her wrist gently.

“It’s not you,” he said.

“I spent years learning to be perfect, you know? To do everything by the book, because I *had* to. Because I’m a Muggleborn and they were always waiting for me to fail. I had to be the smartest, the cleverest, the one who always got us out of danger. And then, when the Death Eaters came for us at Tonks house...I failed. And I watched people I cared about suffer because of it.” She swallowed, her eyes going glossy. “I got mine, though. Being under the Cruciatus Curse for that long really shattered my understanding of the hierarchy of pain.”

Draco felt something cold stirring in his chest, something he didn’t have a name for but had carried all his life, curled like a parasite behind his ribs. Guilt, maybe. Some kind of impotent rage. He’d *seen* the aftermath in Shell Cottage, when she’d been bedridden for days. But hearing it in her voice, raw and tight and confessional...it was like someone had taken his spine and dipped it in acid.

“I hated touching this wand at first. I couldn’t even *look* at it. It felt like it would recognize me and finish what it started.” She exhaled, long and uneven. “But it’s a strong wand. Powerful. It listens to me. Now, when I cast—” She hesitated. “I want them to *pay*. I want them to

know they can't touch me anymore. That I'm not the girl they tortured in the clearing. I want them to be afraid of me. I want them to suffer. That's why this wand obeys me, isn't it?"

She looked away, ashamed now, as if expecting him to recoil.

"The thing that hurt me most is now the thing I use to protect the people I love. That should feel triumphant." There was no triumph in her voice at all. "But every time I cast, there's this voice in my head whispering that maybe it's me who's been conquered."

There was something utterly arresting about her in that moment, some convergence of stubbornness and fury, of pain she'd alchemized into power. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper, eyes fixed on her mouth like it might be the last sacred thing left in the world.

"What you went through changed you, Granger. It made you *dangerous*." He leaned in just enough for her to feel the heat of him across the narrow space between them. "If you think I'm going to tell you to be afraid of it, think again. You adapted. And now you're walking around with her wand in your hand, casting spells no one your age should know, scaring the hell out of people who used to call you filth."

Hermione stared at him, breathing shallow, her expression unreadable.

"Whatever you're turning into, Granger... don't stop."

---

They stepped out of the washroom and into an argument. Draco caught only the tail end of Potter's voice, sharp and furious and aimed at their host. The chaos outside had quieted, but inside, tension clung to the rafters, stale as pipe smoke.

"You're wrong. He wasn't like that!" Potter looked like someone had punched through his ribs and scooped something soft out. He was

breathing too hard, jaw clenched so tight the veins stood out on his neck.

“Albus liked his secrets to stay buried. Made it easier to play chess with the world. You’re just another piece on the board, Potter.” Aberforth sighed heavily. “He was brilliant, my brother. Too brilliant for his own damn good. When Gellert Grindelwald came along, he believed in the whole rotten lot: the greater good, the master race, the idea that wizards ought to rule the world.”

Harry sat stiffly at the table, his mouth pressed into a furious line. Ron looked away, ashamed on someone else's behalf. Only Draco didn't flinch. He'd grown up in homes that spoke of Grindelwald with reverence. That cursed Dumbledore's name and toasted his downfall.

“They were going to lead a revolution, you know. Change the world. But Albus was bogged down with familial obligations. Our father was in prison. A group of muggle boys caught our sister Ariana doing magic when she was just a little girl and they....well, Father made it right. That's what got him sent to Azkaban for life.” Aberforth's voice splintered. “But Ariana never recovered. She would go into these catatonic states...there were accidents, from the uncontrolled magic. Still a sweet little thing, though. Used to help me tend to the goats. I was her favorite, you see. I could get her to calm down, coax her to eat when she was upset. *He* was always locked away in his room, reading his bloody books, scribbling letters to half the bloody magical intelligentsia. To Albus, our sister was a mere inconvenience.”

*Catatonic states. Accidents. Uncontrolled magic.* Suddenly, he was back at the manor in Wiltshire during the terrible summer he was marked, when his mother's mind started to fray at the edges. He remembered the way her voice would vanish mid-sentence, how her wand had gone untouched for weeks. Often, she'd call him Lucius and sometimes, Regulus. He remembered the night of the attack on Tonks House, when Narcissa's grief shattered, triggering the explosion that killed her and Bellatrix. Ariana Dumbledore hadn't been the only witch whose magic had betrayed her.

Draco's chest tightened. He couldn't look at Hermione. He was certain— *certain* —she'd be watching him with those impossible eyes that always seemed to know.

"What happened to her?" But of course, Draco already knew the answer.

"We fought," Aberforth said. "Me, Albus, Gellert. Wands drawn, yelling about their batshit plans for the future. Then, we were all dueling. Ariana was upset. She tried to stop it and got caught in the crossfire. None of us knew whose curse killed her."

Silence settled like dust in the pub's back room. There was no performance of grief in the barman's recount, just the plain, undressed tragedy of being the one left behind.

"He said he never forgave himself...but he still went on, didn't he? Let himself become a legend. Order of Merlin, Headmaster of Hogwarts. I buried our sister alone." Aberforth shook his head. "Look around, Potter. My brother's dead and the Dark Lord he failed to dethrone rules the world. What did he promise you? Was it anything like this?"

He could almost hear the gears grinding behind Potter's grim stare. Dumbledore, the symbol. Dumbledore, the father figure. Dumbledore, the grand manipulator. All those identities collapsing in on each other like unstable architecture.

As for himself, Draco had fewer idealisms remaining regarding the deceased: when the Headmaster had offered to help him save his mother, it was for a price. There was no need for speeches about morality or destiny. Dumbledore had simply left the door open, knowing Draco would become desperate enough to wander through, would give up every scrap of information he could offer, even at great personal risk. Suddenly, Draco saw it all with crystalline clarity: the genius brother, raised in a house of decay and expectation. A father dragged off in chains. A sick, unpredictable family member hidden behind closed doors. Filled with hunger—not to be good, not

even to be great—but to matter, to rearrange the world in his own image so no one could ever take anything from him again. In Draco, he'd seen a perfect vector for his machinations: someone ambitious, fractured, and desperate for meaning. He'd seen himself.

Before anyone could speak again, a soft sound drew their attention, the scrape of a glass on a wooden frame. The portrait of the young girl—*Ariana Dumbledore*, he could see the resemblance now—tucked away in a shadowed corner, had stirred. Her painted face turned, eyes wide and solemn, gesturing silently, as another figure came into distant view.

“What the hell?” Weasley breathed. A panel of the frame slid aside like breath parting fog, and from the dark corridor behind, a figure emerged, slender and cloaked in storm-dampened wool.

“There’s only one way in and out,” Aberforth explained. “Every corridor your lot once crept through has a dementor at one end and a Death Eater at the other. Hogwarts is no school anymore. It’s a prison. And you...” He looked at Harry, something between pity and contempt flickering in his expression. “You’re marching straight into it, with Snape on the throne and the Carrows snapping at his heels.”

The portrait swung open and a newcomer stepped through, shaking off their hood to reveal regal cheekbones, sharp enough to slice. Her black hair was now hacked blunt just below her jaw. Her clothes were pragmatic—thick wool and scuffed dragonhide boots—but there was still a flash of vanity in the kohl smudged deliberately around her lashes, the defiant sweep of deep plum lipstick.

“Took you long enough,” Pansy Parkinson sniffed, pushing the painting shut with her boot. What remained was leaner, keener, something wolfish in her grin. “Merlin, it smells like something died in here. It’s putting me off my supper. Actually, it’s putting me off ever eating again.”

“Pansy?” Draco asked, stunned.



“Hello, Draco.” Her eyes scanned his torn cloak, the bloody bandage at his leg. Her voice softened just barely. “Still haven’t learned how to avoid getting mauled, I see. What creature did you insult this time?”

“Nothing nearly as ferocious as you.”

They shared a look, gruff and fond and full of unsaid history, before Pansy cleared her throat, back to business. She scanned the room, her gaze steel-bright. Harry, Ron, and Hermione all stared back.

“Lovely. It’s a bloody Shell Cottage reunion. Are Bill and Fleur here too?”

“Back again, Parkinson?” Aberforth grunted in annoyance. “You’re turning my pub into a glorified trading post.”

“Oh, stop moaning, you cranky old coot.” She dumped a crate on a nearby table with a thud that made the pewter tankards rattle, then brushed her hands on her trousers. “I brought you a pack of Blasting Batons, a dozen Pepper-Up vials, some Flarebane Elixir—not my own brew, but it’ll do— and enough doxy repellent to scrub out the Slytherin dorms. Which I wouldn’t recommend handling without gloves unless you fancy waking up without any skin.”

“What the hell?” Draco asked, eyeing the crate. “Are you running a *smuggler’s ring*?”

“Don’t look so shocked, Malfoy. *Someone* has to feed the army of child soldiers. While you lot were off turning Gringotts into a smoldering pile of rubble,” she said, smugly. “Some of us were actually solving problems.”

“*You’re* the one who’s been smuggling supplies to Neville and the others?” Ron added, voice halfway between awe and terror. “How?”

“I’m Pansy Parkinson,” she said, as if it explained everything. Gone was the affectation, the brittle snobbery, the idle sighs of discontent. She was still recognizably Pansy, but reframed entirely: elegant disdain turned into a surprisingly ruthless efficiency.

"We need to get into the castle," Potter blurted. "Can we go through here?"

"I doubt you have any alternative." She braced a hand on the portrait's edge. "Let's get you tucked away before the Dark Lord's squadron of incompetents realize you're here. Leave your Floo open, old man, I believe you'll be getting some more visitors before the night's through."

"I told you, it's a pub, not a bloody railway station," the barman argued, looking flustered by the mere prospect. "There's a curfew on the whole bloody village!"

"Don't gripe, Aberforth," Pansy said, sounding disconcertingly like her mother. "It's unbecoming for a man of your age to whine."

She stepped fluidly behind the portrait and into the enchanted tunnel. Draco ducked in behind her, wand tip flaring to life, followed by Hermione, Harry, and Ron in tight formation. The passage opened into a long, arched corridor with root-laced dirt floors, smelling of wet earth and something strongly mineral.

"I'd already planned a supply run when Ab sent word," Pansy said over her shoulder. Her tone was disarmingly offhand, the drawl of someone recounting a luncheon, but underneath, Draco could hear it: the iron spine of a woman who hadn't been idle while the world burned. "Turns out being descended from a long line of shipping magnates teaches you a thing or two about logistics. We started running contraband and supplies through the Hog's Head. Peeves has been helping a bit with that, he does an excellent distraction. The Carrows' are at their wits end."

"*Peeves?*" Ron repeated, aghast. "The poltergeist?"

"He's been terrified of Pansy since third year," Draco explained dryly. "Something to do with a wad of Droobles and a cursed pair of underpants."

They pressed deeper into the tunnel, craning necks as its ceiling sagged, beaded with condensation. Pansy's voice floated back through the gloom. "And what about you lot?"

There was a beat of silence.

"Well," Harry muttered, "We were a bit busy, with the dragon and all."

"No, why have you come back *here*?" Pansy asked bluntly, as she led them through the twisting underground maze. "I must assume that your sudden presence means the end is nigh— not with a whimper, but with a bang and whatnot?"

"Are you...quoting *Eliot*?" Hermione asked, as if offended on the poet's behalf.

"Just because I didn't spend my adolescence inhaling library dust doesn't mean I can't read, Granger."

"Oh, have you moved on to books *without* pictures?"

"We're here to look for something," Harry cut in, ignoring the bickering witches. "An artifact, of sorts. You-Know-Who hid it somewhere in the castle. He knows we're trying to find it, and he's coming. Soon."

"I should have known." Pansy turned her head slightly. Her eyes glittered in the half-light. "Lovegood said she had a feeling a crescendo was coming, but I thought it was her usual tosh about Hinky-Dinks and Spank-Stargles. Barely lets me get a bloody word in most days."

At the far end of the tunnel, a set of thick roots gave way to a wooden door, which Pansy tapped with the butt of her wand. It swung open not onto a hallway or a dormitory, but a vast, vaulted chamber that had rearranged itself once more into a kind of sanctuary. Blankets were stacked in tidy rows. Cauldrons steamed gently near a makeshift brewing station. Hand-painted signs were

strung across the rafters in the colors of all four houses. There were piles of books, sleeping rolls, and the fragrant smell of freshly baked bread. And people—dozens of them—their heads turning at the sound of the opening door.

“Hey Longbottom,” Pansy called, tucking her hair behind her ears. “We’ve got company.”

The moment that Potter stepped into the Room of Requirement, it was as if someone had set off a dungbomb. “*Potter! Look, it’s Harry! He’s alive!*” There were gasps and shrieks. “*Ron! Hermione!*” Someone dropped a flagon of pumpkin juice. It was chaos. Sticky, breathless, emotional chaos.

The newcomers were overwhelmed with embraces. Draco hung back, lurking in the shadows of the cavern’s opening. *The Chosen One, returned at last*, he thought sourly, as the trio was immediately swarmed, half-smothered by a small army of admirers. *Alert the bards.*

Across the room, Hannah Abbott started crying. Luna Lovegood looked delighted, hopping around on alternating feet like some sort of mad rabbit. Seamus Finnigan had Weasley in a robust headlock. “I thought you were dead,” he roared. “There’s been a rumor going ‘round that they found your body in Knockturn, wand shoved up your —”

“Absolutely untrue,” Ron cut in, cheeks coloring.

“Shame,” Draco added, having had about enough of the jovial reunions. “Would’ve been a fitting end.”

Finnigan gaped. “What in feck’s sake is *Malfoy* doing here?” At the proclamation, the clamor around Potter stuttered to a halt.

There was a sibilant hush of recognition that rippled outward in a dozen shocked whispers, the kind of communal disbelief usually reserved for a resurrected corpse or a professor walking into a

dormitory unannounced. The room's focus tightened palpably around Draco as murmurs flickered through the crowd: *Is that—? What the hell is he doing here? Draco Malfoy? With Potter?* Some glares were heavy with history (the Ravenclaw girl he hexed for sport during fifth-year, the brother of the petrified Gryffindor he'd laughed at when they were twelve). Others were even less friendly.

Draco didn't flinch. He straightened, letting the whispers pass over him like smoke. Kept his expression ever superior, ever detached, like he was observing particularly loud barn animals from behind reinforced glass. The consummate Malfoy.

Hermione stepped forward, her presence suddenly gravitational. He watched several of the younger students straighten their posture. "Draco's with us," she said, as she took his hand in her own. "He's been fighting on our side for months now. We wouldn't have made it this far without him."

The assembled D.A., shifted uncomfortably. The murmuring continued, although more sullenly than before.

"Easy for you to say," said a wiry boy with pale hair and a ruddy complexion. Zacharias Smith, radiating that particular brand of sanctimony unique to those who'd spent most of the war sitting in its shadows. "*I* remember Malfoy as the smug little prefect with the Death Eater father, who turned a blind eye while Umbridge used the rest of us for target practice." His eyes flicked pointedly to Hermione, the tone in his voice turning snide. "But I guess that's easy to forget when you're shagging the rehabilitation project."

"Shut your mouth, Smith," Draco interjected. "Or the rehabilitation project will shut it for you. Permanently."

Smith had the sense, or perhaps, the cowardice, to hesitate.

"My personal life isn't up for committee review," Hermione said sharply. "And if you're implying that I'd compromise the integrity of this war effort for *anyone*, then you've clearly never been paying

attention. Which, frankly, wouldn't surprise me, given your general school marks."

Susan Bones piped up, something haunted her in gaze. Draco remembered hearing the whispers, the rumors of the Bones family, killed for their defiance. Lucius had regrettably been involved. "How do you know," she said, eyes locked on Hermione, "that he isn't just manipulating you? This is Draco Malfoy we're talking about."

To Draco's surprise, it was Weasley who intervened.

"Oh, give it a rest, " Ron called loudly. "Sure, Malfoy's a pain in the arse. He's a posh twat and half the time, I want to punch him in his stupid pointy face. But he's had my back." He glanced at Draco, looking about as comfortable defending him as he might be juggling blast-ended skrewts. "He's fought beside us. If you had seen what I've seen—him getting cursed to hell and back, refusing to leave anyone behind, dragging us out of situations we shouldn't've survived— you'd know he's not doing it to impress anyone. Especially not Hermione."

"How touching," Draco said dryly. "Do my eulogy too, will you? Here lies the poshest twat—"

"Prick," Ron said, as he scratched the back of his neck, then added, "Just don't make me regret saying any of that, yeah?"

When he extended a hand, stiff and reluctant, Draco hesitated only a beat before clasping it.

The room shifted with the gesture. There were no cheers, but at the very least, the atmosphere lost its edge of imminent expulsion. Draco caught the flickers of skepticism in the crowd, those who remained unsold. He reminded himself that these were children, mostly. Scared and hungry, too tired to hate him properly, but not enough to forget.

Near the far wall, Neville Longbottom cleared his throat with deliberate weight, drawing eyes like a magnet. His stance was relaxed but anchored, arms crossed, his silence carrying more authority than Smith's whole tantrum.

"Are we good?" Longbottom asked, addressing the crowd. For a moment Draco's brain short-circuited, disoriented by the sheer ridiculousness of the transformation: gone was the pudgy, stammering imbecile he used to hex for sport in first year. In his place stood a man—broad-shouldered, scarred, and self-possessed in a way that unsettled Draco more than he cared to admit. This was a war hero, with gashes across both sets of knuckles. Longbottom the general, addressing his troops.

"I certainly am," Pansy looked around her peers with narrowed eyes. "And just to be clear— if anyone gets the wise idea to curse Draco in the back in service of settling old scores, I will personally ensure you piss slugs for a fortnight," she said, smiling sweetly. "I'll hex your teeth out and wear them as a tacky little charm bracelet."

"Right." Longbottom let out an amused sound. "Remind me not to get on your bad side, Parkinson."

Pansy didn't look at him, just gave a flick of her wrist like she was batting a gnat out of the air. "You'd never survive it."

Neville grinned, slow and lopsided. "What a way to go, though." There was something palpable between them, half-formed but crackling with potential. Like they were circling the same pile of kindling, daring the other to light the match. The look on Pansy's face made Draco want to boke.

"She didn't have to threaten *everyone* on your behalf," Hermione muttered from beside Draco. "Bit attention seeking, isn't it?"

Draco tried very hard not to smile. Apparently, not everyone say what was obviously occurring with Longbottom and Pansy. He leaned a

little closer to her and murmured, "Jealousy suits you, Granger. It's very fetching."

"Don't flatter yourself," she snapped, not meeting his eyes.

Around them, the Room of Requirement had swelled to its limits and then some. A rebel stronghold, yes, but it also had the uneasy rhythm of a holding pen before a slaughter. A dozen different conversations tangled in the stale, over-warm air. Fear wore a dozen different faces.

"If we could all—look, I just— *listen, please!* " Potter pressed his hand to his forehead, wincing as he tried to address the room's occupants. Whatever he felt through that scar of his was enough to nearly bring him to his knees.

Finally, Longbottom stepped forward and whistled loudly. "Listen up!"

Instantly, the room obeyed. The hush was immediate and slightly unsettling. Pansy looked extremely satisfied. Harry blinked, then stepped up onto a low bench, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Right, thanks Neville. It's great to see everyone—"

"Hear, hear!"

"—but we're not here for a reunion. We're here because there's something in the castle we need. If we can find and destroy it, it might be the difference between winning and losing this war."

"What is it?"

"Where do we look?"

"Er," Potter hesitated. "I can't tell you. Dumbledore left it to me to—"

"Hang on," Longbottom said. "I thought you were here to fight. To take back the castle."



“What? No, I don’t want anyone else getting hurt on my behalf. I’m not asking anyone to fight for me. I can’t ask that.”

There was a beat of offended silence.

“Harry,” Longbottom said, calm and steady, “you’re not the only one who’s been fighting. You think we’ve just been waiting here? Hiding out, twiddling our wands? We’ve been *surviving*. We’ve been getting people out. Fighting off the Dementors and the Carrows and every other nightmare the Ministry could dream up. We’ve risked everything to keep this school standing, to protect the ones who *couldn’t* run.”

He took a step closer, and the torchlight caught the edge of his hardened expression, the yellowing remains of a black-eye. His tone never rose, not once. It didn’t need to. He already had the room under a spell.

“You can’t stand there and tell us it’s not our fight. It’s been our fight. It’s been *my* fight since before I even knew how to hold a wand,” he said, eyes locked on Harry’s. “Since the night they tortured my mum and dad.”

“Neville...” Potter murmured, aghast.

“So, stop arguing. Stop trying to protect us from something we’re already in the middle of. Tell us what you need, and we’ll help you finish it.”

There was a beat of charged silence. Then, Pansy moved to stood tall beside Longbottom, her arms crossed like she was daring anyone to question her allegiance, throwing the weight of her old blood and new loyalties behind the unlikeliest of generals.

“You heard him,” she said, lifting her chin. “Buck up, Potter.” Draco glanced sidelong at Longbottom. His ears had grown slightly pink.

"There's something hidden somewhere in the castle," Potter admitted. "We think it belonged to Rowena Ravenclaw. Has anyone heard of a magical object like that? Maybe something with her crest on it?"

"Well," Luna Lovegood said dreamily, "there's always her lost diadem. I told you about it, remember, Harry? Daddy's been trying to replicate it for years."

Michael Corner scoffed. "It's the *lost* diadem, Luna. It's in the name."

"What's a diadem?" Ron asked, brow furrowed.

"A sort of crown," Hermione offered, a far away look on her face. "It's supposed to enhance the wisdom of the wearer. But it's a folkloric object, like Arthur's sword. There's never been any proof it actually existed."

"Exactly," Luna added. "Daddy thinks it might attract Wrackspurts. There's a statue of her wearing it in the Ravenclaw common room. I could take you, if you'd like to see it?"

"Let's go. Thanks," Potter said quietly, and then nodded to Longbottom. "All of you." He swung his cloak so that he and Luna vanished beneath it, their outlines blurring. Then, they were gone.

Beside him, Hermione and Ron had their heads together, arguing quietly.

"Even if we find it, we won't be able to destroy it," Hermione was hissing. "Unless I can cast it again—"

"Absolutely not," Draco cut in. "Over my dead, scorched, dismembered body will you use dark magic right now. You'll blow us all to bits."

"I'll be *careful*. "

“You’re never careful,” he muttered. “You’re brilliant and reckless and you think it’s your responsibility to do everything. Terrible combination.”

“Hang on,” Ron said, interrupting, buzzing with unusual clarity. “There might be another way.”

They both turned to him. Draco’s brows arched so high they nearly disappeared into his hairline, no doubt the very picture of patrician disdain.

“It’s like I said with the locket. When we were in the Chamber, the Basilisk venom destroyed the book, no dark magic required. The snake’s skeleton is still down there. Why not just... get another fang?”

“Ron—” Hermione straightened slightly, the wheels already turning. “Ron, that’s actually brilliant.”

Draco had grown up with tales of the Founders the way other children were spoon-fed fairy stories. Slytherin’s secrets, Hufflepuff’s humility, Rowena’s wit, Gryffindor’s great bloody sword. It was all part of the canon. But the Chamber? That was the most far-fetched of them all. A secret dungeon filled with petrifying monsters, hidden inside a centuries-old school? Unfortunately, he’d learned from prolonged exposure to the three Gryffindors that when it came to them, the most far-fetched of rumors were usually true.

“How would we even get in?”

“The entrance is in Moaning Myrtle’s bathroom,” Hermione said. “We found it in Second Year.”

“So, what do you say?” Ron elbowed his side. “We’ll nip down there, grab a few fangs, and be back up in no time.”

Draco glanced at Hermione, who was already checking a map, her lips moving silently as she traced the route with her finger.

“Let’s go rob a grave, then,” he muttered, and followed them into the dark.

---

---

You already knew the Author's Note for this chapter was going to be insane....

- I wanted to write Hogsmeade as a dystopian outpost under Death Eater control, critiquing how terror is institutionalized: through symbols (runes, propaganda), animals (crups as surveillance tools), and behavioral conditioning (forced compliance).

- Hermione’s fluctuating magic is supposed to reflect her internal fracture, and Bellatrix’s wand becomes a paradoxical symbol for her, both relic of pain and tool of reclamation. Her confession explores the desire for power that is born from victimhood, and the fine line between vengeance and justice. After casting the Killing curse, her magic has become almost biological, a symptom of a larger physical and mental wound.

- The familial scars in this chapter run deep: Aberforth forces Harry (and the reader) to confront the uncomfortable truth: that the most powerful heroes are often tyrants to the people they love.

- Neville's back! Like Pansy's, his arc is one I was fascinated to write. Here, Neville's leadership doesn't emerge from charisma, but from reliability. He becomes the kind of figure people follow because they've seen him endure. He is not exceptional in the "traditional" sense, but he is immovable, and in a world ruled by erratic violence and shifting allegiances, it's radical to be the one who holds the line.

- To a girl like Pansy, who's always had to claw for relevance in rooms full of louder men, Neville is magnetic. She grew up in a world where power was ornamental and masculinity performative, so his quiet, lived-in strength is probably deeply erotic to her. It's not just that he's brave; it's that he doesn't have to advertise it. He suffers

without spectacle, commands without arrogance. In this way he's sort of the Anti-Draco (and that suits Pansy just fine).

- Differentiations from canon: Luna never goes home for Easter (a dumb move tbh) so she's been with Neville's crew all along. When the Burrow was locked down at the end of Chapter 30, Ginny and Lavender, who'd been staying with the Weasley's, were cut off from returning to school (they ended up getting into all sorts of trouble at Aunt Muriel's, but more on that later).

- Next up, Chapter 46: The Potion Master's Secret

[Come chit chat with me on Tumblr!](#)

---

# The Potion Master's Secret

## Chapter 46: The Potion Master's Secret

---

Here's what you missed on Smoke Signals:

- Theodore Nott was the one tasked with killing Dumbledore in this story: in trying to minimize the fallout, Draco confiscated the cursed necklace that injured Katie Bell in the canon and hid it somewhere we were not privy to (Chapter 15).
  - Hermione and Draco had one of their first \*intimate\* experiences at the edge of the Forbidden Forest (Chapter 26/27) only to be caught by Pansy, who then had to be obliviated after witnessing their secret relationship. Hermione had given the memory to Draco for safe keeping.
  - At the very beginning of the war, before joining up with the trio, Draco was posted up at Snape's bungalow in Spinner's End, brewing potions for the Dark Lord's forces (Chapter 31).
  - Ginny and Lavender, who were caught in the lockdown at the Burrow (end of Chapter 30), did not return to Hogwarts for their sixth/seventh years. Instead, they were evacuated to Aunt Muriel's with Molly and Arthur after the Battle of the Burrow (Chapter 33), while Harry and Ron (and subsequently, Hermione, Draco, and Narcissa) were evacuated to Tonks House (RIP).
  - We're picking up right where we left off, at the beginning of the Battle of Hogwarts: Ron, Hermione, and Draco have gone to the Chamber of Secrets to get some Basilisk fangs (Chapter 45) while Harry has gone in search of information surrounding the diadem.
- 

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Draco leaned with his arms crossed just outside the entrance to Myrtle's flooded bathroom, one eye on the end of the corridor where the dark pooled like spilled oil. Below him, two Gryffindors were rummaging through the bones of a long-deceased monster while he stood sentry. Granger, of course, had put up a fight about it.

"We shouldn't risk splitting up. Everyone thinks you're dead, Draco. If they see you—"

Draco gave a short, humorless laugh. "Surely you're not suggesting that we just leave an entrance to the underworld unguarded for anyone to follow, or worse, seal us in?"

She faltered, amber eyes flicking toward the chamber's yawning entrance, the tap that had opened like an unhinged jaw. Her curls and sleeves were damp from the pipe's spray; under light of the stained glass windows she looked like some half-wild naiad, freshly emerged from her spring.

"Even miraculously resurrected, I'm still less wanted than you and Weasley. You two are front-page threats. I'm a footnote."

"Draco—"

"Go on," he insisted, softer than before. "I'll be here when you come back."

He pressed his back against the wall, fervently hoping his Notice-Me-Not charm would hold so that Granger would not be proven right. The castle was too quiet. The warm sounds of his childhood were absent, scraped clean from the stones: the portraits, gone silent or fled, and the ghosts nowhere to be found. When he was young, Hogwarts had been a birthright for him, an inheritance befitting the latest in a long line of Malfoy men. Now, the halls felt unrecognizable, and he was unable to shake the feeling that perhaps, the castle no longer recognized him either.

There was a whisper of movement behind him. His reflexes, sharpened by Tonks' exhausting Auror drills in the clearing, had his wand up and pointed at the threat in one fluid movement.

"Don't even try it," Draco snarled. "I'm in no mood."

"Nor am I," came the voice, aching familiar in its precision, in its refusal to waste even a syllable on the unworthy. He'd heard that low, drawing intonation throughout his school years in the dungeons' classroom, or during tutoring in the Manor's library, rising slightly whenever Draco's arrogance outpaced his competence.

Snape stood at the mouth of the corridor, wearing a harried expression, as if he'd been chased all the way from the castle's upper ramparts. Draco hadn't seen him since last winter, when he'd holed up in the Potions master's cottage. How had it looked from Snape's side, the reports of Draco's disappearance trickling in, none of them concrete, just enough ruin to suggest he'd died while betraying his Mark? Had he assumed that he'd defected? Had he thought he'd been killed? Snape had probably assumed the worst, Draco thought. He had always been practical in that way.

"Sir—" Draco started, but his godfather cut him off with a single raised hand.

"I don't have long," Snape said. "The school has fallen to the Order. The Carrows have fled, but not before they alerted the Dark Lord to Potter's presence in the castle." He rolled up his cloak sleeve to show the brand, bruning dark on his forearm. A summons. "I have only mere moments."

Draco took a slow step forward. "How did you know I was here?"

Snape didn't answer immediately. He looked past Draco, toward the sealed bathroom door, then back again. Something in his expression twisted, too raw to be disdain.



"I am the Headmaster of Hogwarts," he said at last, voice low and strained with contempt. "There is very little that transpires within these walls without my knowledge. I've come to you to fulfill an oath. To deliver a truth that Dumbledore, in all his vaunted wisdom, lacked the nerve to impart himself." He paused, his black eyes flashing with something that might have been rage. "He left the burden to me, and now, as the noose tightens, I am afraid I must pass it to you."

"The Dark Lord has sounded every alarm. The end is imminent. You must know—" Snape moved closer, until the flickering torchlight caught the sweat on his brow. His voice dropped to a near-whisper. "Potter is a Horcrux."

"Sorry?" Draco blinked stupidly. "No, he can't be. Forgive me for the impertinence, sir, but he's a *person*."

"Think," Snape snarled. "*Think*, Draco. The bursts of power. The mysterious visions. The connection he shares with the Dark Lord. It's not just a prophecy that ties them together. There's something inside the boy that belongs to the Dark Lord himself, something he never had any intention of imparting. A piece of his very soul. And now that the last of the Horcruxes are nearly destroyed and his defeat finally becomes possible...you will have to tell Potter what he is...and that to destroy it, he will have to die."

It was as though someone had taken all the air from the room and replaced it with ash. Draco stared at his godfather, horrified.

"Sir, I can't—"

"For twenty years, I have bled," Snape interrupted, low and furious. "I have bartered my own soul in pieces so that others, those fortunate enough to remain gilded and oblivious, might remain unburdened. Such is the curse of the occlumens." His hands were clasped behind his back, but Draco could see the tension in the way his shoulders curled forward ever so slightly, a horrible weariness. "Now, my task falls to you, not by merit nor by choice, but by the cruel symmetry of fate. Among Potter's circle of loyal fools, you, Draco, possess the

rare faculty of cognitive partition to a degree unmatched by your peers. And so, it's you who must lie to him without tremor or fracture, until each remaining Horcrux has been destroyed."

Snape reached into his robe and withdrew a thin vial of memory: a silver strand, roiling within its glass casing like a bottled storm. He pressed it into Draco's palm.

"When the endeavor is done, you will give this to him." His eyes sharpened, black as spilt ink. "You will speak of it to no one. You will lock this conversation in the deepest vault of your mind and guard it with your life. Do you understand, Draco?"

"I understand," he said. "Sir—"

"Good." Snape nodded once, sharply. "Try and stay alive." Draco opened his mouth to return the sentiment, but Snape was already turning, a wraith receding into the corridor's dim light. He watched until, in a swirl of his greatcloak, the sallow Headmaster disappeared completely.

Draco stood alone in the dark, struggled to make sense of what had just transpired. This senseless, terrible thing he'd been told, his godfather's cursed bequeathment. In all honesty, Draco had never understood Snape, not really. He'd admired him, feared him, mimicked his aloofness in childhood and aspired to his authority in adolescence, but understanding had never factored into their relationship. Now, standing alone in one of the school's lower passages, Draco held the memory he'd been given up to the torchlight. It looked absurdly fragile, like a bottled whisper.

When he'd been staying in Snape's bungalow the previous autumn, Draco had often used his godfather's pensieve for what could politely be called *frivolous* exploits, reliving his more carnal memories whenever his godfather was out on his missions. With the war in full swing and communications with Granger cut off almost entirely, Draco would bury his troubles by pouring the contents of his favorite vial into the basin, its surface shimmering like the coin

flipped mid-air, hovering between fates. He used it to relive stolen moments with the very witch he couldn't stop thinking about: *there she was, pressing herself against him at the edge of the Forbidden Forest, after the burial of a giant arachnid. They were splayed indecently in the grass: his hands, blatantly overeager, pushing under her jumper, desperate to feel as much of her smooth, tempting skin as he could manage. Her lips on his, hot and insistent, tasting of blood oranges and salt. When she'd swept her top over her head, he'd been left speechless at the sight of her soft breasts, her dusky pink nipples waiting to be kissed and licked, taken into his mouth—*

The memory had been taken from Pansy's head, of all places, stolen like contraband. At the time, a blushing Granger had asked Draco not to watch it, but then, there'd been a few excruciating audiences with the Dark Lord when he'd been left trembling and in pieces— so yes, on those bitterly cold nights spent alone in Snape's cottage, he'd fist his cock at the swell of her breasts as he tried to remember the feel of her warm, wet cunt. He'd thrust into his hand, moaning her name, every movement a violation he couldn't bring himself to stop, because wanting her was the only thing keeping him alive.

On one such occasion, when Draco had drunkenly stumbled to the basin, a memory was already occupying the pensieve, swirling faintly at the surface. One of Snape's personal vials. Draco didn't dare dive in; he only leaned closer, just enough to catch glimpses of fragments, breaking the surface like shards of dream. A man— Snape, unmistakably younger, standing in the half-light of what looked like an abandoned Muggle lane— arguing with a pretty red-haired girl, her stomach swollen with child. And then another figure stepping into frame, backlit and infuriatingly tall: it looked like Potter, only older and scarless, with different eyes. The memory shimmered and collapsed in on itself, fading to black before Draco could see the end.

He never told Snape what he'd seen. It only occurred to Draco now, in the corridor with a different vial in his hand, that grief had a cycle—a recursive, cruel loop. Once, Snape had undoubtedly stood

where he now stood, holding the unbearable knowledge of someone else's death like fire in his palms.

He couldn't tell Hermione. He couldn't tell *anyone*. He had to live with this knowledge alone, allow it to chew at him from the inside while she clung to hope. He had to let her love Harry, let her believe for just a little longer that they might all get out of this alive. Afterwards, he would have to beg for her forgiveness.

Draco smelled the damp stone and mildew, heard the unmistakable clatter of adrenaline-fueled footfalls. Granger emerged into the corridor first, flushed and damp. Weasley followed, pale and jittery, but grinning.

"We did it!" Ron cried, like he'd won the bloody Quidditch Cup. "Hufflepuff's cup. Smashed it to bits, proper job. I sort of copied that noise Harry made to open the locket—" He made a noise like a cat, hacking up a hairball "— took a few goes, but it worked. Gave the blasted thing a jab before it started chatting bollocks."

He pulled the mangled cup from under his cloak, its exterior scorched and trailing dark magic. Hermione pulled a fang into her beaded bag.

"And we got this to use on the next ones," she said.

Draco looked at the two of them. Filthy and pink cheeked, grime on their sleeves and mud on their boots. Gods, they looked happy, both of them riding the high of having done something impossible and survived it.

"Best get to it, yeah? One more to go, and then that snake's in for a right nasty surprise!" Ron laughed, slapping his shoulder on the way past. Hermione looked at him, beaming, and Draco felt that awful, invisible thread between them flare to life. She was still vibrating with victory, with hope. It was unbearable.

His guilt coiled in his chest, tight and sharp. Immediately, he slammed down his occlumency walls. Hermione frowned, touching a hand to her sternum.

“Are you alright?” She asked. “All of a sudden the bond feels... numb.”

Before he could think, he crossed the space between them in a single breath and kissed her. She gasped against him, and then she was kissing him back, fierce and breathless. Her hands tangled in his cloak in a desperate attempt to anchor him, to bring him back from whatever darkness he was poised to fall into.

When he finally pulled away, she looked sweet and startled. He wished, not for the first time, he could take her away from this world, protect her from its cruelties.

“I had to,” he said, voice embarrassingly rough. “Before—before everything.”

“It’s going to be alright,” she whispered, touching his face. “Draco, look at me. We’re going to win. You have to believe that.”

She had no idea how wrong she was.

---

The Great Hall’s enchanted ceiling was slate-dark, streaked with slow-moving storm clouds. The four House tables had been pushed to the sides, replaced by clusters of students, Professors, and Order members conferring with Potter in hushed, urgent tones. Draco could smell the faint burning scent of magic, lingering in the air: enchantments, barriers, wards both ancient and newly improvised. Across the hall, students were whispering with each other, most of them looking petrified by fear. They didn’t look like children anymore; it was likely, Draco thought, given the Carrows’ brief, violent reign, that they’d already lost any semblance of their childhood long ago.

McGonagall stood on the dais where her predecessors had once addressed the school, her presence a sharp, necessary anchor amidst the rising tide of chaos.

“I am instructing the staff to fortify the grounds,” she announced, her voice echoing with a clarity that silenced even the whispered speculations. “We are beginning evacuations through the secure Floo networks being coordinated by Aberforth Dumbledore. Follow your Prefect’s instructions without argument, beginning with Slytherin house—”

“What if we want to stay?” Pansy called loudly, her arms crossed protectively around her middle. Her chin was lifted, but her eyes darted warily around the gatherers, as if expecting to be hexed mid-sentence for her outburst. “What if the Slytherins want to fight?”

Draco felt, more than saw, the Great Hall ripple with murmurs. He watched it unfold with a nauseating sense of *déjà vu*. There were scoffs of disbelief and blatant stares and a Ravenclaw girl loudly muttering, “Since when?” A Slytherin fifth-year called out, “Speak for yourself, blood traitor!”

His gaze drifted toward the remnants of Slytherin house: the ones who hadn’t fled with their wealthy families, or who were too young to enlist in the Dark Lord’s forces, lingering near the far wall, looking pale and brittle. They’d glared and whispered in Draco’s direction ever since he’d entered the Hall at Granger’s side, uninterested in his miraculous rising from the supposed dead: he recognized Goyle’s haunted thousand-yard stare, Crabbe’s silent, stupid fury. Daphne Greengrass, pretty and seething. Even Blaise looked shaken, the usual smirk stripped from his face, leaving a terrible blankness in its wake. They didn’t look powerful. They too looked like children who’d seen too much and understood too little, who’d been dragged into a war that their parents had offered them as their legacy. They looked, Draco thought furiously, like *fools*. He felt a hollow kind of rage rise in his throat. Hadn’t they realized? Hadn’t they seen yet, even now, that the war had not guaranteed them power or glory? That there was no triumph coming, no promised

seats at the table—there was only suffering, its path indiscriminate of blood.

He didn't even need to look at Hermione to know she felt it too: the churn in his gut, the bone-deep ache of betrayal and recognition, the helpless fury of watching his housemates crumble beneath the weight of a lie he himself had believed for too long. She moved beside him, just close enough for her shoulder to brush his. He bit the side of his cheek, struggling to get his occlumency under control.

Mercifully—or perhaps disastrously, depending on how one looked at it—Ernie Macmillan interrupted Draco's thoughts, face shining with the self-seriousness of someone who believed themselves intellectually superior. "Well, I, for one, am of accord!" He cried. There was some tittering from the crowd. "I mean, really," Ernie continued, already blushing but forging ahead. "While some might find you personally quite disagreeable, Parkinson, I certainly am no determinist! I believe we make our own fates, and thus, I am prepared to defend your right to endanger yourself alongside the rest of us!"

Draco fought the urge to cover his face.

Pansy tilted her head, her tone acerbic. "Sit *down*, Macmillan," she hissed, but Draco couldn't help but note she looked a bit pleased.

"Ernie's right," Neville Longbottom cleared his throat, raising his voice so that the whole hall could hear. "Pansy deserves a choice. She's been risking her life for the D.A., and even if she hadn't—even if she was terrified and just trying to keep her head down and survive—no one should be punished for being afraid. Bravery isn't a prerequisite for goodness. We can't blame anyone for who their parents are, or for what house they were sorted into at age eleven, or if they freeze when someone else would fight." He looked around, his expression hard and measured. "If Pansy—or any of the others—wants to stay and help, I say we let them. There's more than one way to be a part of this resistance."

Pansy looked stunned—not the theatrical, eye-rolling mask of shock she usually wore when confronted with earnestness—but genuinely surprised, as if she'd never expected to be so well understood. Then, without warning, she lunged forward and grabbed two fistfuls of Neville Longbottom's robes, before kissing him squarely on the mouth.

For a moment, Longbottom froze in surprise before kissing her back furiously, thick arms circling the backs of her thighs with astonishing ease as he lifted her off her feet, obliterating their height difference with a single swoop. Her legs went around his waist as her hands found the curve of his neck, fingers tangling in the damp ends of his singed hair. Laughter erupted in the hall, half-appalled, half-thrilled. Someone in the crowd wolf-whistled.

“Miss Parkinson, that is quite enough—put her down this instant, Mr, Longbottom! This is a *school*, not a Knockturn Alley brothel!” McGonagall cried, as the couple broke apart. Neville gently set Pansy down, flushed and grinning. Pansy adjusted her robes, looking very much like a cat with a canary in its jaws, clearly unrepentant. “You’ve made your point, there’s no need for—” The Headmistress cleared her throat, flustered. “All those willing and of age may stay. The rest will leave under guard, *without exception*.”

“You made me out to be so terribly selfless,” Pansy murmured in Neville’s direction, as students began to file out of the hall, many looking back over their shoulders in scandalized glee. “People might start thinking I’ve gone soft.”

Neville’s gaze didn’t waver. “No one who’s ever met you would make that mistake, Pansy. You’re about as soft as—” He dropped his voice and Pansy’s cheeks flared scarlet.

Draco made a small but pointed noise of disgust.

“Oh, stop,” Hermione said, smirking from beside him. “You’ve no room to talk, Draco ‘Forever Marking My Territory’ Malfoy.”



“The curse of a fit witch,” he replied weakly, trying to bury the heaviness that threatened to crush him every time he looked at her.

They had just about finished the evacuations, younger students led to the floo by the prefects as Professors barked orders to the stragglers, when the Great Hall’s massive doors opened with a crash, revealing none other than Ginny Weasley, in all her rambunctious glory. She was flushed and windswept, with her plait half-undone and cloak incorrectly fastened around one shoulder.

“I’m back, you tossers!” she called, tossing her fiery hair over one shoulder with a smirk. “Miss me?”

Her uncouth announcement landed like a spark in dry grass. Suddenly, there was whooping and hollering; Potter, charging towards her, with Ronald hot on his heels. Hermione flew from Draco’s side, and then, there were squeals of delight as the youngest Weasley tried to catch her breath amongst the piles of embraces—

“— Mum’s on her way with Andromeda. Muriel, too, if you can believe it, Ron! Aberforth’s letting people use the Floo—he’s in a foul mood. Merlin’s bollocks, I can’t believe you lot are *alive*—”

More newcomers emerged behind her: the Weasley twins, both grinning like lunatics. “Room for two more disasters?” One of them called. “Wait, make that five. No—seven.”

“Eight,” Bill corrected, sweeping in after them with another two Weasley brothers on his heels, one of them covered in scorch marks, and the other wearing a pair of horn rimmed spectacles. Behind followed a number of former aurors—most of them recent Hogwarts graduates— including Nymphadora Tonks, her cropped hair a furious shade of red.

“Wotcher, Malfoy,” she called, giving him the two finger salute. Her voice was hoarse, but still familiar beneath the sandpaper of grief. Draco let out a breath he hadn’t realized he’d been holding.

Gasps echoed across the room, a ripple of joy and disbelief, as people jumped to their feet, knocking over chairs, tripping on benches. And then, as if hitting the crescendo, none other than Lavender Brown barreled through the doors like a one-woman cavalry, wild blonde curls streaming behind her.

“RONALD!”

“Oh, my giddy aunt,” Ron breathed, the only words he could manage before she collided with him full-force, sending them toppling to the floor in a way that was decidedly indecent for public display.

The Great Hall burst into a hive of noise, every corner brimming with laughter pitched just slightly too high, back slapping, tears and tight embraces, everyone trying to explain their recent whereabouts over the noise. Draco found himself caught up in the Gryffindor trio’s reunions, reluctant to leave Hermione’s side amidst the chaos.

Ginny Weasley was alternating swatting Potter hard on the shoulder and kissing his neck. “You *absolute* arse. You couldn’t have sent a single word? We thought you were—”

Meanwhile, Hermione was wiping her face with the hem of Draco’s cloak. “I was so worried. What have you—how—where?”

“Hermione Granger, speechless?” Ginny laughed brightly, pulling away from Potter. “Never thought I’d see the day.” She turned to him, looking unimpressed. “Hullo Malfoy,” she said, like she’d been expecting him. “Still skulking about, I see.”

Draco raised a brow, having expected the usual volley of accusations. “Not surprised to see me, Weasley?”

Ginny rolled her eyes magnificently. “Oh, come off it. *Everyone* knew you fancied Hermione. Even *Harry* picked up on it—no offence, love—I mean, the glowering? The dramatics? You followed her around like a bloody Victorian ghost. Like that dopey bloke from the book she fancies, Rochambeau—”

“Rochester,” Hermione corrected weakly.

“We’ve been moving muggleborns since November,” Lavender was explaining simultaneously, having finally scrambled off a stunned looking Ron. “After you lot fucked off after the Battle of the Burrow— thanks very much for *that*, by the way— I ended up at Muriel’s safe house with Ginny and her mum. Absolute *cow*, your great aunt. To be fair, it did give us the idea that there were other wizarding families who could afford to hide a couple of muggleborns inside their wards —”

Both girls started talking over each other very quickly in their rush to explain.

“Lav made contact with this widowed squib who runs an inn on the outskirts of Tintagel. She boarded a couple of first years in an unused attic, set warded tiles in the fireplace to mute the noise—”

“—We wrote inquiries in lemon juice and owled them inside of lingerie catalogues, Fleur helped with that—” Lavender added, beaming at Hermione, who inexplicably blushed further. “Each safe house had a signal—an empty birdcage in the window, or a string of blue beads over the door, that sort of thing—like in *Nancy Drew*!”

“Had quite a few basements and false cupboards going,” Ginny explained. “One girl was stuck in the hayloft of a centaur’s barn for a fortnight—made it out alive though, bless her—”

What they were describing was not rebellion in the way people liked to imagine it; there were no grand speeches or duels in the street. What Ginny Weasley and Lavender Brown had accomplished was quieter and *much* more dangerous, running a hidden network of boarding houses connecting muggleborns with sympathizers. Draco watched as Hermione stood before them listening, her molasses-dark eyes gone wide and glossy. Her expression took on a strange sort of wonder, like she hadn’t expected anyone else to care about such things as much as she did, like she’d carried the weight of the muggleborn existence alone for so long, that she’d forgotten other

hands could hold it too. He saw the stunned pride softening her features: these were the girls she must have grown up with, laughed with, gotten into tiffs with over shower schedules. Girls who had built an underground sanctuary from nothing but their bare refusal to let the world end quietly.

“Blimey, Lavender,” Wealsey said, shaking his head with a lopsided grin. “Turns out you’re bloody brilliant.”

“Of course, she’s brilliant,” Hermione barked, looking equal parts furious and proud. “Everyone knows that, Ron.” And before Lavender could offer a retort, she crossed the short distance between them and pulled the blonde girl into a fierce, albeit awkward, hug.

“There, there,” Lavender patted her on the back, bemused. “Is that pond scum on your clothes? Mercy me, ever heard of a *scourgify*?”

Hermione gave a watery laugh and pulled back. “Sorry. It’s just—what you did was extraordinary.”

“Well, babe, someone had to keep the revolution stylish.” Lavender tossed her hair like she’d just stepped off the cover of *Witch Weekly*. “I mean, you lot were out there doing—” She narrowed her eyes. “Hang on, what exactly *were* you doing?”

Potter stepped forward as the joy of the unexpected reunion slipped from his face. Draco found it very hard to meet his eyes. “About that,” Potter said, addressing the other three, his voice stripped of any boyish timbre. “I know which *you-know-what* is left. The Grey Lady told me. It’s Ravenclaw’s diadem.” He used his wand to conjure a shape out of mist: a silver tiara, embedded with sapphires. “She said I’d find it where one finds all hidden things, whatever the hell that means.”

“But that could be anywhere,” Ron cried, aghast. “What are we supposed to do, root through every sock drawer, digging under some third year’s naughty magazines?”

“Stop panicking. We’ll use a process of elimination,” Hermione insisted, eyes gone distant as she undoubtedly began to compose lists in her head. “What hiding spots are we aware of around the castle?”

“The third floor corridor, where we found the Stone?”

“Damaged beyond repair,” Ron said, waving the idea away. “The Forbidden Forest?”

“Too many variables, too many sentient creatures.”

Where did one go to hide something they didn’t ever want found? Oddly enough, Draco had found himself in that very dilemma nearly two years ago, with a cursed necklace in his school bag: Theo’s first of many stupid ideas to take down the Headmaster. He remembered the dust and the shadows as he hurried along stacks of forgotten things, looking for somewhere to stow it before he could be caught. Climbing over upturned desks, rotting cauldrons, dilapidated brooms. A gutted grandfather clock leaking sand. He’d draped the necklace over a broken bust fitted with an outlandish wig and a glittering silver tiara—

His body reacted before his mind did: a tight, invisible fist closing around his heart. In that moment, standing in the hall surrounded by people who’d never trusted him, Draco Malfoy realized the final link in this war—the connecting thread that might tip everything—ran directly through a mistake he’d made in a moment of cowardice. Stowing the necklace had been easier than facing Snape, easier than admitting what he and Theo had nearly unleashed. He hadn’t wanted the trouble, not when so many other things were going wrong—his cursed Mark and his betrayal, the Granger of it all. Merlin, how he hated that version of himself. The boy who’d thought surviving meant cutting corners and burying the evidence. The boy who hadn’t had the spine to destroy the thing he feared, who had just enough cowardice to hope someone else might.

"I know where it is," he said aloud, in a voice that didn't sound like his own. "Come on—"

But before he could finish his command, Draco's voice was eclipsed by a sound not human, yet unmistakably speaking. The hall was collectively forced into silence, thick and unnatural. Then, a voice without clear origin entered the Great Hall, echoing from every rafter. As if it had always been there, pressed into the mortar of the castle's walls. Coming from inside him, originating in his marrow, lancing through his scars: he had heard it murmured an inch from his ear, in a room where he screamed and wept and called for his mother, begging for the pain to stop. He heard it when he woke with phantom burns across his arms, breathless from pain that no longer existed.

"I see you are preparing for resistance," the voice said, smooth and serpentine. It slid through the room's tentative hope and coiled there, choking the life from it. "A valiant effort."

Gasps broke across the Hall. The torches guttered, as if the very air had recoiled.

"But your efforts are in vain," the voice went on, indulgent now, almost fond— *come now, Draco, it's only a mudblood, do it for your poor mother* — "There is no fortress you can erect, no spell you can cast that will shield you from my armies. Even so, I hold no desire to waste the progeny of Hogwarts, all the precious magical talent that elevates us above the filth and rabble. You need not suffer, dear ones. Offer me Harry Potter, and you shall be spared. Give me the boy, and I shall leave your lives intact. Give me the boy, and you shall be rewarded beyond your imagination. You have one hour to respond to my demands. After that...I am afraid you will have no recourse but to drown in the abundance of spilled blood."

Then the voice was gone and the silence broke and all eyes were on Potter, standing among them like a statue not yet toppled. Just a boy, dirty and sweaty and devastatingly real, with a fresh target blooming between his shoulder blades, and another that only Draco

could see, stamped on his very heart. Every face turned toward Harry—except Hermione, who turned toward *him*.

Draco could feel her eyes on him, feel the weight of it, the unspoken question: *what now?*

---

---

[Come chit chat with me on Tumblr! I adore answering any and all writing questions](#)

- This chapter is subtly about Draco's moral crucible: his past cowardice (e.g., hiding the cursed necklace) is juxtaposed with his current integrity (shouldering Snape's terrible secret). His thematic journey is deeply based on ideas of memory/legacy: Snape's vial, Draco's earlier uses of the Pensieve, and the cursed necklace all highlight how the past shapes and haunts the present. Draco's memory of Snape's memory suggests layered narratives within narratives, and positions him as the reluctant chronicler of an archive of painful truth. (I'm writing my dissertation on Derrida, can you tell?)

- Yes, the memory in Snape's pensieve that Draco glimpsed was Snape trying to warn Lily and James and get them to run after he ratted about the prophecy. Like Draco, he was in a situation where he knew people were going to die and had to just watch as they did.

- Even amongst all this turmoil, some light: Parkbottom kiss! Height difference porn! Ernie being Ernie! Much more to come, but you know, time and place.

- You know I love writing female friendships. Flour's lingerie catalogue strikes again!

- I take it as a personal attack that AI uses an excess of em-dashes, and now I get comments about my em-dash use. The real ones who've been here since 2022 know that's MY thing!

- Getting VERY close to the end of Part II. Buckle up, it will be bumpy from here on out...See you shortly for Chapter 47: "No Battle Ever Won." Title comes from Faulkner: "Because no battle is ever won, he said. They are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools."

---



# No Battle Ever Won

## Chapter 47: No Battle Ever Won

---

CW: Wartime violence, minor character(s) death.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

Ancient boughs stood sentinel as intruders swept through the Forbidden Forest like a legion of the damned. Wizards in wrought silver masks, foot soldiers with gold in their teeth, gaunt wolves in human skin, and in a clearing at the edge of the treeline, a single gaunt silhouette, framed by the mist curling low across the underbrush, unnatural red gaze fixed in the direction of the castle that had for so long resisted him. Tonight, it would finally kneel.

Lord Voldemort's pale fingers curled lightly around his wand, *the* wand. A relic of an ancient, crueler alchemy. If there was one thing he knew, it was that power could not be given or conferred. It could only be claimed. *This* was the birthright that had once led him to these gates as an orphan, an unknowing descendent of Salazar Slytherin, so long ago. Fools like Dumbledore believed in good and evil, light and dark— a childish understanding of the world. The truth was simpler: there was that which endured, and that which did not.

The wand, the Deathstick, hungered for dominance. In his hand, it had found a master with no hesitation. Its magic had grown more obedient with time, more precise, but there was still a dissonance, a fracture in the wand's loyalty. He could feel it like spider threads laced under skin, fragile and gossamer-thin. The wand obeyed him, yes, but it obeyed him with the deference of a beast following rote commands, waiting for its true master's call.

“Wormtail,” he said. The clearing fell into a hush as a wretched, rodent-faced man scuttled forward, robes trailing mud. He knelt before him, wheezing from the exertion of his obedience.

“My Lord?”

“I fear there is a matter yet unresolved.” Lord Voldemort’s voice was soft, but its violence cut through the clearing like a scalpel. “The wand’s loyalty is still...uncertain. Its lineage must be clarified before the final engagement. There can be no ambiguity of allegiance.” His red eyes narrowed into slits. “I require Theodore Nott.”

“T-heodore Nott? Tiberius’ son? My lord—”

“Yes,” Voldemort said, soft and mocking. “Young, unremarkable Theodore Nott.”

The clearing seemed to bow to him, shadows lengthening beneath the weight of his displeasure. It was he who had struck the killing blow on the astronomy tower, while the Malfoy boy quivered. The boy had always lingered at the edge of Voldemort’s inner circle, like smoke curling under a locked door; his father, Tiberius Nott, was a man of conviction, one of the Dark Lord’s most loyal early followers. A true believer: he’d even offered up his wife in the service of blood purity, so that weakness would not be permitted to bloom in the family tree.

He was a zealot for the cause—of course, this mattered little, in terms of power. When Nott Sr. failed to retrieve the prophecy at the Department of Mysteries, Voldemort did not forgive. The punishment had been symbolic: to infect the boy was to gut the family’s legacy. Fenrir had made a show of it, tore into him under a blood moon, but unlike the weak, snivelling Malfoy whelp, the Nott boy did not, to Voldemort’s surprise, break. When the order came to kill Dumbledore, he obeyed. The Headmaster’s wand had not forgotten.

A simple correction, Lord Voldemort thought. The wind caught the hem of his cloak, rustling at the cusp of a world he would remake in

his image. So close now. Soon, magic itself would submit.

---

The Room of Hidden Things was a sentient archive, filled by what Hogwarts had been forced to obfuscate, but never forget. Objects towered over Draco's head in precarious monuments: teetering columns of shattered cabinets, exploded cauldrons, bloodstained trunks, and spell-shattered mirrors. Broken wands littered around surfaces like crushed insects. An out of tune harp plucked itself mournfully in the distance.

Hermione was muttering detection charms as they went, syllables like spilled beads. He could feel her heart through their bond, a trapped thing rattling its cage. The magic between them—old, accidental, half-formed in blood and fear—was loud and insistent; he tampered it down with his occlumency, lest she sense his despair.

Draco wondered if she would ever forgive him.

"How do you know where the crown is?" Potter muttered, raising his lit wand. He stepped over a shattered telescope, careful not to touch it.

"*Diadem*. Let's just say the night at the Astronomy tower wasn't the first time Nott tried to kill the headmaster," Draco said. "I intercepted one of his particularly harebrained schemes involving an antique necklace from Borgin and Burke's, supposed to curse the wearer beyond recognition. Coincidentally, Weasley foiled another by glugging down a flagon of poisoned mead."

"That's who sent me to the hospital wing?" Ron whispered angrily.

"That skinny git?"

"The very one."

After some wandering, they'd reached the pile where he had left the artifact, somehow swollen with more junk. The bust was there,

wearing the cursed necklace Draco had intercepted and hidden, and nestled on its crown, was the diadem, tipped slightly askew.

“The lost diadem of Ravenclaw,” Hermione breathed, stepping forward to marvel at the wrought silver. “Supposedly imbued with Rowena’s own enchantments: artificial clarity, mnemonic precision, enhancement of deductive reasoning. Centuries ahead of any improved cognition spells we have now. It’s—it’s practically alchemical.” She stopped herself with a sharp inhale, hands balled at her sides. “What I wouldn’t give to take it apart—”

“Let’s just stab the damn thing before it starts talking to us,” Ron grumbled, moving to remove it with his wand.

“Oi, Malfoy!”

All four figures whipped around, to find none other than Draco’s old henchman, Vincent Crabbe, stepping out from behind a stack of overturned desks with his wand fixed at the point between Draco’s eyes. Goyle flanked him: slower and dumber, built like a well-fed bear.

“Merlin’s taint,” Ron swore.

“Oh my days,” Crabbe said, grinning. His mouth was slick with spittle. “Look at this, G. All of them lined up like a little reunion.”

“Lose something, boys?” Draco asked, voice dipped in aristocratic venom. He stepped in front of Hermione, a motion that, regrettably, did not go unnoticed. “Or are you two oafs out for a late night lovers jaunt. I have to say, I always thought there was something there. Have you been playing rub and tug in the boys dormitory while I’ve been gone?”

“That’s rich, Draco.” Crabbe rolled his wand between thick fingers. “You’re the one who’s been rutting in the mud. We thought you’d kicked it, we did, but it turns out you’ve been sticking your cock in filth. Reckon you’d be better off dead.”

Weasley opened his mouth to retort, but Draco held up a hand. He knew how to handle them: lumbering with borrowed swagger, attempting menace like children wearing in their fathers' cloaks. Goyle puffed up like an inbred bull, Crabbe twitching with a pompous, put upon sort of glee—yes, he knew this performance. Violence, for the Slytherins, was never a private affair. It needed a stage. It needed an audience. He had once been the axis around which the whole thing revolved, their certainty and their excuse.

“I see the Carrows finally taught you to speak in complete sentences,” Draco drawled. “Have they finally managed what the Hogwarts faculty have been praying for the last seven years?”

Crabbe scowled, taking a step closer. “You think you’re clever because you know which bloody fork to use? That shite don’t matter anymore. Not when your name’s worth less than goblin piss.”

“I don’t see why manners should concern you, Crabbe. Your family was never even invited to the table.” Draco tilted his head, regarding Crabbe with the cold amusement of someone watching a man step deliberately into a noose. “Everyone knows the *help* eats in the kitchen.”

“Not for long,” Crabbe threatened, drunk on the illusion of leverage. “Soon, we bring the Dark Lord Potter's head and yours, too. The traitor and the Chosen One. We’ll be so rich, the Malfoys will look like paupers. Too bad there won't be any of your lot left to humiliate then.”

Goyle chuckled: a hideous, heavy sound, like something dragging through meat. “Might even let us take a turn with her. Figure we’ve earned us a bit o’ fun.” They guffawed, eyes fixed on Hermione. Draco saw it, the flicker of interest. Hunger masquerading as curiosity. It was the kind of gaze you learned at thirteen in the dungeons, from older boys and their terrible magazines. It was the look of someone wondering what a girl like Hermione Granger might sound like when she said no.

There were parts of him Draco thought he'd buried, instincts born not of love but of possession, base as wolves in winter. They stirred now, jaws clicking. He imagined the spellwork with obscene clarity: a hex to tear the ligaments in Goyle's shoulders. Another to collapse his throat like a paper straw. He saw arterial blood, heard the screams.

A pulse of warning came through the muted bond. *Stay still*, her magic screamed. *Don't be reactive. Don't be stupid*. He knew Hermione was right—they couldn't afford any more collateral damage, couldn't afford to lose what they'd come all this way for. But the illogical side of him didn't care. This was an important reminder: Draco was not a good man in the way, say, Neville Longbottom was. Not by intention, not by omission. He was not noble, not righteous. He was a Black. There was something molten in him, older than the name Malfoy and far less elegant. It uncurled in him when her hand brushed a shoulder that was not his, when another wizard's eyes lingered, their attentions obvious. This part of him—a part untouched by Occlumency or shame—howled at the suggestion that she might be anyone else's to have or hold or hurt. It wasn't love, not in the daylight sense the Gryffindors waxed poetic about. It was something darker, something with teeth. He would have killed Goyle on the spot if it wouldn't have cost him what little remained of her tolerance.

Draco shuttered his mind, drawing on the last of his occlumency stores. He viewed the two intruders with a veil of coldness, a veneer of disaffectation.

"Ah," he said softly. "You don't understand. That's alright. You've mistaken access for power. That is incorrect. Shall I remind you, where you truly belong?"

"You don't gotta remind us of shit, posh-o," Goyle growled. "We know things now. Dangerous things." His wand jerked toward Hermione and the air changed. "Like this— *Crucio*."

The curse hit Hermione like static, sharp and sudden. Behind her, Harry and Ron fanned out, wands raised instinctively to retaliate.

Then, she buckled over and made a sound that stopped Draco's heart cold. A slow, surprised chuckle.

"That's it?" she said, breathless but steady as she straightened her spine. "Merlin, I was under Bellatrix Lestrange's wand for hours. That feels like a tickling charm in comparison. You're not very good at that, are you? That makes this, I suppose, a teachable moment. If you're going to attempt another Unforgivable on me, dowsy to mean it this time."

Goyle sneered, knuckles whitening at the insult. "What's the matter, Granger? You want me to do it again?"

"No," Hermione said, chin high, radiating something so much more composed and threatening than fury. "I think a demonstration would be more effective in this case. *Imperio*."

The world all but stopped: Harry and Ron, with matching dropped jaws, were frozen in shock. Crabbe faltered, confused by the turn of events. Draco could only watch, fascinated, as the miracle of obedience took hold: Goyle's expression slackened, growing bleary-eyed as the curse took hold. There was no flicker of resistance. He was made for this: an empty house with doors flung wide open.

"Now. Pick up that necklace, will you, Goyle?" Her voice didn't change. She might have been instructing a student in Charms. "Rather fetching isn't it. Why don't you put it on?"

Draco's breath hitched, his hand twitching around his wand. Potter moved to stop her, but Draco put a hand out, blocking his intrusion. This was no longer their realm. It was hers.

Goyle's thick fingers moved toward the bust, forgoing the tiara for Theodore Nott's cursed necklace. The chain shimmered in the wandlight, gaudy and bright. He lifted it to his throat.

For a heartbeat, nothing. Then—

Goyle's body went rigid, the room filled with the wet sound of something rupturing deep inside him. His skin blistered, boiling over. Veins blackened as his eyes bulged and then burst, lips split. He dropped, twitching and screaming, until finally, what remained of him was still. Crabbe screamed at the sight, but didn't dare intervene

Hermione lowered her wand, cleared her throat. "Now. What have we learned?" She smiled, a quiet, poisonous thing. The kind of smile that belonged carved on a war goddess in a temple in Pompeii, lips curled in divine warning.

Draco looked at his girl, his terrible beauty, and felt something in him kneel.

"Jesus, Hermione." Potter breathed, breaking the spell. "You didn't even flinch."

She did not hesitate in her response. "I think I've flinched enough."

Crabbe staggered backward, his hands trembling, face stretched into something horrible.

"You killed him," he breathed, high and wild. "You—you made him—" Crabbe's wand snapped upward, fingers clenched too tight around the hilt. "You'll burn for this, mudblood. *I-Ignis Infernum.*"

A ball of light went howling from Crabbe's wand. Flame unfurled in spines and wings, in mouths and talons, in the shapes of monsters too old for memory. Everything was on fire: the towers of broken furniture groaned and collapsed, timbers snapping like ribs. Instantly, Crabbe was lost to the inferno, consumed by his own summoning.

"Draco!" Hermione's voice, sharp as a whip crack. "Move!"

Potter grabbed him by the elbow and dragged him away and Draco let himself be dragged, because the alternative was dying. Immediately, Hermione's fingers locked around his sleeve as shelves crumbled in waves. Together, they broke into a full sprint, he ducked



a falling grandfather clock, its brass hands frozen at midnight. A wardrobe exploded in sparks. The bust, the diadem—all gone in smoke. They ran until they reached the end of the stacks, where the ceiling had begun to blister and weep fire.

“Where—” Ron gasped, half-collapsing. “The door—”

The fire was everywhere. It came from all sides now, alive and starving, forming wolves made of pure heat, serpents with fangs of cinder, great birds of prey screeching down from the rafters. Wait, Draco thought, spying an incongruent movement, that wasn't a bird —

Above them, a sudden rush or broom-bristle and a voice dripping with familiar, lazy disdain.

“Merlin's tits, Draco! The fuck did you lot do this time?” Theodore Nott barked from overhead, dark curls plastered to his forehead with sweat. There was a new slash, bloody and fresh, along his cheekbone. He tossed a spare broom down like a lifeline, already yanking Potter and a panting Weasley onto the back of his. It dipped, groaning under the excess weight.

“What are you waiting for?” He shouted at Draco. “Aren't you supposed to be half-decent at this? Get in the air, you twat!”

Draco caught the handle; Granger was already there, climbing behind him without hesitation. They lifted just as the floor caved in behind them, and for a breathless, gravityless moment, they were only smoke and speed, shooting towards the room's only exit—

*I need a way out. I need a way out. Give me a way out.*

The door materialized, opened for them. Draco aimed for it like a knife hurled toward a target. He did not look back.

They landed hard in the corridor outside, the stone cool beneath their smoking clothes. The door behind them shuddered and

vanished into the wall, sealed like a tombstone. The fabled Room of Requirement, destroyed by one, stupid boy.

Draco felt the tremors in the walls, heard the sound of hexes colliding, the concussive pop of spellfire shattering stone. The deep, booming groan of moving walls, staircases folding and unfolding. A chandelier exploded two floors up, sending light and glass up in a glittering fountain of ruin.

It appeared the battle had started without them.

The floor vibrated again, lurching slightly to the left as the castle's foundations shifted, grinding like tectonic plates. Ron staggered to the window and peered through the crack in the charmed glass. His breath caught.

"Oh, fuck. They're everywhere," he muttered. "Giants. Dementors. Acromantulas. I think—shit, is that a banshee?"

"Front gates have been breached," Theo said without needing to look. "A pity."

"The diadem," Potter croaked in dismay. "It's stuck in there—"

"Didn't you read the bloody book?" Draco coughed in reply. "Fiendfyre is one of the only things that'll destroy it. Of course I didn't think anyone would be so stupid to use it, in an enclosed space—"

"Yes, well, Crabbe was always an idiot. That's nothing new. You lot would have been nothing but cinders if it weren't for my dabbling in heroics," Theo said, sounding far too smarmy for Draco's taste.

"Caught those dolts sneaking back onto the grounds, running their mouths about finding you. Luckily I had the foresight to follow them. That makes two rescue missions now, doesn't it, Draco."

Draco snorted. "What, you want a medal? Next time, try not cutting it so bloody close."

“Oh, stop whinging. You’re alive, aren’t you?” Theo shot back. “You always make it out, Malfoy. It’s your special talent. Like a cockroach.” He fixed his collar. “Anyway, that makes us even. For what happened to your aunt and uncle. My debt’s been repaid.”

“His debt? Fucking Slytherins,” Ron muttered. “Haven’t you lot ever heard of a simple apology?”

Theo winced, quickly recomposing himself, but Draco saw as he pressed his palm hard into his forearm, the place which, for Draco, held naught but an ugly scar.

Draco’s eyes narrowed. “What is it?”

Theo didn’t answer at first. His teeth were clenched, gaze unfocused. “What does he want?” Theo muttered, more to himself than anyone. His voice was tight, strangled between pain and dread. “I’ve done everything. I gave him names. I led him to the safe house. I burned the bridge behind me—”

Potter, of all people, was the one to answer. His face had changed, eyes black-rimmed. He was not entirely there. “He doesn’t care about that,” he said, touching his scar absently. “Not anymore. He just wants the wand. The Elder Wand...It used to be Dumbledore’s, but he thinks it’s yours now. That it’s chosen you.”

“That’s madness. I never touched the thing.”

“Doesn’t matter,” Harry said. “He thinks that the wand won’t answer him because of you.”

A tremor pulsed through the stones, closer this time. The wall at the far end of the corridor shuddered as something struck it from the other side. Then it exploded inward in a storm of splinters and dust. The battle had not bothered with waiting.

Figures poured through the breach: masked Death Eaters cloaked in shadow, curses already sizzling from their wands like storm-

lightning. One of them—tall, his voice cracking with delight—shouted “Look, it’s the mudblood! Avada Kedavra!”

Draco moved on instinct, wand slashing through the air in a silver arc. The spell struck the masked man mid-torso, hurling him backward into the rubble with a sickening crunch. Curses began ricocheting down the corridor like meteors, painting the air with green and crimson. Stone split, tapestries ignited. Screams were swallowed by the collapsing ceiling. In the chaos, he found Pansy firing off acid hexes, her cloak torn and hair singed. Beside her, Ernie Macmillan, hair perfectly parted even beneath the grime, fired defensive spells with textbook form; pulling up the rear of the ragtag group was Lavender Brown, eyes bright and alive.

Ernie gave a shallow bow even as he deflected a curse. “Watch yourself, Malfoy! Nasty bugger. Figured some reinforcements would be just the ticket to give you chaps a fighting chance, eh? I must say, it’s not very sporting, what these Death Eaters are up to—”

“Oh, shove off, MacMillan,” Draco muttered, flicking his wand to deflect a Blasting Curse. “Don’t you have something to be shoving up Boot’s arsehole?”

Ernie laughed, completely unaware of the distaste in his tone.

“You’re nearly as witty as our Pansy!”

The corridor convulsed with heat and light. A werewolf, half-shifted, barreled through the wall behind the advancing Death Eaters, fangs dripping, eyes wild. Lavender screamed; it was on her in a blink, claws raking through her chest and shoulder. Blood sprayed the stones. Theo charged the werewolf with a growl, bowling him over, as they began to fight like beasts on the corridor floor.

Weasley roared in dismay. Hermione dropped to her knees, hands shaking, trying to stanch the blood.

“Oh shite. T-This will scar—” Lavender moaned. Weasley made a choked sound, cradling her head.

“No,” Hermione cried. “You’ll be fine, everything will be fine— Lav, don’t close your eyes! You’re not going to sleep, stop that!”

“Not...sleeping. Just...” Lavender’s head lolled loosely in the cradle of Weasley’s arms. “...Getting m-my beauty rest.”

From beyond them, Draco watched as Theo pinned the werewolf, and ripped out his throat with his blunt, human teeth. Blood dripped down his chin and for a moment, Draco saw his friend as he looked on the full moon, wild and barbarous.

The corridor was smoke and screaming now, bodies moving through chaos like fragments in a hurricane. Draco fought his way to Hermione’s side, but MacMillan was faster, casting with the flourish of a boy raised on fencing manuals, each spell accompanied by his poncy commentary.

"A classic Cruciatus form—barbaric, but effective!" he called, deflecting the curse mid-air and sending back a retaliatory stunner that knocked the caster unconscious. "You know, the theory always favored the underhand grip—your way is very gauche."

A hex grazed Draco’s shoulder, tearing the fabric. He shot a barrage of stunners back. Behind him, Weasley and Hermione knelt beside Lavender, her palms growing slick with blood and she whispered spells.

“Vulnera Sanentur. Vulnera Sanentur! These wounds are laced with fresh venom. Why are they laced with fresh fucking venom?”

“Hermione,” Ron urged, a deranged look in his eyes. “Hermione, she’ll die if you don’t do something.”

“I’m trying!”

“Then do it!” Ron cried, his voice rough and desperate. “Fucking save her—”

There was another explosion. Draco dove to the side, stone clipping him heavily on the shoulder. He struggled up, his own heartbeat a hammer inside his ears. Ernie, sweating at the exertion of holding his shield charm over his fallen comrades on the floor, glanced Draco’s way. His last words were practically fated:

“Atta boy, Malfoy! For queen and castle—”

Then he dropped with a jet of green light as debris rained down.

“No!” Pansy’s voice tore through the noise. She moved toward him, but another wave of enemies surged in, cutting her off. Her face crumpled with grief. “MacMillan! MacMillan, get up you great ponce. Please get up!”

He did not get up.

It was all so horrible and nightmarish, the screaming and wailing and ricocheting spells. Blood dripped into Draco’s mouth from somewhere above his eye, hot and coppery. His vision blurred. Around him, the corridor pulsed like a dying lung, walls scorched and banners aflame. The air stank of iron and burnt flesh.

Hermione and Weasley were dragging someone’s prone form—Lavender covered in bright gurgling blood—toward the broken staircase. Theo was nowhere to be found. Hermione’s hair was wild, tangled and streaked with someone else’s blood. Her eyes locked on him across the ruin.

She was screaming something. A name. Not his.

“Harry! Get Harry and go!”

There was Potter: crumpled, wandless, chest rising too slowly, one leg at a sickening angle beneath him. His glasses were gone, and

his face looked oddly boyish, like in injury he'd been returned to a younger, more breakable version of himself. Draco's knees buckled, but he caught himself on the edge of a collapsed balustrade, fingers sinking into the rubble. He looked at Hermione again. She was holding Lavender's head now, shielding her from falling stones with her wand. She wasn't watching him anymore.

It felt physically impossible to leave her, like trying to sever muscle from tendon. The bond screamed, every tendril of magic insisting he go back to her, that he stay by her side. But if he didn't help Potter, they were all fucked—he had to help Potter, had to tell him—

A jet of crackling magic sent Draco lunging around the corner, dragging Potter's moaning form as he went. He stumbled until he found a forgotten servant's passageway, slick with dust and the scent of old bread, and shoved them through, letting the shadows close around them like a cloak.

Harry collapsed against the wall, gasping and semi-conscious. His leg was a ruin: bone pushing the skin out of shape, dark blood seeping through the seams of his trousers.

Draco crouched beside him, breathing hard, sweat stinging the throbbing cut above his brow.

"Hold still," he muttered. "*Ferula*." Bandages twisted from the tip of his wand, wrapping the broken leg in rough precision. "*Ossio Reparo*." The crack of bone mending made Harry twitch and moan.

"Dead," he breathed raggedly. "They're all dead."

"No, they're not," Draco snapped, tightened the wrappings. "Don't waste your energy moaning. Can you stand?"

Harry blinked at him, dazed, barely nodding. Draco helped him up, half-carrying him through the twisting servant's path, past sculleries and dumbwaiters, until finally—finally—they emerged into the upper hall behind the headmaster's gargoyle. The way was clear. The fight

hadn't reached this part of the castle yet. Draco gathered some of the blood from his temple and flicked it onto the gargoyle (Snape would have never bothered with something so inane as a password). The statue slid aside.

The Headmaster's office was untouched, a relic of a simpler time. Draco remembered sneering at Dumbledore from one side of the great desk, threatening his father's involvement. Dust motes drifted in golden shafts of light, falling gently on a small, sleeping bird, downy and half-formed, its feathers sticky with the business of becoming. That bloody phoenix, reformed once more, flaunting its immortality. It seemed to Draco in very poor taste.

The Pensieve sat on the desk, cool and still, like it had been waiting. Draco reached into his robes. His fingers closed around the vial. They'd reached the edge, the time to tell Potter the thing that would gut him.

"Take it," he said quietly, holding out the memory. "It's meant for you." Harry stared at him, something unreadable flickering behind his eyes.

"W-what are you on about, mate?"

"It's something Dumbledore meant for you to see. Once the rest of them were gone. And now, there's nothing but the snake. I reckon this is as close as we'll ever be."

"Dumbledore?" Harry looked bewildered.

Draco looked away, briefly. Outside of the tall windows, smoke curled above the battlements like dying breath.

"It's from Snape," he said finally. "He didn't trust anyone else—not the Order, not the Dark Lord, not even McGonagall. Only me. We were the same, in a way. Careful with our thoughts. Surrounded by people too stupid to understand why."



“Would you stop sermonizing about yourself and tell me what the fuck is going on?”

Draco pushed off the desk, walked past the Pensieve and the oil-drenched portraits of dead men who had all believed their leadership was necessary.

“You’re not meant to survive this,” he said flatly. “And I think you know that.”

Harry didn’t respond.

“Do you want me to say it? You are the Horcrux. You’ve been carrying him inside you since you were a baby, like rot beneath the floorboards. He thinks he can’t kill you, that the wand won’t obey him because of Theo, because of Dumbledore, because of some stupid prophecy— but it’s just you. It’s always been you.”

“Then what is the point of all of this?” Potter cried, grasping at tufts of his own hair and tugging. “The horcrux hunting and the Hallows... What was Dumbledore’s plan to save me?”

Draco gave a dry, humorless laugh. “There wasn’t one.” He looked around the office miserably. “Do you think any of this was built to save us? This school, this war, our fathers and masters—this place was designed to break us, Potter. To keep us docile until it was time to take us out to pasture.” He shook his head, so heavy on his aching neck. “You’ve been dying since the moment you got that mark on your forehead.”

Harry stared down at the vial. His voice was hoarse. “Why are you the one telling me this?”

Draco blinked, and his mask slipped, just a fraction.

“I don’t know. But for what it’s worth— I’m sorry, Potter. It shouldn’t have had to end this way. You never had a fair shot and for that, I am truly, genuinely sorry.”

Harry stared at the vial in his palm. It caught the light oddly, memory held in suspension.

"It's almost funny," he murmured. "That it's ended this way. With the two of us. Did you know you were the first wizard I ever met? Besides Hagrid, that is. That first day, in Diagon Alley, buying robes. It's almost funny, isn't it?"

"Yes," Draco replied. "Almost."

Harry looked up at him then, and something passed between them—an understanding. "I want you to take care of them," he said. "Hermione and Ron. Swear it."

Draco blinked. "Weasley?"

"Yes," Harry said firmly. "They're not ready to lose me."

Draco's throat felt thick, a knot rising where no grief had yet been admitted. He looked down at Harry Potter—the Boy Who Lived, the Boy Who Would Die—and saw not a rival, not a symbol, but a man, bruised and bleeding, doing the bravest thing Draco could imagine. Recent events notwithstanding, Draco had spent most of his life trying not to be a coward, failing in small, quiet ways. Choosing silence over rebellion. Family over conscience. Power over kindness. But Potter—Potter had always chosen right.

"I swear," he said. "On my name. On my house. I'll be there for them when they need me."

With that, Potter plunged his head into the Pensieve. When he emerged moments later, he didn't speak, just moved at the edge of the stairwell and stood there like he was waiting for the stone to give way, send him falling down into the bowels of the castle.

"I reckon it's time." He hesitated briefly. "Will you come with me?"

"What?"

Harry's jaw worked. "Just to the edge of the forest." And then, quieter, almost ashamed to say it aloud— "I need someone who'll keep me from turning around."

Draco's stomach turned. He stared at Potter, and in that instant, saw a mirror held crooked. They both knew he would do it, simply because Hermione would have never wanted to let Harry face it alone. He saw her now in his mind: a halo of diffuse curls, eyes the color of aged whiskey, the sort that made men flinch to imbibe, filling with tears as she learned of the news. She would've stood between Harry and death if she could have. She would've screamed and clawed and fought to the bitter end. But this—leading him to his slaughter—this was one thing she could not do, and so it fell to Draco.

He steadied himself with the memory of her, let it warm him for a moment, like flames from the hearth. And then he turned to Potter.

"Let's go," he said, voice raw. They went down the stairs together, one limping, one bleeding, both draped in Potter's cloak. Invisible as they made their way toward the end.

---

---

This chapter was drafted back when I was working on finals, so forgive all the analysis that it bred! And forgive me for the death of sweet, sweet Ernie. He truly deserved the world. [Come yell at me on Tumblr!](#)

- The two biggest losers at Hogwarts try their hand at kidnapping! Crabbe and Goyle's danger is real because power—especially toxic, masculine power—does not require intellect to be fatal. I wanted to use this section to critique the hierarchies and the rituals by which men (and teenage boys) maintain dominance (and boy, do they get theirs!)

-Hermione's retort to Goyle's attempted Cruciatus stands as a moment of radical inversion, in that I tried to destabilize conventional

moral binaries and resituate the locus of agency into her hands. In deploying the Imperius curse with unnerving ease, Hermione occupies a liminal space between resistance and retribution, wielding power as a corrective to reassert control over the narrative of victimhood surrounding her experience being tortured. This is not an instance of “eye for an eye” justice: Hermione’s act is not about indulging in violence, but about demonstrating the terms on which violence can be reappropriated (and remember, Hermione is a legilimens. In her POV, she heard whatever specifics of what Goyle wanted to do to her). In this moment, she ceases to function as moral compass to male protagonists (!) Her final—“What have we learned?”—works as both a fucked up sort of closure and ideological rupture: a critique of the gendered expectations traditionally imposed upon female characters in high fantasy. Hermione is no longer the voice of ethical moderation or maternal restraint: she is, instead, what theorist Sara Ahmed might call “a willful subject,” a figure whose refusal to obey the imperatives of gentleness or moral decorum operates as an act of political defiance.

-Unlike redemptive archetypes, Theo's arc is not one of moral absolution but of the struggle to reconstruct control. His werewolf condition, a mark of marginalization, becomes a form of embodied counter-power in the physical fight he gets into: a feral, ungoverned alternative to institutionalized magic. (But much, much more on this later...)

- The choice to have Draco accompany Harry to the forest reframes their relationship from adversarial archetypes to reluctant intimates shaped by shared disillusionment. No longer hero and foil, they become parallel subjects, both casualties of a system that commodified their identities for opposing ideologies. Draco’s final “Let’s go” is a gesture of solidarity: an acknowledgment that, in the end, only those broken by the same machinery can bear witness to each other’s position.

- Can you believe it's three more chapters until Part II comes to a close? I promise to heal whatever I break.

---



# Unbowed

## Chapter 48: Unbowed

---

To listen to this story, check out the audio version. [\[Podfic\] Smoke Signals by blue\\_keyboard\\_by\\_flightless\\_seagull](#)

And don't forget to [come chit chat with me on Tumblr!](#)

Previously, on Smoke Signals:

- Voldemort gathered his forces in the Forbidden Forest, fixated on resolving the Elder Wand's faltering loyalty, believing Theodore Nott, Dumbledore's killer, to be the true obstacle. In Chapter 31, we learn how Draco disarmed Nott after he used the killing curse so he wouldn't struggle with the aftereffects of using dark magic.
- In the Room of Hidden Things, Draco, Hermione, Harry, and Ron discovered Ravenclaw's diadem. Crabbe and Goyle confronted them, and Hermione cast the Imperius Curse on Goyle, forcing him to don a cursed necklace that killed him. Crabbe retaliated with Fiendfyre, destroying the diadem but also consuming himself. Theo appeared at the last moment, rescuing the group on brooms as the room collapsed in flames.
- Out in the castle, the Battle of Hogwarts erupted in chaos: giants, dementors, banshees, and Death Eaters pouring in through shattered walls. Pansy, Ernie Macmillan, and Lavender Brown fought alongside them; Lavender was mauled, Ernie was killed, and Theo revealed his werewolf savagery in combat (and learned, via Harry's visions, that Voldemort was looking for him).
- In the midst of carnage, Draco helped Harry to safety in the Headmaster's office, where he revealed Snape's final memory and the devastating truth: Harry himself is a Horcrux. Harry asked Draco

to swear to protect Hermione and Ron, then requested Draco accompany him to the edge of the Forest.

---

(See the end of the chapter for more notes.)

*“The public execution is to be understood not only as a judicial but also as a political ritual. It belongs, even in minor cases, to the ceremonies by which power is manifested.”*

—Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

\*

Draco moved through the scorched remains of the courtyard, invisible under Potter’s cloak, as the war raged on in brutal, unsentimental color. A man stumbled past them with no face, only muscle and bone slick with blood, eyes rolling wetly in his ruined skull. Behind him, a centaur screamed as a hex tore its legs from its torso. The stairs leading down from the battlements were slick with blood, leaking into the grooves of stone.

Every few steps they passed some new atrocity: a dark spell shot overhead, fizzling like a dying star. A wall where a human silhouette had been scorched in black, like someone had simply been vaporized on the spot. The mangled remains of a Snatcher, his intestines dragging behind like a wedding train. Draco killed him, silently, with a slicing hex to the throat. A mercy.

“We can’t stop,” he reminded Potter harshly, when the dark haired boy emitted a noise of distress, twitching in the direction of a seventh year Hufflepuff who was making himself an open target by sobbing into Professor Sinistra’s limp body. “We can’t bring anyone back.”

Seeing the extent of the destruction was both sobering and sickly familiar: at the onset of the war, back when he was still playing spy amongst the Dark Lord’s forces, Draco had occasionally been dragged into the thick of it. Potioneering alongside Snape did not

exclude him from the first raids, the purges, the quiet eliminations of minor Ministry officials and their families. He'd stood beside his father in drawing rooms gone dark, watching Avery burst a man's skull like overripe fruit. He remembered the house in Cornwall, burned down by the Lestranges with the family still inside. He remembered the way the youngest—a girl, barely Hogwarts age—had cried out just before the roof gave way. He remembered vomiting down his front. There had been the October massacres, a bloodbath in the underground wizarding resistance cells outside Glasgow. He'd walked the tunnels afterward, stepping over twitching limbs. Draco's job had been to search for survivors and dispatch them cleanly. He told himself he had to do it—to keep his cover, to keep Granger safe, to get his mother out alive—and he knew it was true, but truth offered him no comfort, truth would not keep his role in these events from haunting him for the remainder of his miserable life. And then, like a miracle—he'd spent the latter half of the war in attics and warded cottages, in overgrown woods and safehouses. Removed from the blood and the smoke and the bile.

*This* was what he'd evaded during the months on the run with the Gryffindors. Now, he was reminded: the ground, soft with bodies of the dead. Mud, blood, ichor, ash. He couldn't tell the difference anymore. It all smelled like rust and meat and wand-burnt ozone. Someone was screaming long, low wails of discovery, of someone finding a body they hadn't expected to lose.

This time it was Potter, who had to tug him away. Overhead, the moon was high and bloated, a wound in the sky.

When they finally reached the tree line near the Hogsmeade path, Draco shrugged off the invisibility cloak, handing it to Potter, who reached into the pocket and pulled out something small and golden. A snitch, weakly fluttering in his palm.

"I open at the close," he muttered, half to himself. He looked like hell. Dried blood crusted at his temple, his shirt torn and scorched in places, his leg in bandages. Injured and gawky, absurdly mortal. He



glanced up at Draco, something solemn in his eyes. “Can you tell Hermione something for me? Tell her, I figured it out.”

“Yeah,” Draco managed. “I’ll tell her.” There was nothing else to say.

Potter extended his hand. Draco took it. For a second he wasn’t watching a man walk to his own execution. He was eleven again, standing in a corridor on the first day of school, the world wide open in front of him, reaching out to shake the hand of a scrawny dark haired boy with broken glasses. How different, it all could have been.

The forest seemed to open for Potter with a kind of begrudging awe, the mist swallowing him inch by inch until he was only a shadow in the underbrush. He didn’t look back. And Draco—Draco, whose life had been shaped by turning away at the last moment, sparing himself the sight of the kill—found himself rooted to the spot, unable to move, unable to breathe, held there by the enormity of what it meant to bear witness. He thought of the boys they had been and the men they had become. He stood alone at the forest’s edge, the last person to ever see Harry Potter alive.

---

Limbs leadened, vision blurred. The castle, naught but a silhouette through the smoke. Red flares cut across the sky to the east. Someone calling for help, or perhaps surrendering. It was impossible to tell which anymore.

Draco stumbled through the chaos with a single imperative: he had to tell Hermione what he’d done, where Potter had gone. Before she saw the body.

He reached for her through the bond the way a drowning man might reach for light breaking across the waves, desperate and instinctive. The bond pulsed in distress; her magic, burning like a coal buried under snow. She was calling for him. For help.

Heart full of dread, Draco picked up into a run, ducking behind debris and, for one horrible moment, shielding himself with the still warm

body of a fallen soldier. He was halfway across the south lawn, moving towards the pulsing place the bond was taking him, when he heard voices and boots squelching through mud.

Draco dropped low behind the remnants of a stone angel whose face had been blasted clean off. One wrong move and he'd be another stain on the earth. The Death Eaters marched past just yards from where he crouched, moving with the confidence of men who knew the tide had turned in their favor.

"Heard they tried to hold the Astronomy Tower," one sneered. "Didn't even last ten minutes."

"Waste of time," a third muttered. "Better to burn the whole damn place down and be done with it— oi, what's that over there?"

There was a blasting curse, sending the remnant of the angel shattering. Draco moved on instinct, legs churning beneath him before his sluggish mind could catch up.

*Fuck.*

He doubled back, darted through a breach in the southern wall, boots skidding on bloodstained grass. He didn't look over his shoulder; to turn his head now would cost him seconds he didn't have. Behind him, a shout rose like a flare: "*There! Dissident! Dissident on the run!*" —and then the crackling hiss of Dark curses, splitting the night air like lightning shearing branches from trees.

He veered hard, moments away from catching a Blasting Curse to the side. Ducked and rolled like he'd been taught during Auror drills with his cousin: keeping a low center of gravity, zigzagging unpredictably, shielding only if he *had* to. Shields took a millisecond of time to materialize, and sometimes, that was all it took to catch a stunner between the eyes. Tonks had drilled this into him, standing in the clearing like some half-mad scarecrow, hair bleached to the color of bone and sticking out in all directions. Draco, panting in a puddle of snowmelt and his own humiliation, had squinted up at her from the

ground and thought—not for the first time—that Nymphadora Tonks was perhaps the worst possible cousin a disgraced ex-aristocrat could inherit.

Now, he was being forced to reconsider.

“Look at his hair— that's a *Malfoy*! Get him, Evenson!”

Spells tore past him. One caught the edge of his cloak and ignited it. He ripped it off without breaking stride, scanned the grounds desperately until— *there*. The Whomping Willow loomed ahead, its gnarled limbs twitching, roused by the spilling of blood. At its base, a curiously placed opening.

Draco dove.

He slid beneath the flailing branches, Quidditch instincts on overdrive as he dodged the trees thunderous blows. He dropped flat to the earth and rolled hard, shoulder-first, into the narrow crawlspace that gaped beneath the roots. A spell screamed past and struck the trunk just as he disappeared. Bark exploded above him, showering him in splinters.

Then, darkness. He lay in the tunnel's cold mouth, chest heaving, blood in his ears, heart galloping like it wanted out. Above him, the tree groaned and swung again, blindly, viciously, sealing the entrance in a net of impossible limbs. Draco lifted his wand, slowly, silently, and moved forward in a crouch. The tunnel narrowed before it opened again, yawning into the hollow chamber beneath the Shack. Just ahead in the dark, warped by the tunnel's strange acoustics, he heard a voice.

“I told you someone would come to finish me off—” A dragging sound followed, soft and awful, like something heavy being pulled across damp stone. A shallow breath, the rattle of it catching. “I told you, Granger—”

Draco froze. The hairs on the back of his neck stood to attention.

He could feel her before he saw her, the bond between them alight from sheer proximity. She was shaking, pale as candle wax, standing protectively over what looked like a pile of dirty robes. Her wand pointed directly between his eyes.

“What did you say before I left, that first night at the Second Son’s Estate?”

Draco’s heart clenched helplessly. Above them, an explosion echoed, sending gravel and a dusting of dirt down the passage’s walls.

“I said,” he replied. *“You have no idea what you’ve done to me.”*

“Merlin,” the voice from before groaned. “I wish he’d just fucking killed me. At least then, I wouldn’t have to listen to this.”

The pile of dirty robes twitched, and Hermione stepped aside. Half-collapsed against the tunnel wall, with one leg twisted beneath him and robes soaked through with something dark and glistening, was Theodore Nott. Slumped like a puppet with its strings cut. Sweat beaded at his temples; his dark hair lay plastered in wet curls against his forehead.

“You’re late, Draco.” He made a low wheezing sound that might have been a laugh. “Missed all the action.”

Draco dropped to his knees beside Theo’s limp form, heart thudding. “What happened?”

“I found him,” Hermione explained hoarsely, like she’d been screaming into a pillow. “By the boathouses. He was already like this. I didn’t know what to do—there was a clutter of acromantulas coming and they would have eaten him— so, I pulled him in here.”

Immediately, Draco began muttering spellwork under his breath, diagnostic charms, sealing incantations, tissue-knitting hexes. Nothing took: the skin hissed beneath his wand, puckering in refusal.

The blood kept coming. Sticky and dark and overwhelming, a scent that would haunt the creases of Draco's memory long after this was over.

"Cauterize, you bastard," Draco growled.

"It won't work," Hermione said, resting a shaking hand on his shoulder. "I tried every healing spell I know."

"I-It was the snake." Theo coughed, spitting blood into the dirt beside them. "The Dark Lord summoned me, like Potter said he would. He was convinced Dumbledore's stupid bloody wand wouldn't yield while I lived. I guess *this* was my reward for my continued loyalty."

"The venom should have killed him in minutes," Hermione added, low enough so that Theo would not hear. "But I think his magical regeneration is keeping him alive." Werewolves were infamously difficult to kill—where the snake's venom would have ended an average wizard in seconds, Theo could suffer for hours. His body would keep healing, magic regenerating, only to eventually succumb. "Bandages, countercurses, stabilizing charms—none of it takes."

"So what?"

Hermione fell silent, her eyes on the dirt floor. The answer was implicit. There was nothing to be done.

"It's alright, Draco," Theo rasped. "We knew how this would end. It was a fifty-fifty shot, wasn't it? Odds were, only one of us...would make it out...I'm glad it'll be you." He blinked, eyes glassy, and smiled in Draco's direction. "Now, we're even, eh?"

For a second, he was the boy from the Slytherin dormitories, from racing brooms on the Manor's grounds. The boy Draco had been pitted against since the cradle: who would be the better son, the more accomplished student, the favored soldier? They both knew the score was always running. Their fates, helplessly intertwined. Same year, same house, same pure bloodlines traced back to the

same dead empires. Theo, with his cool disdain and quiet smarts, flying under the radar until it was too late to see him coming. Always so different from Draco's loud mouth and vanity, the Malfoy name dragged behind him like a cape. Back then, Draco had always envied him, though he would rather have bitten his tongue bloody than admitted it. Even as children, Theo had done as he pleased: sneaking into the owlery after curfew, smoking contraband on the Quidditch stands, skipping lessons outright if he couldn't be bothered. Draco, son of Narcissa and Lucius, heir to ancient wealth and expectations, had been strangled by his surname from birth, choked with lessons in etiquette and posture, every meal a stage play, every word overheard, judged. Theo had been ungoverned, indifferent to consequence, free in a way Draco had never been.

He thought of Theo at thirteen, narrowing his eyes over a chessboard. Theo at sixteen, screaming in the dungeons after Draco confiscated the necklace, cursing his name. Theo in winter, in the common room, in the manor, on the pitch; Theo sneering, smirking, storming out; Theo throwing a punch, spitting a slur; Theo turning his back. Theo, in the clearing of Tonks House, eyes wild with the realization he'd betrayed Draco and his mother. A part of him that wondered if *this* was the prophecy the late Lady Nott had hinted at, all those months ago. *You'll watch over my son, Little Black*. If he'd be doomed to watch, as his oldest friend—the boy he'd hated and loved in equal proportion— choked out his last breath.

Well, *fuck that*.

Draco leaned forward, brushing sweat-damp curls from Theo's clammy forehead.

"Don't do that," Theo muttered weakly. "Makes it worse."

"Shut up," Draco replied. "Keep your eyes open, you hear me?"

"Draco," Hermione croaked. "Draco, what are you doing?"

Draco's hand shook, just slightly, as he pressed his palm gently to Theo's chest, the torn place where Nagini's fangs had punctured. He felt his frantic, broken pulse, a wild creature trapped and battering itself against the bars of a cage. Hermione's hand was still on his shoulder, grounding him, but her voice was far away, drowned out as he slipped into Theo's head.

*Stay inside*, Draco had begged his mother, so long ago. *Take the boat out until you can't see the shore. Stay far, far away.* He'd protected her body from the Cruciatus by freezing her mind in those seaborne dreamscapes of her youth, the dunes and shells and pebbles he'd seen when he brushed against her mental walls, each tiny object holding a memory, holding back the tides. He would lead her to the rowboat, and he would push her out, and she would leave her body behind.

There were no dunes in Theo's mind, no careful occlumency barriers like Narcissa's. When Draco concentrated, he brought them instead to sea spray and black cliffs, the North Sea in November, jagged and endless and white-capped, a place too barren to offer much comfort. In the distance, Nott Castle loomed like a sentinel on the bluff, its turrets stark and foreboding against a flat grey sky. Tied to the dock, a small, ugly skiff, the kind the fishermen used.

"That's yours," Draco said, his voice both in his throat and in Theo's mind. "You'll board it now. Let the waves take you out, alright?"

Theo laughed, a wet, ruined sound that turned into a cough. "You couldn't have managed anything nicer? A yacht, perhaps?"

"Get in," Draco said, firmer now. They were younger here, the boys from the Slytherin dormitories. Theo, limber and unscarred, pulled himself into the boat and looked back once. His mouth opened like he might say something cruel, some half-formed insult to hide how frightened he was, but then he closed it. He lay back against the planks and his eyes slid shut.

Draco pushed the vessel from the shore and the waves seized it eagerly, reclaiming what was once theirs. Out past the breakers, into the fog. Smaller, smaller, until it was gone.

When he opened his eyes again, he was in the tunnel, sweat dripping from his brow. Hermione was staring at him, stricken.

"He's not gone," Draco explained hoarsely. "Not yet. He's just...at sea."

The words sounded childish to his own ears, thin and inadequate against the reality in front of him: Theo's limp body, his blood already cooling into the dirt as his mind drifted off into a subconscious state, caught and released by the black waves around Nott Castle, the ruin on the cliff.

Hermione's hand trembled against his arm. "And will he come back?"

Draco looked down at Theo's slack face. Measuref the thin pulse still fluttering beneath his ribs like a moth rutting against a window.

"I don't know."

Hermione's throat hitched in a sob. There was no love lost between her and Theodore Nott. Still, she wept in recognition of what the war had done, of what it had made out of boys she'd once passed in corridors, rivals and shadows, loudmouthed and cruel and very much alive. Left to die in the dirt like animals. It was unbearable.

Hermione bent forward and gently pressed her lips to Theo's forehead, her tears leaving streaks through the blood on his cheeks, and Draco had the sudden and sickening awareness that he envied Theo even in this: her tears, her forgiveness. Her hand, cleaning the dirt from his face. There was a chance that he would not receive the same acceptance, once she knew what he'd done.

He swallowed, and the taste of the sea filled his mouth.



Hermione lifted her head and looked at him. She looked so breakable in the dark, and yet she was still upright, still holding herself together. She asked him the thing he'd been dreading since he stood at the edge of the forest.

"Draco— where's Harry?"

The question like a knife slipped between his ribs. The image came unbidden: Potter's silhouette swallowed by the trees. Draco's hand tingled at the memory of their handshake, ridiculous and solemn, as if that had been binding.

"Potter...Potter was a horcrux."

She made a sound of horror, but he ploughed on.

"He's been one all along. I went with him to the edge of the forest. I made sure he wasn't alone, at the end. He told me to tell you—"

"You just...let him sacrifice himself?" She cried. "Without telling me, without looking for another way—" She wrenched herself away from him.

"You know there was no other way."

"How *could* you?"

Her face crumpled, and in that moment Draco wanted nothing more than to tell her Harry was alive, that Harry was clever enough to survive anything, that Harry would walk back out of the trees any second now. But for once, he couldn't bring himself to lie.

---

The summons came like a rupture in the air, like the world itself cracking open. A sound that arrived in the bones first and only later resolved into words. A voice, everywhere and nowhere at once: *come, come and see, come and bow, come and be finished.*

Draco and Hermione stumbled out of the tunnel mouth into the half-light, the smoke still lifting off the ruined stones. She could not bring herself to look at him; instead, she glazed blankly at the battlefield, the pyres stacked high, flames crackling in the pale April—or was it May, now? How long had they been fighting?—light. The air stank of charred flesh, ash curling over the grounds in thick ribbons that stung the eyes. The other survivors stood in huddled masses, faces turned from the putrid smoke. Aurors in scorched robes, professors their mouths set. Pansy and Longbottom and Weasley, the blank look of the melee on their faces, ghosts of their former selves.

Draco joined them, lost amongst the ranks, filled with a hollowness he could not name. He had wanted once to be apart from the masses, to be marked different, purer, inherently better. But here, they all were the same, reduced to the raw edges of survival. All of them pulled onto the lawn by something greater than obedience, the pull of spectacle.

Before them on a conjured dais, Voldemort stood with the Death Eaters behind him a murder of carrion crows. Before him the body, displayed with a cruelty so stark it almost masqueraded as reverence: Harry Potter borne in Hagrid's arms, hair matted with forest dirt, form emptied of tension. Glasses slammed hastily on his face.

"Your champion is dead." The voice was as he remembered it: to hear Lord Voldemort speak was to feel him in the body. The tightening of Draco's chest, the sting in the nerves that braced for the cruciatus, the taste of iron on his bitten tongue. "The boy who lives no longer. Lay down your arms, bow before me, and you may yet be spared."

Hagrid's shoulders began to shudder as his form was wracked with sobs. The Death Eaters' laughter rose, triumph sharpened by the rusty blade of cruelty. Draco heard the first notes of mourning rise from the others: Weasley moaned, fist to his mouth, *Harry, no, no, no* — McGonagall collapsed to her knees in the mud. Beside him Hermione stiffened, but made no sound. Through the bond Draco felt

the sight hit her. Something wilder than grief and far darker, a rage boiling up from the deepest part of her. It hit him like a hot iron brand, sudden and searing, his vision sparking at the edges. The dark magic that had been accumulating in her roiled through the tether between them until Draco's knees nearly buckled. He gritted his teeth in an attempt to corral it, to throw a glittering net of protection over her mind. She shrugged it off like a shawl. Above them, storm clouds began to gather.

For a moment it was easy, too easy, to believe it was over, that the war had collapsed into silence, that what Voldemort said was true—that the boy was finished and with him the last of their fight, that nothing remained but surrender. And yet—even as he stood there among the wreckage, Hermione's rage filling his chest, Theo's blood still tacky on his hands—Draco felt it. Resistance, cold as ice and twice as hard in his heart.

Voldemort, triumphant, was still speaking, his arms spread in a parody of benediction. His snake wound around his shoulders like some kind of perverse, serpentine stole.

"Bow now, bow to me, or suffer his fate. Who amongst you will be the first?"

The crowd shivered like grass in a poisoned wind, waiting. In another life, it would have been easy to surrender. He was exhausted, blood-soaked, and hollow. His own name would have functioned as an offering: *Malfoy*. Perhaps he'd be spared a brutal and public execution, if he bowed, like his father once had. Even now, Lucius stood among the Death Eaters at Voldemort's side with the posture of a man who had bent too long and could no longer straighten. His once-perfect robes charred, hair lank and unkempt, eyes glassy with devotion or terror (did it matter anymore?). Something in Draco curdled at the sight. A lifetime of lessons in superiority, of bloodlines and legacy and taste, shriveled into an image of utter servitude.

In this life, Draco reminded himself, Voldemort could call, command until his voice cracked the sky, but there was no leash on Draco now,

no Mark on his forearm to drag him forward. That bond had been burned out a long time ago, servitude away by Hermione's magic. He felt it pulsing through him even now, warm and inexorable, pushing him forward until he had pushed his way through the crowd.

"Stop it," Hermione cried, lunging for his sleeve. "Don't do it, Draco —"

He pulled away, locking eyes with Ronald Weasley. "Don't let her get herself killed, alright mate?"

He didn't allow himself to look back as she struggled in Ron's hold, and he made his way to the no man's land between both crowds. He stood before the dais, lifting his head to cries of shock and alarm.

Lord Voldemort's eyes flickered with amusement. His father did not so much as twitch.

"Draco Malfoy," The Dark Lord hissed. "Back from the dead. Have you come to stand amongst the victors?"

Then, Draco did something very stupid. He laughed.

"You call this victory?" His lips twisted with amusement at the sounds of shock. "Potter's body paraded like a prize unicorn pelt? Your Death Eaters sporting losses in the hundreds, and to whom? A disorganized phalanx of school children? *This* is your demonstration of might? It's a bit...provincial, isn't it."

"*Silence!*" The Dark Lord aimed a silencing charm in his direction, but, as ever, Draco had more to say.

"I'm afraid you'll find you cannot command me anymore, Tom." He lifted his chin. "In fact, you never could. Even as I sat at your tables, nodded at your sermons, I was ferrying every secret to the other side. My death, like my loyalty, was a fallacy you accepted without question. Every time you plunged into my mind, you saw a fabrication of my own making, and you never thought to question it.

My mother taught me how to lie to your face— you always overlooked her, didn't you? Weak, fragile Narcissa Malfoy. Your mistake.” He shrugged up his robe’s sleeve and bared his forearm, pale and pink where the Mark had once writhed. “Your mind magic, thwarted by the talents of a housewife. Your Mark, broken in a ritual beyond your comprehension, severed by someone far more powerful than you can ever dream of being.”

The Death Eaters hissed in disquiet, their eyes darting to the clean expanse of his arm, as though its bareness were more obscene than the snake and skull had ever been. Voldemort’s expression did not shift, but his voice dropped, soft and dangerous.

“And who might this great and powerful wizard be? Albus Dumbledore? I’ve bested the old fool many times over.”

“Dumbledore?” Draco laughed, again. “Heavens, no.” And then, with deliberate rebellion, he turned his head toward Hermione — who stood pale and rigid, held back by Weasley’s straining forearms — and added, almost lazily, “It was a muggleborn. She broke your Mark, freed me from your servitude as though cutting string from a kite. That’s how fragile you are, Riddle. Your bond, undone by a schoolgirl.”

“You pontificate on your own supposed triumphs, but your absence was hardly noticed amongst my ranks. What conceivable use have I for a boy like you, Draco Malfoy?” Voldemort’s voice uncoiled, carrying over the ruined courtyard. “I, who command legions. I, who stand enthroned at the summit of wizardkind with an army at my back. I, who wield not merely a wand, but *the* wand — the most ancient, the most puissant, the most inexorable instrument of magic the world has ever known. Tell me, what could a child of mediocre pedigree offer me, when I hold in my hand the destiny of all creation?”

Draco’s laugh was low, brittle, almost weary in its elegance. “An army,” he repeated, as though testing the word and finding it hollow. “Is that what you call it? Do you imagine I don’t recognize them? I

was one. I know their looks of terror. I know the sound of the leash when it pulls tight. You command not legions but conscripts. Their loyalty will last only as long as their pockets are lined with stolen gold. When that runs out, well...they're your reflection, Riddle. Pitiful, counterfeit. Gone when the going gets tough. And as for your so-called prize—the 'most puissant wand in the world' can't even hold a silencing charm, can it? You tried to gain control from Theodore Nott, but you got that wrong as well. *I* disarmed Theo, on the astronomy tower. It wasn't him. It was me. It was always *me*."

Draco raised his chin, pale throat gleaming in the firelight, and smiled. "So yes, you have an army, and you have a wand. But both are borrowed, and you, Tom Riddle, are nothing more than fraud made flesh."

Voldemort's amusement curdled into rage, marble disdain gone in the face of Draco's insolence. He raised the Elder Wand.

"Your wand, is it? Not for long. *Crucio!*"

Hermione screamed.

Draco's shield charm snapped up, silver and sharp, but his magic was unsteady and drained and it buckled under the onslaught. The ground beneath him split, stone shards spitting skyward. He fought the burst of pain, staggered upright, only for another curse to strike, green fire tearing across the air, shattering his wand in a burst of splinters.

The Dark Lord's face stretched in something close to rapture. "You dare stand against me, *boy*? Against Lord Voldemort? I will flay you, bone from marrow, and feed what remains to my serpent!"

Wandless, Draco was forced to his knees. He could hear others fighting to break the holding spell: the crowd's murmurs swelling, Hermione chanting, *Draco, get up, get up!* He could only watch as Nagini uncoiled from around the Dark Lord's shoulders with a wet

hiss, her body thick as a man's torso. She slid across the stones toward Draco, jaws yawning wide.

Draco, pressed back, his breath ragged, as he looked around for something, anything. A stone, a stick, a— was that a *phoenix*? The bird cut the night, swooping overhead. From its beak dropped a battered old hat, tumbling end over end until it landed in the churned mud at Draco's feet. The Sorting Hat.

*Ridiculous*, he thought. *Utterly absurd*. From the hat's ragged brim, steel emerged: silver studded with rubies, its edge bright and hungry for blood. His inheritance from Albus Dumbledore, the old crackpot himself. The Sword of Gryffindor, returned to Draco at last.

Nagini lunged, body whipping forward in a rush of coiled muscle, just as Draco lurched forward and seized the hilt, the sword near weightless in his grip as he swung. The blade sang as it cut through scale and sinew, and the serpent's head fell with a wet, decisive thud, venom spilling black onto the stones. The body convulsed, great coils lashing in death-throes, and then, finally it went still.

The courtyard erupted in cries of horror from the Death Eaters, triumph from the survivors. They broke his hold, charging the space between armies, as Voldemort screamed, clutching his chest, the wound in him sudden and fathomless. His last horcrux lay twitching headless at Draco Malfoy's feet.

Draco lowered the sword, blood and venom steaming off its edge. He looked up, met his father's horrified gaze, and grinned crookedly.

"Your pet seems indisposed, Riddle."

A blast of pure fury threw Draco to the ground, and then, Voldemort's face, alabaster, and hideous, loomed above him; the Elder Wand was already rising again, and Draco—bloodied, wandless, swaying on his feet— had nothing left to offer but his body. His cleverness had purchased him a handful of breaths, no more. He filled his lungs, his last moments, with her. Hermione. The sound of her haughty

laughter during their shared detentions, when she'd stay out past curfew, sparring with him. Her body at the Christmas party, caressed by candlelight, every line of her brighter, sharper, more devastating in acromantula silk. The way her breath had caught when he'd pushed inside her for the first time, her nails dragging helpless crescents into his shoulders. Her face, filthy and bloodstreaked, as they fought invaders in the clearing with desperate, graceless ferocity. The tangle of her hair against his chest in a tiny seaside cottage. Her eyes narrowed and determined, as she set fire to her childhood home, the flames reflecting in her warm brown irises.

He clung to those details as the wand leveled at him, as green fire gathered at its tip. They were absurdly small things, private things, but they were his. The sword of Gryffindor trembled in his bleeding hands, and he thought — with the last ounce of selfishness left in him — that if he was to die here, he wanted to feel her with him, across the bond. To know he had stood, unbowed, hers entirely.

When he closed his eyes, he wasn't on the battlefield anymore. He was nineteen and helplessly alive, with Hermione's lips parting beneath his, her legs wrapped around his waist, pulling him impossibly closer, *her, her, her* —

The last thing he saw was Harry Potter, blinking into view from beyond the dead, wand in hand. Here, Draco supposed, to ferry him from this life, into the next.

---

- \*deep breath\* Theo's boat scene was maybe the saddest for me to write of the whole book. These two boys have spent their whole lives side-eyeing each other across chessboards, Quidditch stands, and family functions. Of course, Draco is the one who has to ferry him, pushing him off into a North Sea dreamscape to an uncertain fate... (Of course, Hermione is the one who drags Theo out of the mud, who refuses to let him be eaten alive by acromantulas. She has no reason to love or pity Theodore Nott, but she insists on his survival



anyway: in this story, Hermione's ethic has always been brutal mercy.)

- I knew from early on that I wanted Draco to see Lucius beside Voldemort at the final battle, and for that to be his ultimate trigger. Thematically, this is the culmination of a long arc: Draco rejecting the Malfoy legacy of bowing. He steps forward, not with, say, Neville Longbottom's Gryffindor courage but with Slytherin drama and calculation, mocking Voldemort's theatrics (and referencing his mother as a tiny vengeance!). Voldemort wants the crowd to perform submission, but Draco, instead, stages a counter-performance of his own. ("Provincial," he calls Voldemort's antics, like he's critiquing bad art at the Royal Academy).

- A common question: what wand is Draco using? His own was snapped at the raid on Tonks House: ever since, he's been using a loaner wand, provided to him at Shell Cottage, ten galleons to whoever guesses whose it is!

- A significant development in the relationship: Draco calls Ron "mate."

Two chapters left of Book Two! Thank you so much for all the kindness and care: this chapter was a tough one to write, and I went back and read your insightful encouraging comments so many times for motivation and strength. Can you believe we've surpassed 300,000 words together? I love you all.

---

# Back Through the Veil

## Chapter 49: Back Through the Veil

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

Draco Malfoy had never known when to stop.

Hermione knew this better than most. She remembered him at eleven: sharp-tongued and arrogant, calling Harry's name in the corridor like a challenge, blowing spitballs into her hair. By thirteen he had perfected the art of mockery, and if he couldn't best you in skill, he would grind you down via words (one, in particular: *mudblood*). She had hated him for that, hated the way his laughter filled every room, hated more the way she heard it when she was alone, replaying their scuffles in her head until her own retorts curdled on her tongue.

And then the war. That cursed afternoon in her childhood home. They had been thrown together like bits of kindling; she'd felt the relentless spark in him, his barbed words hiding the strange heat underneath. He'd hovered incorrigibly at the edges of her life, pretending he wasn't watching her, finding reasons to touch her, to follow her. Even when he hated her—especially then—he still couldn't stop reaching her way.

Now, watching him laugh at Voldemort's so-called victory with his aristocratic chin lifted in disdain, Hermione couldn't help but mourn the fact that Draco Malfoy had never learned the art of yielding. And now, it was far too late.

Hermione watched him from Ron's iron grip, as he lifted Godric Gryffindor's sword, as Voldemort's wand rose with green flame gathering at its tip. She screamed his name, her voice clawing through the silencing charm that bound them. Ron's arm locked around her ribs, holding her the way one might restrain someone

from running into a burning building. She had once thought the worst pain of her life had been under Bellatrix's wand, when her nerves lit up like struck copper, her body jerking and retching in the snow while her screams filled the clearing. But she'd been wrong. Through the thin cord of magic soldered between them, she felt the strength of his memories. The litany of her, tumbling through his mind like beads slipping from a string.

Oh, she'd been so wrong. The worst pain of her life was here, watching the man she loved think of her in his final moments. Helpless to do anything to save him.

A darkness had been building in her, ever since that night at Tonks House. Bellatrix's Cruciatus had torn through her magic, a hairline fracture that never healed. Proximity was poison, Hermione knew that. Carrying Bellatrix's wickedly curved wand, using the Killing Curse on the cup, and then the Imperius on Goyle...each act left a residue, ash in her veins. The more you used dark magic, the more it made room for itself inside of you, and she could feel the instability crackling in her bones, a wildness growing harder to contain with every spell.

When Draco's face was lit in a brief flash of green— pale throat gleaming, mercurial eyes closed— any containment she may have managed imploded. The bond between them yawned wide and she poured everything through it, a power so sharp it swept her off her feet. Ron stumbled back as she dropped to the ground, levied by the intensity— even the courtyard shook with it, stones splitting under the masses.

Draco lay crumpled where he fell. Hermione felt the curse gather on her tongue as she pointed the curved wand. Voldemort turned his head toward her, and for a moment she thought she saw cold recognition, the understanding of what she was about to attempt. But then, everything seemed to tilt, recalibrate around the sight of Harry's chest rising once more, his impossibly green eyes. For one dizzy, disbelieving instant, Hermione thought she had hallucinated

him into being, conjuring him from a sheer refusal to accept the alternative. Harry Potter, back from the dead. *Again*.

Voldemort looked over his shoulder, serpentine face contorted in fury. She saw Harry's lips, moving around a spell, and then, she felt the air split: twin jets of light tearing into the night. The beams locked. Red and green, a seam stitched into the dark.

The curse rebounded. Voldemort's body hit the cobblestones with a light thud. The curse that held the spectators at bay broke fully.

Pandemonium reigned.

The formation of Death Eaters broke like startled cattle, fleeing in streaks of black and silver, as the Hogwarts defenders reared forward in pursuit. The air was thick once more with curses and screams, a final cacophony of a fight that refused to end neatly. Hermione did not think: there was no room for her usual careful logic, no weighing of outcomes. Her orderly mind was now stripped to its brutal fundamentals: observe, calculate, act. A hex at her back. Duck. Stunner, silent. Shield. Drop low, strike the ankles, fell them like trees. Again. Again. Bellatrix's wand vibrated in her hand as she moved; her whole body, a metronome of violence. She was not fighting for victory now. She was fighting her way to where Draco lay, collapsed and still. Too still. Her lungs seized; she cast something wicked and searing, flame burning a path to him through the melee. She cut through the fire, reached the place he lay prone, only to find someone else had gotten there first.

Amidst the chaos, she saw Lucius Malfoy. Crouched low, clutching Draco's shoulders as though he might drag his son back into the world of the living. His pale hair hung in snarled ropes around a face that had once exuded hauteur; now it was a ruin, every line etched with exhaustion and fury.

Lucius Malfoy, who had allowed his child to be branded.

Lucius Malfoy, who had offered up his family like bargaining chips in the Dark Lord's endless game.

Lucius Malfoy, whose neglect had left Draco brittle and cold, terrified of acting out of mercy.

Lucius Malfoy had walked free, once before. If he lived tonight, he could slip the noose again. Men like him always did. And Draco — if Draco survived this, he would never be free of him. He, who had already borne so much: the curses, the vows, the suffocating weight of that family name. He shouldn't have to add patricide to his ledger of survival. He shouldn't have to live with that stain.

The elder Malfoy looked up when Hermione came near, face twisted with grief. "This is your doing, mudblood," he spat, shaking his son's form. "You dragged him down with you, you *ruined* him! My boy, my heir—"

She did not see Lucius Malfoy lift his wand in her direction. This was something she would lie about, under oath, many months later, claiming that she had cast under duress. But in that moment, all she saw was Draco as a child holding an injured bird, desperate and brittle under the weight of this man's scorn. She saw him at sixteen, gaunt with terror, bearing the Dark Mark because of Lucius's failures. She saw him now, bloodied and broken, under the shadow of his father once more. She thought of Bellatrix's wand carving through her until she wished for death. She thought of Narcissa's blue fire, her self-immolation to save her son. She thought of the children buried in rubble, of Lavender's screams, the look on Ernie MacMillan's face as he slumped against the castle wall. Theodore Nott, bleeding out in the tunnels. The ruin, the waste of precious life. All of it had been done by men like Lucius Malfoy, men who mistook cruelty for power and obedience for love.

She cast her verdict. There was no triumph in it.

"*Avada Kedavra.*"

The green light hit him squarely and by surprise. Lucius Malfoy folded sideways, graceless as a felled tree, collapsing into the churned mud beside his son. His grey eyes frozen open, fixed distantly on the storm-dark sky.

She did not justify it as defense. She did not soften it into necessity. It was punishment, prevention. An act of brutal mercy.

With the echo of green light still burning behind her eyes, she sank to her knees beside Draco, her hands trembling as they searched, desperate for the faint rhythm that meant he was—

*Alive.*

---

Alive. He was alive.

The first thing that returned to Draco, upon having this realization, was the light. A thin, clinical strip of it, pale against the backs of his eyelids. He blinked, and the ceiling above him swam into focus: plaster, a little cracked, painted sterile white. The air smelled faintly of antiseptic potions. Somewhere, a monitoring charm was beeping. It didn't make a lick of sense. The last thing he remembered was the Dark Lord's wand, the jet of green. Potter's bright green eyes, beckoning him into the afterlife—

How the bloody hell was he *alive*?

Draco attempted to sit up and failed spectacularly. His body felt like it had been dismantled and reassembled by someone very careless with instructions (Weasley, perhaps?). Every breath tugged against his ribs, muscles trembling when he so much as tried to flex a finger. His mind was blunted with pain potions. Strong ones, too. They made his thoughts wooly and unmoored.

He turned his head—gingerly, as though even that small motion might undo him—and something inside his chest gave way as he saw Hermione Granger, folded awkwardly into a chair at his bedside.

Her hair was a wild halo of dirty curls, her clothes creased and stained in ways that spoke of days spent without reprieve. She was slumped forward, cheek pillowed against the mattress, her hand locked in his. Even in sleep, her grip was iron.

The haze that enveloped him at the sight of her was warm, syrup-thick. Golden, like the sensation that pulled in his chest when he reached inward with his magic for their—

Nothing.

It was gone.

Not muted, like it had been in the Parkinson cellar, strained by distance or magical suppression. The bond that had connected them was simply, horribly *gone*.

His throat constricted, panic sluicing through him even through the layers of pain potions. He tried to sit up again, a doomed effort; pain flared hot across his ribs, and the world tilted violently.

“Granger,” he rasped, voice raw with disuse.

Hermione startled awake in the chair, curls spilling around her face. Her eyes—bloodshot and panicked—found his.

Above him, a diagnostic charm flared, casting him in an orange glow. The beeping increased in pace and tenor, tinny and metallic, summoning footsteps at once. The door banged open. Robes swished. Wands drawn.

“Stabilize him—”

“There we go. Easy does it—”

A sharp sting entered his veins, its invasive coolness spreading outward like frost.

“Draco. Look at me.” Her voice cut through the blur of healers and alarms. “You’re alright. I’m right here.”

His gaze latched onto hers, the only fixed point as the potions surged and the room slipped sideways. He wanted to ask her: *Why can’t I feel you anymore? Where did you go? Please don’t go —*

---

Draco dreamt he was in an orchard.

There were endless rows of trees and shrubs, heavy with fruit, the air syrup-thick with their scent. Sunlight filtered through branches like melted gold. He could hear her voice, low and teasing, see her figure darting ahead of him between the rows. Bare feet slapping against the moss, skirts gathered in her fists. The sound of her laughter was wild and breathless: she didn’t look back, but he knew she wanted him to follow.

The orchard adored her. Branches bowed low as she passed, brushing reverently against her skin, showering her curls with dustings of petals. He watched, transfixed, as she turned her head to look back at him, flushed and mischievous. Her dress clung damp with heat, gauzy material gone nearly translucent against the curve of her spine, the swell of her breasts. Her thighs flashed bare as she ran, skirts pulling higher with each step. Every movement, a provocation. The glisten of sweat at her collarbone, the curve of her hip under the thin fabric, the ripple of muscle in her calves as she slipped through the foliage—it was unbearable.

Draco ran.

He caught her in a blur of movement, pressing her body into the bark of a specimen heavy with fruit. He reached up and tore a pomegranate from the branch, splitting it open in his fist. The juice ran dark down his wrist as he pressed the red seeds against her lips. She sucked his fingers into her mouth, her tongue darting out to catch the sweetness. He kissed her before she’d finished swallowing, juice staining both their chins.



“Greedy,” he murmured, smearing a line of red down her throat, following it with his tongue. She arched against him, her nails dragging lines down his back through his shirt. The orchard hummed around them: bees anointing the blossoms, cicadas screaming in the heat.

They tumbled to the mossy ground. He yanked her skirt up around her waist, hands impatient, to find her cunt, bare and ripe. She was wet already, slick against his fruit stained fingers as he slipped them inside her. She grabbed at his wrist, dragging him deeper, gasping his name as she rode his hand, undulating against him, curls falling into her face. Her open mouth, stained and obscene.

With a growl, he rolled her beneath him and freed himself from his trousers, cock already hard and straining. Pressed her hands above her head, wrists caught in one palm, holding her in place as his other hand dragged down the line of her body—breast, rib, the lush curve of her hip— until he was lifting her thigh high around his waist. He pushed inside her in one rough thrust, and she cried out, the sound ringing through the orchard like a hymn.

Her dress had come loose in the tumble, thin material spooling around her waist. Her breasts spilled free, flushed and perfect, nipples peaked in the cool orchard air. His mouth closed over one, tongue circling the tight bud, sucking until she gasped and arched beneath him, thighs spreading wider as if to offer herself up. He fisted the fabric of her flimsy gown, using it to keep her spread for him as he fucked her deeper.

When she broke, it was cataclysmic. A cry ripped from her throat and echoed through the orchard as her cunt spasmed around him, her nails raking his back bloody. He spilled inside her with a ragged curse, cock jerking, pulsing thick streams of come into her spasming cunt. She took it all, legs locking around his hips. The orchard itself seemed to collapse with them: branches cracking overhead, fruit bursting open in wet ruin, red juice dripping down in rivulets that streaked their entwined bodies, painting her breasts, his chest, their mouths. He bent to lick the sticky sweetness from the hollow of her

collarbone; he was thrusting more intentionally now, slower and deeper, so every drop stayed inside her, keeping her full of him.

When he pulled back, his spend slipped from her swollen cunt to slick her thighs. He groaned low at the sight, pressed his fingers into the mess, free of any inhibition.

“Look,” he murmured, bringing it to her lips. She opened for him without hesitation, eyes glazed, moaning around the taste. He dragged his hand lower, smearing the rest of it back into her, pushing it inside her as if to claim her twice over.

The orchard grew even stranger around them, tilting into delirium. Bees swarmed low, drunk on spilled nectar. The air was thick with the blossoms and the sweet rot of fallen pomegranates. Somewhere, a flock of birds burst into warped chatter. He reached for her face, but her outline blurred at the edges. Her curls slid through his fingers like water.

“No,” he whispered. “Stay.”

He clung to her shoulders, her hips, anything solid, but she was already dissolving. Pomegranate juice turned to blood between his fingers, the orchard tilting and spinning until he could no longer tell if he was standing or falling.

---

The second time he woke, it was quieter. The beeping, the birdsong. It had all ceased.

He blinked through the haze of potions, lids dragging like lead. His throat was dry, his body sore in a thousand small ways that told him he was, absurdly, still alive.

“Bout time, Malfoy.” Tonks sat in the chair that Hermione had previously occupied beside his bedside, her knees drawn up. Hair cropped short again, the color a muted pink he’d never seen her

wear, almost pastel. Relief softened the lines around her mouth.  
"Back through the Veil, eh?"

Memory slotted itself back into place: late nights at Tonks House, the kitchen table strewn with dueling manuals, her barking laugh when he failed a shield charm, the way she'd clapped his shoulder after he managed to best her in a spar. He remembered, too, the sight of her body crumpling at the sight of Lupin catching a curse in the back.

"You had us all thinking you were going to go down swinging"

He blinked at her, trying to gather his thoughts. His voice cracked.  
"Didn't I?"

"Sort of." She grinned lopsidedly. "Made quite an impression, your act of heroism."

"Where's Hermione? Is she—"

"Your witch is upstairs, checking up on Lavender Brown— word is, she's been touch-and-go, but she's stabilizing, slowly." Tonks sighed. "She's hardly left your bedside; I had to drag her from this bloody hospital for a shower and a nap, the stubborn little thing."

"What about..." His head hurt. There were so many loose ends, so many uncertainties. "What *happened*?"

Tonks leaned back in the chair, exhaling slowly. "Well, you've been under about ten days, give or take," she said, watching his eyes widen, gauging his reaction. "They had to put you into a coma, to stabilize your magic— apparently, you shouldn't even be alive. The last time someone took a Killing curse at that range and survived it was—"

"Potter."

Tonks mistook the look on his face. "Don't go all grim on me, Malfoy. We won. Voldemort's gone. Dead, properly this time. Potter's alive

too, so you have company in the 'should have kicked it, but miraculously didn't' club." She looked away for a moment, voice dipping lower. "We lost too many innocents. Lots of Death Eaters, the ones who tried to take a final stand after Voldemort fell. Bodies are still being cleared from the castle, so we don't even have a final count yet." She hesitated, and then, rested a hand on his arm. "Your father was one of the ones we found on the grounds."

Draco closed his eyes, jaw tightening. It should have been simple. A monster slain. The architect of his misery, the man who had raised him on cruelty and cowardice, who'd bartered his family for what? Status? Ideology? A man Draco had hated and feared and pitied in equal measure. There was no clean relief in it, only a great hollow space opening inside his ribs, a vacuum where his father's expectations had always been. He had lived his whole life as Lucius Malfoy's son. How was he supposed to stop now?

"He's dead," Draco said, as if testing the words.

"Yes." Tonks squeezed his wrist, grounding him. "But you—you lived. And so did Hermione. She fought like hell for you, you know. Almost blew us all up, when you went down. She'd make a damn good Auror if you ask me." His cousin shook her head, admiringly. "You aren't too shabby with that wand yourself, you know? Your mother would be proud."

The memory rose, unbidden, as Draco lay back against the stiff white pillows.

*He was back at Shell Cottage, where the sea gnawed endlessly at the rocks. Bill Weasley had found him sitting on the porch steps, collar turned up against the wind. The horizon was a bruised grey, indistinguishable from the sea.*

*"Malfoy." Bill crouched in front of him, boots creaking against the old wood. "Tonks asked me to get something to you."*

*From the pocket of his worn dragonhide coat, Bill withdrew a small brown-paper parcel and a folded letter, sealed in a hurried scrawl of wax. The package was particular enough in size, for Draco to know, even before the paper tore, what lay inside.*

*A wand. He ran a hand down the familiar whorls in the handle, the warm maple wood. His mother's wand.*

*He opened the letter.*

---

*Draco,*

*Found this in the rubble while looking for salvage back at the house. We don't get to choose the legacies our parents leave us, but sometimes we can decide which pieces of them we carry forward.*

*Give 'em hell,*

*Nymphadora*

---

In the fluorescent hospital light, Draco stared at his cousin. His voice scraped. "Ten days?"

"Ten days," Tonks agreed, a sad little smile playing across her lips. "But on the bright side, well. Now, you have the rest of your life."

---

Tonks had gone by the time Hermione returned, citing a need to check on her mother. Although she'd been markedly fragile since her husband's death, Andromeda was still at Muriel's, taking care of two-dozen young magical children who'd been smuggled under the Death Eaters' noses, all of them orphans. It had given her a necessary sense of purpose, in the face of unspeakable loss.

Draco turned his head at the sound of the door jamb, just in time to see her slip inside the room. Her hair was bound back in a long braid

and she wore a fresh set of clothing: a loose, gauzy cotton tunic and denims. Her sleeves were rolled up, arms clutching a pile of what looked like Muggle celebrity gossip magazines. The look of her—still drawn, dark circles under her eyes, yet moving with quick, restless purpose—made something seize in his chest.

She stopped when she saw him awake, nearly dropping the stack of magazines.

His voice was rough, but steady enough. “Are those for me?”

“What?” Her throat worked visibly before she spoke.

“*Titanic Crush*,” he read one of the covers dryly. “*Leo Makes Our Hearts Sail?*”

“Oh,” she replied, setting the stack aside. “No, these are just— I’ve been bringing them to Lavender. She usually likes *Sugar and Mizz*, but all I could find today was *Teen Beat*.”

Hermione lingered, uncertainly, at his bedside and he caught a hint of her shampoo— something jeweled and sweet and mouthwateringly tart. For the first time since he had first met her— eleven years old, all sharp elbows and an even sharper tongue—she didn’t immediately fill the silence.

"How is Brown?" He prompted.

“They’ve moved her to the infectious disease ward. The extent of her injuries...” She exhaled hard. “It was too much to treat. The only way she could have survived was to induce a full transformation.”

Draco shut his eyes briefly. He remembered the witch’s screams on the battlefield, the terrible tearing sound of the werewolf dragging her down. He remembered the blood, how bright it had been against stone.

Hermione went on, though her tone was bleak. "It's not ideal, of course, especially with the social stigma against lycanthropes, but this way she at least has a future."

Draco winced. He'd seen the fight one's body endured against lycanthropy up close, and had brewed the foul-smelling Wolfsbane himself. He knew what "a future" could look like.

He asked the question he'd been too scared to broach with Tonks.

"Theo? Pansy?"

"Pansy's fine. She's been pestering the Mungo's staff about you, keeps threatening to hex the night nurse." Hermione smoothed her tunic across her knees as though the act might steady her. "Theo's alive," she said at last. For a moment Draco thought he'd misheard her, potion-haze distorting sense. "That's who— that's how they were able to get a hold of werewolf venom in time to stabilize Lavender. It just so happened that a semi-conscious werewolf donor was being patched up downstairs."

"He's alright?"

"Apparently, he reached some sort of meditative state that allowed his body to shut down just enough to keep him alive. The healers said that if he hadn't, he would have almost certainly bled out, lycanthropic regeneration or not."

Draco blinked, slow, the words clawing their way through the fog of his thoughts. The boat. The North Sea. Theo Nott was also alive. He let out a breath he had not realized he'd been holding.

Hermione must have seen the realization cross his face, because her voice softened. "Whatever you did...it gave him enough time."

"You said he was here." Draco cleared his throat. He wished she would touch him. Why wasn't she touching him? "Where is he now?"

“He’s being held at the Ministry, until he’s called up for his trial.” Her face darkened. “The Wizengamot’s been busy.”

“The Ministry? Actually *doing* something?”

“I’m as shocked as you are,” she said, dryly. “They couldn’t rouse themselves to fight, but they’re happy to condemn it all from the benches now that the tides have changed.”

He studied her face. She looked so different from the girl who had stood shaking in the snow under his aunt’s wand, the girl who had burned her parents’ house to the ground. Something in the way she carried herself now, taut and brittle as a bowstring.

“Hermione,” he said softly. “What happened?”

For a long moment she didn’t say anything at all. Sat there, fidgeting with the loose end of her braid, eyes fixed on some point just beyond him.

“There’s—” She took a deep breath, and met his eyes. Cedar against storm clouds. “There’s something you should know.”

“The bond.” He swallowed, the dryness in his throat suddenly unbearable. “It’s gone.”

“When Voldemort cast the Killing Curse—when it struck you—I didn’t think, I just reacted. What with the horcrux and the battle, I’d been using so much Dark Magic...I wasn’t stable.” She looked at him, beseechingly. “I have no idea why it worked. If it was the strain on my magic, or because of the ritual—” She exhaled hard, cheeks flushed— “Or if it was just... me.”

He stared at her. “You’re saying you stopped the Killing Curse? Isn’t that how Potter got himself into this mess in the first place?” Something occurred to him. “And how the fuck did Potter reincarnate, *again*?”



“Apparently, Snape had a hand in it. He told Voldemort that Harry was dead after the first attempt backfired, lied right to his face,” she answered. “As for the Killing Curse, there’s no way to technically stop it, but maybe...maybe I diverted it. Maybe the bond gave me a way to force my magic into you, like—” She hesitated, searching for language. “Like slipping something between you and the curse. Like a bulletproof vest. It’s a muggle invention; it doesn’t stop the bullet, but it changes the way it enters the body. It slows it, blunts it. There’s still damage, and it hurts like hell, but wearing one can be the difference between life and death.”

“A *vest*,” he repeated, disbelieving.

“It’s not a perfect metaphor,” she admitted. “I poured everything into the bond to stop the curse and...” She looked down at their intertwined fingers. “It burnt out. That’s why you can’t feel me anymore.”

For a ghastly moment he thought she was about to apologize. The look on her face—eyes wide with something perilously close to guilt—was the same expression she’d worn after Tonks House, when she’d blamed herself for the loss of his mother. It was unbearable.

“Granger,” he rasped, voice thin as parchment. “You do realize I stood up to Voldemort fully expecting to die?”

She flinched, but he pressed on. “I wasn’t buying time. I wasn’t clinging to the faint hope of some third act deus-ex-machina. I’d already tallied the sum and come up short. And yet—” He gave a humorless little shrug that made his shoulder twinge— “Here I am. Breathing. Which is frankly absurd.”

Her eyes shone with unshed tears, the stubborn kind she refused to let fall.

“I thought of you,” he said, softer now. “When I was staring down his wand. It was all I wanted to carry with me.” The thought lodged in his chest, unspooling faster than he could censor. “And now, that’s the

only thing that matters to me, Granger. We're not on the run from a genocidal maniac, or faking our deaths and fighting our way out of traps anymore. It's over."

"It's not over," she said darkly. "The castle is in ruins. The Ministry is in chaos. Hundreds dead, maybe thousands displaced. Children without parents, families without homes. Azkaban is overflowing with suspected Death Eaters —everyone's crying Imperius, of course— and wrongly imprisoned people like Xenophilius Lovegood, political hostages leftover from Runcorn's sham government. The Wizengamot's out for blood, no doubt overcompensating for their *violent* complacency. The survivors are traumatized; the wounded will need decades of medical intervention; the Intensive Care unit is hundreds over capacity—"

"You *do* know that they don't give out extra credit for saving the world, right? You've already gotten your O, let the bureaucrats do what they do best— obstruct!"

She went on, as though she hadn't heard him. "There are laws to rewrite, institutions to rebuild. The *very* corrupt press is already looking to gain the public's loyalty back. *Zero* talk of reparations in sight, much less systemic change. There's no way to ensure *anyone* will get a proper trial— much less a qualified examiner so I can sit my N.E.W.T.s—"

"Hermione," he interrupted, straining to sit up straight. "Listen to me when I say this— my stab at espionage? The bank heist and the dragon? My deeply misguided sacrificial beheading of that great bloody snake? Those were isolated events. A blip in my existence, and now, my brief career in public histrionics is over. I'm not to be connected to any heroics nor redemptive measures henceforth."

"Hate to break it to you, Draco," she said wryly. "But you have a reputation to uphold. They're calling you The Blade of Slytherin."

"What?"

“The Viper Slayer.” She ticked monikers off on her fingers. “The False Serpent. The Silver Lion. The Pale Knight—”

*“The Pale Knight!?”*

“That snake was a rather overt symbol of Voldemort’s reign of terror. And *you* killed it. Which means to the rest of the wizarding world, you’re not just Draco Malfoy anymore. You’re—”

He groaned. “Don’t say it.”

“—a war hero.”

“If that means I’m going to be expected to *do* something for the rest of my sorry existence,” he said, disgusted. “I’ll pass. I’m going back to my life of aristocracy, thank you very much. Breakfast in bed, monogrammed linens, and a cheeky cordial at noon. You should try it, Granger. You’ve already done more for this war than most members of our parliament. Take a break.”

His thumb stroked idly along her knuckles where their hands were joined. He hadn’t noticed he was doing it.

“As soon as I’m better, I’ll take you to France and we can stay at the chateau. Visit some quaint little vineyard. I’ll correct your pronunciation and fuss over the wine. You’ll lay in the sun in some unreasonably revealing Muggle swimwear. Or Greece, and substitute ruins and olive groves. We can visit the Temple at Delphi, query the Oracle for dramatic irony’s sake.” He softened, voice edged with something perilously close to hope. “I know acts of selfishness are not part of your repertoire, but they’re rather a specialty of mine. Let me be the one to ask nothing of you but the pleasure of your company.”

She sat beside him, not wide-eyed but intent, weighing him the way she always did—like she was measuring his words against the world and finding them wanting. And still, Draco Malfoy felt the treacherous pull in his chest, the need for her to believe him anyway. Believe not

just in the sheer absurdity of their survival, but in the even more ludicrous future he was reckless enough to imagine with her by his side.

“You want to...run away to France?” She said a little hesitantly, rolling the idea around in her mind.

The sterile glow of the hospital charms did her no justice, but even under their flat, clinical light, her skin held a quiet radiance of its own. A dusting of freckles on her cheekbones. He thought of tracing them, one by one, with the tip of his finger until he learned her like a map. The thought startled him with its simple intimacy.

“Or Greece. Or Spain. Or Egypt, I’ve always wanted to see—”

She leaned down and pressed her lips to his. A soft, lingering kiss.

“— the Pyramids,” he finished belatedly, a little dazed. He blamed the pain potions. “Just a week.” She smiled against his mouth. “Two at most.”

“Budge up, then,” she whispered, moving to join him.

Ignoring the pull in his ribs, Draco shifted, opening his arms. Hermione’s braid brushed his jaw as she settled closer. He breathed in the sweet scent of her shampoo, marveling at how he’d gotten there, awash in the wonderful, ordinary feel of her body against his in a cramped hospital bed.

---

End of Part II

---

---

- This was originally supposed to be two chapters, but as I was editing, I realized it was one. Here, we close one cosmology (the war, the bond) and open another (reconstruction, love without duress).

- Bellatrix's Cruciatus once defined Hermione's worst pain, but here, she learns the most unbearable pain is watching Draco die (a shift from the individual subject of trauma to the relational subject of love). It also sets up her later choice with Lucius: Hermione understands, in that moment, that there are injuries you cannot watch happen again (and that the old order only ends when someone ends it). The text doesn't acquit her, but it also doesn't condemn her: instead of the compass of good, she has become far more morally complex (closer to Snape than to, say, Harry) under duress. Where canon treated love as providence, this story treats it as praxis, which is to say: painful and costly. Love is not a miracle but a choice that often demands sacrifice and leaves scars.

- How did I sneak a lush, forbidden sex scene into the Battle of Hogwarts chapter? My favorite plot device: dream sequence! Draco's dream obviously invokes Hades/Persephone (I LITERALLY could not resist) and the myth of descent, consumption, and the warning of an only partial return. Like Harry, Draco brushes up against the "underworld," but unlike Harry, his return is not messianic: it's deeply personal and intimate (props if you picked up that Draco dreamed of pomegranates because of Hermione's shampoo/lotion).

- The little things I enjoyed adding in the most: Draco using his mother's wand! 90's Leo DiCaprio gossip magazines! Hermione using a muggle analogy to describe earth-shattering magic!

- This chapter's ending scene was meant to echo \*the hospital scene\* from Chapter 28, where Draco comes crashing in to check on Hermione. The earlier hospital scene dramatizes the chaotic urgency of their bond, while this final hospital scene enacts the earned intimacy of their survival: quiet, reciprocal. A soft place to land. Together, the two function like before-and-after diptychs of their relationship: love under siege versus love in aftermath; the bond as curse versus bond as sacrifice.

- Here ends Part II, the war era! That you for sticking with me throughout this season of putting out fires. The first chapters of Part

III are something I'm so very excited to share: think Call Me by Your Name meets Bertolucci meets Marguerite Duras. The war may be over but there is plenty of intrigue to come: how will Theo's fate intersect with Lavender's survival? What about Pansy and Neville? Will Draco learn it was Hermione who took his father's life? How do you rebuild a decimated society? Who is the narrator of Part III? How tasteful is the come kink, really? I LOVE YOU ALL!

---

# A Thing With Feathers

## Chapter 50: A Thing With Feathers

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

### Book III

The funerals began long after the battle had ended. For weeks, the bodies lay unburied, magically preserved in stasis within the bowels of St. Mungo's morgue. The Ministry — provisional and fractured as it was— still required paperwork: death certificates, autopsies, affidavits, chain-of-custody documents. Nothing could be lowered into earth until it had been counted, logged, and stamped. Grief had been asked to wait its turn.

Hermione knew that part of the delay lay in the ruins Voldemort's puppet administration had left behind: records of raids, detentions and executions had been deliberately burned, whole archives magically razed in an attempt to make atrocities untraceable. Entire families had disappeared without a trace. Mass graves remained unmarked. Kingsley, suddenly elevated to provisional Minister of Magic by a Wizengamot vote, had grown fastidious in response, insisting that every fallen witch and wizard be documented, every site of violence catalogued, every death accounted for in ink before the soil was turned. "If we do not write it down," he maintained, in public speeches and private addresses alike, "they will say it did not happen."

Alastor Moody was dead. Remus Lupin was dead. Ted Tonks was dead. Ernie Macmillan was dead. Fred Weasley was dead. Colin Creevey was dead. Hermione kept their names as part of a running list in her mind, a compulsive mantra. She feared most the erosion of memory: how faces blurred in recollection, how voices thinned until only fragments remained. She had once read that grief was not unlike muscle memory—that if you refused to practice it, the body

would eventually grow stiff and uncooperative. It would hurt more, the next time you attempted. During the war, death had become background noise. She had grown numb to it, each loss folded into the next until grief became a kind of static. Survival required this. But after the fighting ended the numbness began to slip, and what came rushing in was not orderly, not manageable, but raw and astonishing: a pain reborn, again and again.

Narcissa and Lucius Malfoy were dead too, but Hermione didn't quite know what to feel about that, caught between pity and unease. She could not fold Draco's parents neatly into her mantra. They occupied another category altogether, one that unsettled her more than she cared to admit.

Fred Weasley was buried on a blustery May afternoon. The Burrow was gone, burned in the winter raids, so the service was held on the uneven moors of Shell Cottage, beneath a sagging white marquee that shuddered with every gust of wind. No one wanted to be inside, where the ceilings were too low for sheer rising of grief, so they gathered instead beneath a trembling canvas sky.

The coffin was set on trestles at the front, draped with a simple Gryffindor banner that sagged under the damp air. The crowd was thick with Weasleys, Order members and schoolmates, many of them former admirers of the twins. Harry stood with Hermione flanking a stricken Ron, like two cloaked sentries. Draco had insisted on remaining in the back of the small crowd, seated stiffly beside a stone-faced Andromeda. Everyone knew he had driven the blade into Nagini, the act that ended the war as surely as Harry's spell, but the story of how he had come to that moment was far more uncertain. Just because the public believed in his redemption did not mean they knew what to make of him now. Hermione hated the way people's eyes lingered on him, found their curiosity abhorrent and their uncertainty dangerous. She hated more that without the bond, she could no longer sense him as she once had, could not feel his pulse like a second rhythm inside her chest. Every time he so much as went into another room, she felt the ground tilt beneath her, as if



he might never return. She told herself it was pathetic, but the words would tumble out before she could stop them:

“Don’t leave my sight. Please. I can’t—”

She hated the sound of herself, voice thin and clinging. It was nothing like the girl who had endured endless curses with her jaw set. But the war had stripped her down to this raw plea, this childlike need to keep him within reach, even as a hint in her periphery against the sea of dark cloaks.

Throughout the service, Molly’s sobs were relentless. Arthur had his arms wrapped around his wife’s shoulders, holding her upright, his own face a ruin. When the time came, it was Bill who raised his wand. Silver flames hovered above the casket, flickering in the cliffside wind, meant to symbolize the persistence of the soul. The wizarding funerary ritual dictated it was a mark of release, the spirit freed from its body.

When they started to lower the coffin, George lurched. “No,” he said, his voice strange and far away. Then louder: “No. It isn’t fair. He can’t go without me.” He slumped over, leaning his full weight against the polished wood. “You can’t put him down there alone. I won’t let you.”

Bill tried to pull him back, but George hung on, jaw clenched. The crowd shifted, eyes down, all too aware they were witnessing a private break.

Ginny broke formation and reached for his shoulder. “George—c’mon, Georgie—”

He flung off his arms, teeth bared like an animal. “Get off me!” He crouched in the dirt, murmuring into the wood. “Fred, I’m right here. I’m not going anywhere. I’m right here.”

Ginny recoiled, her mouth trembling, and then she broke. She stumbled back from the marquee, almost tripping on the grass, before turning and running hard toward the house.

Hermione went after her without thinking, catching Ginny's arm just before the steps. A visibly pregnant Fleur appeared at the same time, slipping under Ginny's other shoulder. She collapsed against them like a sack of flour. Together they helped her inside, into the dim, low-ceilinged kitchen that smelled of salt water and fresh firewood. Through the cottage's walls, they could hear George begin to wail.

They got Ginny into a chair, her red hair a curtain over her face. She said it first in a whisper, then again, louder:

"I wish it was me. I wish it had been me." Ginny lifted her head, eyes raw. "Why him? He left another half, and I'm just—" Her throat closed. "It should've been me instead."

For a moment none of them moved. Then Fleur crossed to the cupboard and began to rummage, before coming back with a dark bottle. She set it hard on the table, the sound sharp in the still kitchen.

"For your nerves," she said, unscrewing the top and pushing it toward Ginny. Her accent thickened around the vowels, as though the weight of the afternoon had urged her closer to her mother tongue. "Remind your body that it is still alive."

Ginny took the bottle, hand trembling. She drank deeply and passed it to Hermione.

She lifted the bottle, swallowed, and let the fire spread.

At the table, Fleur began to speak, her words a low caress. "You know, when I first came here, I did not like England very much. The skies were heavy, the food was bland. I missed my family. I missed the sea. I would wake at night, sick with longing, and ask myself if I had made a mistake." Her hand moved in slow circles across the curve of her stomach. "But I was in love with Bill, and so I stayed. I told myself love was enough. Some days it was, some days it was not. Bill tried to make me comfortable, but he could tell I was lonely. He thought bringing me around his family would help."

She turned to Ginny and her lips turned up faintly, not the glittering smile she wore in public, but something worn thinner. “Your brother Fred did not try to make me comfortable. He turned my slippers into frogs, enchanted the kettle to crack filthy jokes when I tried to pour my tea. Dirty tricks. It was his way of making me part of your family. I will always remember that. Fred, distracting me from my own sadness. He gave me the gift of laughter, even when it was at my expense. Perhaps especially then.”

As she spoke, Hermione felt the subtle flush of Fleur’s magic, her Veela inheritance. It came on like warmth spreading under her skin, a gentle distortion of the senses. The damp little kitchen dissolved at the edges, and she nearly could feel it. The kettle squealing in Fred’s borrowed voice, laughter in the doorway, the rough-spun texture of a Weasley sweater. She smelled scorched toast, woodsmoke, the sweet edge of treacle tart cooling on the sill. For a heartbeat it was all there again: Fred, alive and restless, Prince of Mischief, laughter spilling out of him like light.

The vision thinned, steam rising from a cup. Ginny pressed her face into her hands. Fleur reached across the table and folded her palm over her sister-in-law’s, the gesture grounding, steady. Outside, George’s voice had gone quiet. The only thing Hermione could hear was the marquee, flapping in the wind.

Draco found them a short while later, the kitchen thick with the sour-sweet smell of spilt liquor. An empty bottle rolled lazily against the table leg: Ginny was hiccupping into Fleur’s lap, while Hermione sat opposite, blotched and red, her breath sharp in her throat between rounds of tears.

He stood tall and pale in the doorway, the lamplight turning his hair into a coin’s glinting edge. She blinked and the image of him split into two.

“Hello, M-Malfoy. And Other Malfoy.” She was quite drunk.

Fleur met Draco's eyes over their heads, her expression dry and resigned, a hand still stroking Ginny's hair. She gave a small tilt of her chin toward Hermione, the unspoken instruction clear: yours.

"How much did she drink?"

"All of it," Hermione admitted thickly. She pushed herself upright, too quickly, and the table pitched sideways. Then it was all cool hands and furrowed brow, a strong grip catching her arm before she tumbled from her chair. His firm shoulder, the fabric of his fine wool cloak soft against her palm. He smelled faintly of pine smoke and something medicinal. The familiarity soothed her more than any bottled spirit could.

"Let's get you home," he said. "Before you polish off the entirety of the cellar. Come on." He eased her to her feet, one arm strong around her waist. She leaned into him, the room rocking loosely like a ship in port. Fleur raised a hand in farewell.

"Home," she repeated, the word thick on her tongue. But where was that, anymore? Not the red brick house in Hampstead Garden, burned into ash and ruin. Not the Burrow, felled by Death Eater wands. Not even Hogwarts, crumbled and blackened by curses and memories alike. England no longer felt like home— how could it, after the disappearances, the raids, the Ministry pamphlets printed in neat black letters that declared her less than human. Her country had hunted her, hollowed her out. There was no place for her here.

She pressed her forehead against Draco's shoulder as he guided her into the night, set to apparate to the Second Son's Estate. He turned into the crisp air and Hermione sagged against him.

"Don't leave me," she whispered, sudden and sharp. "Don't go."

"I'm right here," he said. "I'm not going anywhere."

"You did," she mumbled. "In the courtyard. I saw the green light. You were gone." Her breath hitched. "I felt it."

His arm tightened around her waist. The night pressed close, cool against their flushed skin, smelling faintly of wet grass and smoke drifting from distant chimneys. He held her, her weight folded against him as though she might slide through the cracks of the earth without his grip.

"I came back," he said finally, voice low. It made her head swim. "You made sure of that, love."

The world spun once more as he apparated them away, the pop of displaced air swallowing the gusty seaside. When they landed in the darkened corridor of the Second Son's Estate, Hermione swayed and thought, perhaps this is what survival looks like.

Then she vomited all over the floor.

---

Ernie Macmillan's funeral was held nine days after Fred in a church in Bloomsbury, a Muggle building requisitioned for magical rites. Hermione sat in the pews, Draco on one side, the other flanked by Neville. Hufflepuff House had come in full force: Hannah, Susan, Justin and all the other faces from the Great Hall, now transfigured by adulthood's harsh initiation. And yet, it was Pansy Parkinson, who rose to give the eulogy. Hermione felt the subtle twitch in the crowd: the disbelief, the small recoil. Despite her efforts during the latter half of the war, Pansy was remembered for cruelty, for her money and positionality and the calculated flick of her cat-like eyes.

"She's nervous," Neville murmured from his seat in the pew. "Been practicing this for days."

When Pansy spoke, her voice was stripped clean of ornament. "Ernest Macmillan," she said, and the name sounded bizarrely ceremonial in her mouth, "was a complicated wizard. By which I mean he was difficult."

"Maybe she should have practiced a bit more," Hermione whispered.

Pansy went on. “He debated that which no one sought to debate. He insisted on ethics when the rest of us wanted expedience. We argued constantly about politics and morals and the possibility of redemption, of which he was in great favor. I maintained my doubts. I thought he was insufferable, and vocalized this often. But I was wrong. I was wrong about almost everything.”

Pansy’s tone was not elegiac; it was rigorous, almost juridical. More a defense, an argument made on Ernie’s behalf. It was, she had to admit, rather moving.

“I used to think that what Ernest wanted was to be right. But I understand now that what he wanted was for the world to be right, and that is something rarer and far more precious. His insistence was not born from vanity or self-assuredness, but from faith. Faith that there were still laws worth following, truths worth pursuing. People worth defending—” Here her voice caught, briefly, before resettling into its steady cadence. “Even people like me. Ernest held to principles most of us abandoned when it became inconvenient to keep them. He believed in the radical potential of good until the very end. Which is much more than I can say for most. That is what I want to remember.”

When Pansy finished, the silence was heavy. She closed the parchment she had been holding and left the lectern without flourish, returning to her seat on Neville’s other side as Ernie’s parents rose to address the group. Despite herself, Hermione found herself studying her from the corner of her vision. Pansy Parkinson had always been beautiful—cheekbones sharp, lips full and lacquered, hair sleek as poured ink— but in her black funeral dress with her eyes rimmed heavy with kohl, she was stunning.

“Was it okay?” Pansy whispered into Neville’s ear, so quiet Hermione barely heard. “Do you think he’d have liked it?”

It startled Hermione to realize she was watching someone grieve. Pansy had not been Ernie’s ally at school; she had sneered at his earnestness, mimicked his pompous turns of phrase, and rolled her

eyes when he spoke. And yet, here she was, hands trembling minutely as she smoothed the folded parchment into her lap.

Neville turned toward her, voice tender in a way Hermione had never heard before. “You were perfect.”

It was searingly intimate in its delivery, enough to make her hastily look away, refocusing on the pulpit where Ernie’s parents stood with clasped hands. Something about it unnerved her: the sheer strangeness of the pairing, yes, but also the nakedness of Neville’s affection. So much had happened during the war that Hermione had not been privy too: suffering, but also, this.

After the service, the congregation filtered into the courtyard, a square of cracked flagstones shaded by plane trees. She saw Pansy standing off to the side—Neville had been swept into conversation with the Hufflepuffs—looking around for Draco, her Slytherin lifeline.

Hermione approached before she could think better of it. “That was —” she began, and stopped, hating the inadequacy. “What you said. It was lovely. Ernie would have been...” She fumbled. “He would have been pleased.”

Pansy’s mouth curved. “Don’t sound so surprised, Granger. I can manage sincerity when pressed.”

Hermione flushed, feeling the old reflexive tension spark between them. Years of insults in corridors, hexes traded under desks. The sharp, cutting laughter when Hermione’s hand shot too eagerly into the air. Pansy had been her opposite at school: pretentious where Hermione was precarious, erratic where Hermione was precise, effortless where Hermione had only effort. But now, in black dress and smudged eyeliner, Pansy felt less like an adversary and more like someone Hermione used to know a long time ago. A relic of childhood made flesh.

She wondered if this was what it meant to outlive a war: that some grudges ceased to matter, or at least, could no longer be maintained

with the same intensity. The recognition that animosity had grown inefficient, a poor use of limited strength.

She forced herself to meet Pansy's kohl-rimmed gaze.

"You did well," she said again, firmer this time.

For a long moment Pansy only studied her, expression unreadable. Then she gave the barest nod, a gesture so subtle it could have been mistaken for a shudder.

---

Time went by strangely, after they'd buried the dead. Days did not fall into sequence so much as accumulate, one atop the other. June arrived in increments—the air warming, the hedgerows thickening as the evenings stretched past supper— and then all at once, lush and unruly. The fields spilled over with wildflowers, bees humming drunk in the clover, swallows stitched the sky into dizzying patterns overhead. For Hermione, the abundance felt jarring, a portal into another world.

As the season changed, the population of the Second Son's Estate grew. There was, admittedly, an abundance of room in the Black family's country manor, pressed into service now as a kind of halfway house for wayward young adults. After much coaxing, Harry laid temporary claim to the attic while Grimmauld was fortified, insisting to Draco's great bemusement that he felt safer in enclosed spaces; Ron and Ginny were in and out, splitting their time at the estate while the Burrow was rebuilt; to Hermione's chagrin, Pansy had moved in fully, unwilling or unwelcome to stay at Parkinson Manor while her parents awaited trial, which meant Neville drifted in and out but more often in, his overnight things gradually colonizing Pansy's rooms; Andromeda and Tonks visited but never stayed long, the grief in Andromeda's face too raw for company. And then there was Draco, of course, his presence both anchor and unsteady axis, consistently ruminating aloud at how it came to be that so many people were enjoying the fruits of his hospitality.



For Hermione, the days filled themselves out of necessity. She had learned during the war that stillness was dangerous. To be idle was to fall into the past. As in school, she was almost always reading, but this time, it was to compulsively keep abreast of the news: there were leaflets and proclamations and Wizengamot briefs, all announcing widespread progressive change that Hermione had yet to see materialize in any actual legislation. When she was not reading, she was writing. Letters of support for the reparation efforts. Letters of contempt for those who should have been in cells for treason rather than Wizengamot seats. Opinion pieces that the Prophet refused to run, instead filling their pages with the usual dander. Applications for Masteries she was not even certain she wanted (she settled on applying in both Healing and Dueling; not because she thought the subjects the most interesting, but because she feared what might happen if she wasn't ready next time). If she could respond to every missive, submit every application, catalogue every shifting policy, perhaps she could hold off the chaos that threatened to seep back in through the cracks.

When she wasn't hunched over the study, she was assisting in the Burrow's reconstruction or volunteering at St. Mungo's, where every Tuesday afternoon she had tea with Lavender Brown in the Infectious Disease Unit.

Lavender sat propped against the pillows, hair dulled from its usual bright gloss to a dry, uneven frizz. Her nails, once immaculately polished, were bitten down to the quick. A month's worth of Witch Weekly lay stacked at her bedside, untouched. When Hermione entered, she did not even look up.

"It's me," Hermione said softly, setting her bag down on the chair. "I brought those French sweets you like. The candied violets."

"I don't want them." The bitterness in her voice pained Hermione. Lavender had always been buoyant, almost theatrical in her brightness; now she was sullen, miserable with both the physical pain of lycanthropy and the corrosive humiliation of being forced to forever carry her attack within her body. In retaliation, she stubbornly

refused to acknowledge the wolf as part of herself, something which the healers warned Hermione was leading to difficulties around the full moon. “My stomach’s been off ever since *she* ate that rabbit during the full moon.”

Hermione sat on the edge of the chair. “How was the transformation?”

Lavender shrugged, affecting apathy. “*She* tried to tear me apart from the inside, like always.” She adjusted the blankets, pulling them tighter around her form, though the room was warm. “Ron came yesterday. Did he tell you?”

Hermione nodded.

“I told him to bugger off.” Lavender’s voice was thick with annoyance. “I can’t deal with a bloody boyfriend on top of everything else. He still acts like we’re a normal couple. I don’t know how many times I have to tell him we’re not together anymore.”

Hermione folded her hands in her lap, hell bent on choosing her words carefully. Ron was already drowning under the weight of George’s grief, pressed thin by the burden of being the brother who survived, and Lavender’s rejection had cut deep. But Hermione could see that it was not cruelty that drove her— if Lavender could not bear herself, how could she possibly bear anyone else?

“I can’t stand the way he looks at me.” Her eyes were glassy, staring not at Hermione but through her, at some jagged point beyond the hospital wall. “He wants the old Lavender. But she’s gone. The wolf took her.”

Hermione reached for her hand. “You’re still you.”

Lavender slapped it away. “No, I’m not. I’m a monster. And I won’t have Ron—or anyone—pretending otherwise.”

“You’re alive,” Hermione snapped, and Lavender recoiled. She lowered her voice, reminding herself that lashing out wouldn’t help the situation remotely. “You’re alive and I’ve attended too many funerals over the past month to join you in wishing otherwise.”

Lavender toyed with the edge of her blanket, worrying the fabric. “You know it was him who saved my life, don’t you?” she said at last, her voice flat. “Nott.”

Hermione nodded, expression schooled.

“I can’t stop thinking about it. He was a Death Eater. He murdered Dumbledore. And then when I transform, *she* feels connected to him. When I see him in the Prophet sitting in a cell waiting for trial, all skinny and pathetic, I feel— I don’t know what I feel. I don’t want him to be a part of me.”

“You’re not,” Hermione said, sharper than she intended. “You’re nothing like Theodore Nott.”

“I love you, Hermione,” Lavender sighed. “I do. But frankly, you have no idea what you’re talking about.”

---

Unlike Hermione, Draco did not fill his hours with lists and pendencies. He smoked gillyweed on the terrace, drank Pimm’s cups before noon and prowled the house at odd hours, checking the wards over and over. To the untrained eye he looked like a man at ease, an aristocrat surveying his grounds, but Hermione saw the cracks. He counted exits—*door, door, window, skylight*— every time they entered a new room, lips moving as he surveyed the perimeter. Locks preoccupied him. He would stop halfway up the stairs to flick his wand at a latch, then again, and again, until he was satisfied it had caught. He disliked leaving the windows open at night. Hermione had woken more than once to find him standing shirtless in the moonlight, palms pressed flat to the glass, testing each catch.

These were not grand displays of collapse, nothing the others in the house remarked on. But Hermione catalogued them the way she might footnote a difficult text. Without the bond, she could no longer feel him within her, that steady thrum that had once braided their magic together. Instead, she had to relearn him through smaller signs: the twitch of his jaw when he lied, the way his eyes went distant when Hermione read the paper aloud, the cold in his expression as he occluded before bed. It was painstaking, like deciphering a language without a lexicon.

Hermione was not without her own hauntings. There were many nights she woke the house with her screaming. She'd jerk into consciousness disoriented, stunned by the pain of the Cruciatus still hot in her limbs, head filled with green light and the sound of Draco's body hitting the stone. The Killing Curse had no physical signature, no heat or burn, no scar like other dark magic. And yet in her dreams, she felt it in a way she could not rationalize, his near-death reverberating through her body like the recoil of a gun. Then, she'd feel Draco's hands on her shoulders, shaking her gently, his voice low and urgent in her ear.

In the morning she would insist she was fine, but often, her magic betrayed her. The exposure to Dark curses, both as instigator and recipient, had left some permanent distortion in her. Her spells came out warped, unpredictable. A levitation spell might send books rocketing into the ceiling, pages raining down like confetti. A summoning spell carried the force of a battering ram.

One morning, after reading a particularly aggravating Prophet headline in the kitchen—"Ministry Grants Conditional Pardons to Former Registry Officials"—Hermione's vision went white at the edges. The headline was tucked halfway down the page, as though the crimes of those who had catalogued (and thus, contributed to the hunting of Muggle-borns) were a footnote. She slammed the paper down and before she knew it, the kettle on the stove shrieked and burst, boiling water spraying across the tiles. The glass window above the sink fractured into a glittering spiderweb pattern.

“Salazar’s bollocks,” Draco swore, leaping up from the kitchen table. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she said tightly, cheeks burning from the indignity. “I’m fine.” Her magic, traitorous as it was, still fizzed in the air around her, waiting for her next misstep. Luckily, Harry and Ron were already at the Burrow, set on finishing the new roof before the summer storms began in earnest. No one was home to witness her implosion besides—

“Giving Finnegan a run for his money, are you?” Pansy sauntered into the kitchen, taking in the disrepair with an expression of mild disinterest. She was in a men’s shirt, the buttons misaligned. Neville stumbled in after her, notably shirtless, with a rather telling bruise marking his neck.

Hermione flushed and looked at the ground, suddenly all too aware that ever since the battle, since the loss of the bond, she and Draco had not been intimate. It was not for lack of wanting. At least, she hoped it wasn’t that. She caught him watching her sometimes, caught on the exposed curve of her collarbone or staring at her legs in the little shorts she wore to bed. And yet, nothing came of it. Once, it had been as simple as the hum in her veins, a magnetic pull that required no language, no awkward fumbling for cues. Now, stripped of that tether, she felt stranded in her own body. Alone. Was he waiting for her? Was it just that their nerves were frayed wires, their bodies requiring time before exploration? She longed for him, but she feared misstepping. *Do you still want this?* She wondered helplessly most nights. *Do you still want me?*

“For Merlin’s sake,” Draco complained, looking at Pansy and her Gryffindor paramour with marked distaste. “Can’t you two manage to dress yourselves properly while on my ancestral estate?”

“Ancestral estate is a bit of a reach,” Pansy responded coolly. “There was no middle child to inherit this draughty pile in the middle of nowhere, so the Ministry let you keep it.” She looked pointedly at the shattered window. “Look, it’s falling to pieces as we speak.”

Hermione pressed her palms into her eyes, hard. “I didn’t mean to,” she muttered, hating the smallness of her voice. “It was just—” She gestured helplessly at the newspaper, now damp with spilled tea. *Pardons*. A word that meant mercy. But for whom?

Draco’s expression softened, the edge slipping from his voice. “I know.” He crossed the room, plucked the curved blackthorn wand from her hand with the gentleness of someone defusing a bomb, and set it on the counter. “You were just rattled. You’re fine.”

“She’s obviously not fine,” Pansy said sharply, inserting herself once again. “She’s got less control over herself than a first-year with a broomstick. If I were making a list as to who should be seeing mind healers...” She jerked her head in Hermione’s direction. “This one would be at the top.”

Draco’s head snapped toward her. “Stay out of it, Pansy. Just because you’re a walking constellation of personality disorders—”

“Oi,” Neville warned, meeting Draco’s heated gaze. “Tone.”

“Tone? It’s my bloody house, lest you forget—”

“Yes, it’s your bloody house,” Pansy cut in. “It’s your bloody house that she’ll end up leveling if someone doesn’t intervene.”

Hermione’s face burned hotter than the steam still curling from the broken kettle. It was unbearable, being spoken about as though she were not present.

“I said I’m fine.”

“Pansy’s right. You need help, Hermione.” Neville didn’t raise his voice, but it commanded the room all the same. “Pretending otherwise will only make things worse. There’s no bravery in delusion.”

“I’m not deluded.”

“Really? Then why won’t you listen to our concerns?” Neville asked, his voice low, even. “You don’t think that maybe I have a touch of experience dealing with what happens to someone with excessive exposure to Unforgivables?”

The room went still. There was no ground to stand on against Neville’s blunt conviction. After all, he was the son of Frank and Alice Longbottom, infamously left hollow by Bellatrix’s wand (*Hermione’s* wand. With the nationwide shortages, she hadn’t the opportunity to replace it— at least that’s what she was telling herself). He had grown up in the shadow of their broken minds, visiting them at St. Mungo’s. He knew that some damage could calcify into permanence.

Draco’s eyes flicked back to Hermione, gray gone stormy. The edge bled out of his posture as he took in her humiliation. He looked gutted.

“I don’t need a mind healer,” she said, every syllable hardened by pride. “I need the Ministry to stop pardoning the people who wanted my head on a pike.”

“You know,” Pansy said casually, reaching for an orange from the fruit bowl. “I’m seeing a mind healer twice a week. As it turns out, being imprisoned and nearly forced into becoming a broodmare for your murderous parents does quite a number on your ability to maintain intimate relationships. Who would have guessed?” She peeled the orange with slow precision, nails flashing red against the pith.

Hermione let out a brittle laugh. “Well, forgive me if I don’t think my little outbursts are on par with your parents’ decades-long experiment in generational cruelty.”

“You’re right, Granger.” Pansy’s face was troubled. “I think what you went through was worse.”

It hadn’t been that bad, had it? She was alive. She was in love. She wasn’t in St. Mungo’s. And yet—

She couldn't allow herself to linger. If she did, she would have to admit that surviving Bellatrix's attentions had left more than invisible bruises, that the Killing Curse echoing through Draco's body had left more than memory in her own. It was easier—safer—to diminish it. To call her state survivable, manageable. Anything but the truth: that she was still stuck in the war. That this Hermione was simply a phantom, albeit one that had learned to walk upright, wear clean robes, and speak in full sentences.

She pressed her palms flat to the table, wishing she could push down the shame the way one might tamp soil over a seed. But it had already sprouted, curling tight in her chest.

"Nothing that happened to you is your fault," Neville said gently. "Not the curses you used. Not the torture you endured. You didn't choose any of that. But still, there are wounds. Treating your injuries doesn't make you weak. It makes you responsible."

Hermione pressed her lips together. She felt cornered. Beside her, Draco's hand brushed the edge of hers on the table. Near enough to remind her that he was listening to every word. That he would not let this drop.

---

The following week, she found herself in a high-windowed office in Diagon Alley that smelled of old carpeting. Her chair was soft, positioned to lounge, but Hermione sat bolt upright, her quill poised, as though this were an examination. At the desk, Healer Celestine Moraunt, a supposed specialist in magical trauma, studied her with unnerving patience.

"You are describing a state of heightened volatility," she said, after Hermione finished recounting an—admittedly edited—version of the last year or so, glossing over some of the more damning illegalities and giving only a bare bones rendition of her and Draco's magical bond. "And volatility is not uncommon after repeated contact with Dark magic. Research from both magical and Muggle sources suggests that prolonged exposure to extreme threat alters the



nervous system, and thus, the magical core. It recalibrates you to expect danger, even when the danger has passed. Cognitively, you know you are safe, but your body and your magic are not convinced. They are conditioned to anticipate damage. The heightened vigilance, the hair-trigger responses, the intrusive dreams... your magic is doing exactly what it has learned to do: survive at any and all costs."

"Yes, I understand what post-traumatic stress disorder is—" Hermione interrupted, sifting through her notes on the topic.

"It sounds like you've simultaneously suffered the loss of a magical tether, which can feel like an amputation," Moraunt continued, unfazed. Her accent carried the faintest Northern lilt. "Phantom sensation where there was once a connection. Have you experienced that?"

Hermione's chest tightened. Yes, she wanted to say. Every time Draco left the room, she felt the absence like a limb cut from her. But she couldn't say it aloud, not when it would sound so pathetic, so dependent.

Instead she smoothed her skirt and replied, coolly, "I've adapted."

Moraunt inclined her head, as though she had expected such recalcitrance. "Your tether—magical and emotional—was both a coping mechanism and a protective factor. It buffered you against some of the worst psychic damage the war sought to inflict. Its sudden absence, however, has left you destabilized. When such bonds rupture, the body and mind often attempt to recreate them. Sometimes by clinging to the same partner. Sometimes by developing compulsive routines. Sometimes by over-identifying with control. Your lists, your letters, your attempts to police the Ministry—"

Hermione's cheeks flushed. "That's activism."

"Of course," Moraunt said smoothly. "But it is also a way to manage the internal chaos by imposing order externally. Unfortunately, your

disregulation is something you will have to address head-on. A deliberate reduction of both known triggers and magical exertion would allow your core to stabilise. If you refuse, your magic will continue to externalize whatever you repress.”

Hermione’s quill snapped.

“Shall I check out completely, then?” she asked, laced with sarcasm. “Manage my stress by running off on holiday to Spain? Rent a cabana and hope the Ministry sorts itself out in my absence? Ignore the paper because it makes me uncomfortable? Sod the news of the displaced muggleborns, or the victims of—”

“I am not suggesting ignorance,” Moraunt replied calmly, seemingly unbothered by the bite in Hermione’s tone. “I am suggesting selectivity. Exposure without capacity to regulate compounds damage. The nervous system is overwhelmed by stimuli it cannot process, producing hypervigilance and reactivity. If your magical core remains in constant contact with reminders of threat, such as the wand of your tormenter, your magic will continue to behave as if you are at war. You will not be able to accomplish what you seek— which is to say, reform— if you are disregulated. The outcome will be worse than shattered kettles. Do you understand?”

The truth of it needled her. It was possible that the war had burned away every other illusion she might once have had about herself, but not this one: most of all, Hermione needed to be necessary. During the war, her value had been proven daily through research, strategy, decisions that kept them one step ahead of death. She had been indispensable. What was she now? A clever girl, who, without a crisis to manage, was creating one for herself?

“So your prescription is what? Abandon my work? Leave everyone who depends on me behind?”

Moraunt’s lips curved almost imperceptibly. “I would call it strategic withdrawal. A recalibration of both nervous system and magical core in an environment free of the cues that trigger volatility. The

distinction is critical.” The woman folded her spectacles. “Three months of new scenery and limited magic. No less.”

Hermione was, for once in her life, left speechless. She left the appointment with her notes shoved furiously in her bag, the words “recalibrate” and “retreat” underlined twice, as though repetition might force them to cohere.

There was, she admitted, something terrifying about the idea of rest. If she stopped writing letters, if she stopped compiling lists, if she stopped hurling herself against the Ministry’s inadequacies, what then? The thought of stepping away, of being—what had the healer called it? Regulated?—threatened to expose a hollow at her center she had no idea how to fill.

---

The study at the Second Son’s Estate was the sort of room built from excess. Heavy velvet curtains in a deep, wine-dark red muffled the windows, their tassels long and dust-furred. A majestic fireplace stretched the length of the far wall, its mantle crowded with Black family silverwork: serpents coiled around candlesticks, a tarnished clock crowned with a griffin frozen mid-snarl. The rug, which she and Draco had used rather indecently the prior summer, still had a notable wine stain.

Hermione curled in one of the gaudy brocade chairs, going over her notes from the session, cross referencing Moraunt’s diagnosis against three different volumes on magical trauma she’d picked up at a newly reopened Flourish and Blotts. She’d even pulled down *The Principles of Curse Transference*—a volume thick with dust and Black family annotations— from the small library, its margins crowded with contemptuous notes.

Across from her, Draco lounged in one of the leather armchairs, smoke curling from the cigarette pinched between his fingers (a habit he had, unfortunately, picked up from his pink-haired cousin). To the untrained eye, he might have looked indifferent, but she caught the

way his gaze tracked her movements, the tension set in his jaw. Watching her, as though she might disappear if he blinked.

“Well?” he prompted, when she finally abandoned her reading out of pure frustration. “What edict did Pansy’s oracle of the psyche deliver? Purge by solstice fire? Abstention from pleasure and drink? Or simply the usual drivel—abandon reason, surrender to feeling?”

“Do you remember...” Hermione hesitated. “Do you remember what you said when you were in Mungo’s?”

“I was on a lot of pain potion,” Draco said automatically, his face slightly flushed. “I’m excused any and all waxing poetic about your sweet—”

“Not that.” Hermione shoved the notes further away. “About wanting to just get away from it all? My healer is in apparent agreement. She wants me to stop. The letters, the petitions. Everything. She thinks I should... ‘strategically withdraw.’”

Draco arched a pale brow. “That’s an elegant way of saying, ‘Let’s go on holiday, Draco.’”

“That is not what I’m saying.” Her hands tightened into fists on her knees. “I can’t just run off while bloody Kingsley pardons Death Eaters and forgets all about the traumatized victims who’ve had their families murdered and domiciles destroyed—”

“As someone who has had their family murdered and domicile destroyed,” Draco said dryly. “I give you full permission to do just that.”

“I’m being serious.”

“So am I.”

Hermione chewed her bottom lip. “She thinks I’m addicted to being useful.”

“What an astute observation.”

“I don’t—” She flushed, caught between indignation and the sting of recognition. “I don’t need to be needed.”

“You’d sign up to scrub Azkaban’s floors if they told you no one else was duly qualified.”

“You know, you’re not nearly as witty as you seem to think you are.”

“As I see it,” Draco continued, ignoring her quip. “People leaned on you your whole life because you were brilliant, and even more than that, willing. Now, you think if you stop for five minutes the whole world will fall apart.” He tapped ash into the tray. “Newsflash: it already has. You’re not the Ministry’s sole scaffolding. You’re not Atlas holding the sky.”

She wanted to be offended, but instead, she realized with a clarity that embarrassed her, how tired she was of being the fulcrum. Of the weight of it all. The room—its Black silver and heavy curtains, the ghosted place where they had first unmade themselves—felt too warm all at once. Her throat worked around nothing.

“Three months,” she said at last, because the healer had said three months and because it sounded safer than saying yes. “She wants me to stop for three months. No petitions. No daily pamphleteering. I’m supported to get rid of this—” she thrust out Bellatrix’s wand with a grimace “—and have minimal magic use.”

Draco plucked the wand from her hand before she could blink. “An excellent starting point.” He turned it over once in his fingers, expression cool, almost clinical. “I hate this bloody thing.” Then, without preamble, he snapped it cleanly in two.

“Are you insane?” Hermione gasped, lunging forward. “Draco, I don’t have a spare! There’s a wand shortage! I can’t just— just— go without. What if something happens? An attack or a resurgence?”

“Then you’ll use mine. I’ll happily cower in your shadow. But as it stands, you aren’t supposed to be doing magic,” he replied. “Two snidgets, one stone.”

“You had no right,” she spluttered. “You—you— absolute neanderthal!”

It was infuriating—the arrogance behind his spur of the moment act—but she couldn’t deny the faint sense of unburdening that came with the broken shards of wood. Not that she’d ever admit it to him.

“I had every right.” He stubbed out his cigarette, something pained in the deliberate movement. “Every time you held that wand, I saw her. I saw you screaming. I saw every time I failed to become proficient in Occlumancy. She used the Cruciatus on me like a whip on a crup. Longbottom can hardly stomach breakfast if it’s in the room. Haven’t you noticed?”

No. She hadn’t. She had been so consumed by besting her own trauma, that she had not considered the curved wand’s other victims. She had not seen Neville at breakfast, not seen Draco suffering in tandem, reliving his own violation every time she cast. Bellatrix had used him like a training post until he could master shutting her out. How many times had she reminded him?

For the first time, she forgot what point she was trying to prove by carrying it and to whom.

“Now that that’s sorted...Spain or France?” Draco tilted his head, as if considering. “I’m partial to the latter. Better wine. And frankly, my Spanish is atrocious.”

“What are you blithering on about?”

“Our exile,” he said lightly, as though it were obvious. “Surely you didn’t think I’d let you rot here, wandless, staring at the wallpaper like some sort of deranged Victorian housewife for three months straight? Provence, perhaps, for the culture. Or the Côte d’Azur.”

“What about Lavender?”

“You can write.”

“What about Harry? Ron and Ginny are still mourning Fred—”

“We’ll have them round for tea. International portkeys cost an arm and a leg these days, but luckily, I happen to be the sole heir to an enormous sum of blood money I’m rather eager to waste on frivolities.”

She watched him with an odd, fluttering relief in her belly. He worked like this: in small, decisive, practical actions that shifted the world incrementally back into order. He was witty on the surface, dry and slicing; when he was with her, an extra softness threaded his words.

“I won’t have my mind going soft,” she warned. “I want books. Mountains of them.”

“Literary fiction,” Draco conceded. “Poetry. No cursed tombs or ritual texts.”

“Magical theory.”

“Muggle theory. And a television. Potter seems enamoured with the blasted thing, says it shuts off his brain.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Done.”

He smiled. “Perhaps I’ll make a useless lout of you yet.”

She thought he’d bask in his triumph. Instead, he picked up the broken pieces of Bellatrix’s wand and placed them delicately in her hands. Hermione felt a sudden, awful flutter of possessiveness, a childish reliance on the tiny object that had once been an axis of terror and, absurdly, a talisman of her survival.

“You’re right,” he said quietly. “I had no right to do that without asking. But every time you lifted it, I couldn’t—”

His hands were trembling. Draco was trained in concealment, built to smooth away the evidence of fracture until even she, who had once shared his very pulse, could barely trace it. Occlumency had turned him into a fortress, and she had thought his walls meant he was coping with all of this better than her, somehow more in control of himself. At that moment, she realized she'd been wrong.

Without giving herself time to think, she rose and tossed the pieces into the fireplace. They landed with a dull clatter. Draco looked at her, something very complicated on his face. Love and pride and compassion and worry and sacrifice and—

“Let's be rid of it,” she whispered.

Draco flicked his wand. Flames roared up, golden and all consuming. The curved handle caught like tinder, and in seconds the black grain of the wood blazed white, edges curling, splintering into ash. Smoke rose and threaded itself into the chimney's throat. The smell was acrid, strange: not the clean sharp scent of cedar or pine, but something bitter and resinous.

Hermione rested her cheek against his shoulder as they watched it burn, the heavy velvet curtains swallowing the room in dark red shadow. For the first time in months, she felt a stitch undo itself in her heart. An almost imperceptible hint of release

---

- Hermione POV! Oh how I've missed her neuroses! Hermione is actually the most natural character for me to write (as I, like Hermione, am often the critic of my own life).

- The motif of distorted magic (Hermione's kettle exploding, her spells misfiring) is supposed to mirror the psychosomatic effects of trauma (the body remembers; magic is the body), giving a metaphysical dimension to PTSD.

- This chapter is about ritual and its failures, funerals that cannot contain grief, objects that cannot be neutral, and healing that cannot



be linear. It stages survival as an uneasy negotiation between memory and forgetting-- a negotiation both Hermione and Draco are profusely struggling with.

- This chapter is also for the Virgos, which is to say, everyone who has ever done research in preparation for therapy. (Chapter title from the Dickinson poem, "Hope" is the thing with feathers.

- Very soon: France!

---

# The Season of Wanting

## Chapter 51: The Season of Wanting

---

Draco and Hermione experience a very belated honeymoon phase.

---

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

A week later, Hermione left England. Her departure was not without some fuss. She stood in the newly constructed Burrow with a list spread across the table like a battle map.

“Harry, you’ll need to check on Lavender for me. She likes the candied violets from the patisserie on Diagon Alley, even though she insists she doesn’t. Don’t bother with the sugared almonds, they stick in her teeth.” She tilted her head, listening for the sound of hammering. “George is overexerting himself on the construction—someone should make sure he’s not on the roof unsupervised, I’m worried he’ll faint in this heat. Ron, the Prophet is going to print another round of pardons soon, so someone has to write to the editor, or the public will think—”

“Come off it,” Ron groaned, tipping his chair onto its back legs. “I draw the line at bloody homework, okay? Go take your holiday.”

“It’s not a holiday.” Hermione bristled. “It’s healer mandated. And forgive me for wanting to make sure—”

“What Ron means is, we want you to get better, Hermione.” Harry cut her off with a look of concern that reminded her uncomfortably of Professor Lupin. “We’ll manage just fine. And if we don’t, Malfoy says he’s going to curse our nobs off.”

Hermione cleared her throat. “Yes, I’ve actually asked him several times to stop threatening your genitals.”

“And yet, he keeps insisting he’ll sectumsempra my bollocks if I’m not ‘supportive of your recuperative efforts.’” Ron pulled her into a parting hug. “Write if you need us.”

For a moment, she saw them as they had once been—three children standing shoulder to shoulder in a girls’ lavatory, facing a mountain troll. Now, in the half-built Burrow, she looked at them again and could almost see the ghost of those children, layered faintly over the worn and war-marked men before her. She wished she could fold them back into their smaller, simpler bodies, where survival had meant a clumsy spell and a stroke of luck.

“Bloody hell, Hermione,” Ron groaned, his voice muffled against her curls. “You’re going to crack my ribs.”

---

They finally arrived on the southern coast of France, in a sleepy Muggle town east of Toulon. The portkey dropped them into a square at dusk, uneven cobblestones shadowed by a crooked bell tower. Their lodgings were in an old fisherman’s villa (her choice; Draco wanted the massive chateau with an included butler). It was perched on a cliff, stucco walls crumbling, balconies spilling with wild lavender. Hermione pressed her palms to the balustrade and inhaled, the sea spread out before her, violet at the edges, glass-dark at its heart.

Even after the sun set, the heat was thick with the kind of heat that made fabric cling. They ate supper at the uneven table in the courtyard, the boards warped by years of sun. Draco had gone down into the town earlier and returned with an armful of supplies: crusty bread, a wheel of soft cheese sweating in its paper wrap, olives that glistened like small black stones. They opened a bottle of wine that Draco declared, “drinkable, though I wouldn’t dignify it with the word vintage.”

Hermione laughed, and they both stopped still, stricken by the lightness of the sound.

They talked about nothing and everything, the kind of conversation that stretched thin and easy across a summer night. Comparing which animals mated for life (swans, wolves, angelfish). Debating differences in French and English wizarding education (France was known for its ministry-supervised examinations with rigorous oral defenses, where students had to debate magical theory before a panel). Explaining the roundabout workings of the Muggle electrical grid ("It's not a web of lightning, Draco.")

After dinner, Draco suggested a walk down to the water. Their sandals scraped against the stone steps carved into the cliffside; below them, the sea held the swaying reflection of the waning moon. The tide pushed spray over their ankles as they waded out, shoes abandoned on the sand.

She watched, chewing her lip as he stripped off his shirt, tossing his clothes onto the embankment. His lithe figure, pale as a ghost, split through the black water.

She lifted her hem and hesitated for a moment, before tugging her dress over her head. The sea was a welcome shock of cold. Hermione floated on her back, her hair spooling around her like spilled ink, marveling at the sudden lightness of her body. Draco, as natural in the water as a selkie, swam circles around her in the moonlight.

The cliffs loomed behind them, and for a brief moment, Hermione thought of another cliffside: Shell Cottage, where they'd come back together after the horrors of Tonks House, desperate to reconfirm each other's heart beats. The memory was sharp, too sharp. When they'd had sex, it was frantic and anguished and raw. Every kiss had been an incantation against disappearance: you're here, you're here, you're here.

Now, with the moon slung low over the French sea, she wanted something else. She wanted to experience desire without the axe hanging over her head. To let her body remember what it was to be young and curious, before war had taught her to equate touch with violence and intimacy with loss.

When the tide picked up, they stumbled back up the cliff path in the dark, wrapped in mismatched towels. The villa's pale walls were luminous, its shutters thrown open to the night. A faint breeze teased the gauzy curtains.

Hermione lingered in the doorway, towel knotted tightly at her chest. She felt flushed, but not entirely from the wine or the exertion of the swim. Her thoughts were muddled, careening between want and terror.

Desire itself was not unfamiliar to Hermione. She felt it every time she saw the fine bones of his wrist when he unbuttoned his cuffs, in the deliberate precision with which he poured wine, in the sharp line of his throat when he tipped his head back in thought. What unsettled her was the absence of urgency.

She realized with a kind of horror that she did not know how to inhabit this feeling when it was not sharpened by desperation. How did one say I need you without sounding absurd? How did one allow oneself release without the alibi of terror?

"Draco," she started. "I—erm. I was thinking..."

He looked over from where he was fussing with the latch on the shutters. Barechested, seawater dripping from him in rivulets, darkening the rug beneath his feet. "I thought such behavior was medically prohibited."

She twisted her fingers together, mortified at how difficult this was. "I was thinking about...us."

He stilled, half-turning, a line forming between his brows. "Us?"

“I know lately things have been, well, different.”

“Different,” he repeated flatly.

“Yes. I mean.” She cleared her throat, tugging the towel tighter. “We’ve been through a war, obviously, which inherently alters personal dynamics, whether that’s romantic or social or even filial in nature. And it’s common for most people, much less couples, to struggle with— well, with reentry into ordinary life. By all accounts, intimacy is quite complicated, post-conflict. Priorities recalibrate, what with the pressing questions of identity and stability and whether one even recognizes oneself, let alone one’s partner, in the aftermath, and then there’s the matter of communication, which is a minefield in itself— ”

“Just spit it out,” Draco interrupted. His tone was hard, but there was a thread of something fragile wound up in it. “Are you ending things?”

“What?” Hermione blinked, bewildered. “No! That’s not what I’m saying at all.”

“You just gave me a fully-researched abstract about incompatibility in postwar relationships.”

“I was contextualizing!”

He arched a pale brow, skeptical. He was bracing himself, she realized, already building the wall against a loss he had half-expected all along. It was there in the set of his jaw, in the tightness at the corners of his eyes: fear lurking under the ever faithful guise of disdain.

She buried her face in her hands. “Why is this so difficult?” She peeked at him through her fingers, mortified, heat prickling her cheeks. “I want—” The words jammed up. “I just want us to be like we were before.”

“Before what? If you’re attempting to demote me to platonic housemate—”

Hermione let out a strangled sound, somewhere between exasperation and laughter. “For heaven’s sake, Draco, I’m trying to sleep with you.”

He wore the look of a man convinced he was being toyed with. “That was an attempt at a seduction?”

“I’m rusty!”

“Rusty?” To her immense irritation, his mouth twitched. “Granger, you’re catastrophic. But—” He pushed off the window ledge and closed the distance between them. His voice dropped. “I suppose it’s only sporting to allow you a practice round.” He reached out, thumb lingered just below her jaw, coaxing her chin upward so their eyes met. “As you were saying. You want...?”

She swallowed hard, her pulse fluttering at her throat. “I want you to...touch me.”

“Better.” His free hand caught at the knot of her towel, fiddling with the fabric. “Although, I’m still uncertain of the exact nature of your request. Precision, please. You know how I value clarity in instructions.”

Hermione’s face burned. “Draco.”

“Yes?” His mouth was inches from hers now, curved in infuriating amusement.

“I want you to touch me. Here.” She rested a finger on her lips. “And here.” She trailed her finger down her throat, to the swell of her breasts, and dropped her towel. His eyes went dark. “And here.” Down her stomach, to the apex of her thighs. “And here—”

Then his mouth was on hers. He kissed her, careful and steady and relieved, as though he'd been waiting all this time for permission. They half-stumbled, half-collided their way through the villa, knocking into the table, the chair legs, her hip catching on the edge of the counter. By the time they crashed into the bedroom, her pulse was everywhere. Between her legs, in her palms, at the hollow of her throat. He pulled back just enough to look at her, eyes wild.

"I've wanted this," he rasped. "I've wanted this so badly. To feel you coming apart under my hands. To be inside you. I wanted it, and I held back, because I couldn't — without the bond, I didn't know if you—" He groaned as she flexed her hips under him, brushing against his hard length. His hand tightened on her hip, restraint fraying. "I don't want to hold back anymore."

---

The world broke into fragments. The scrape of teeth against skin. The taste of smoke and salt and wine. Heat, slick and unbearable. Hands everywhere: gripping, stroking, coaxing. Every inch of skin, molten. Every nerve flared, waiting to be attended to. His chant filtered through the haze: mine mine mine. She couldn't tell where he ended and she began. Only the blur of pressure, of catch and release. The sound of her voice, high and crooning and unfamiliar. Why had she been nervous when this was so natural? His angle shifted, bringing them impossibly closer. She keened. A sharp edge, chased blindly. Above her, the ceiling seemed to tilt and shiver. Her spine arched. Her bones, like metal left too long in the forge. For the first time in months, she was not elsewhere. She was inside of her body and it was alive, unbearably alive, the place inside her chest bursting with light.

---

Mornings were bright, insistent things on the coast. The shutters always let in too much of the eager July sun; it sliced across the crooked floorboards, gilding the rumpled sheets in uneven stripes. Sometimes they lingered in bed until noon, unwilling to surrender to the day. Sometimes they found each other wanting again, mouths



slow, bodies sore from the night before, moving not with urgency but with a kind of wonder, as if they were rediscovering a favorite passage read too quickly the first time around.

She learned the geometry of his body in the early light: the shadowed lines of his collarbones, the faint white scars across his chest, the way the sun caught in his hair until it looked almost white. He mapped every inch of her, coaxing her onto her back and tugging at the sheet until it slid down her body in soft collapse. Instinct urged her to cover herself, but his hands would already be there, his touch possessive.

"I love this," he murmured, his palm curving over the narrow dip of her waist, thumb pressing into the gentle give of her stomach. He trailed his touch to her calf, stretching her leg out before him, thumb stroking the fine line of muscle. "Strong," he said, almost to himself. "And absurdly elegant. I used to linger packing up my things in Potions on days when you didn't wear tights under your skirts, just so I could watch you cross the room." Then his fingers moved upward, until they rested at the tender juncture of hip and thigh. He bent, his mouth grazing the skin.

"I like when you wear those knickers," he murmured, voice roughened to a rasp, "The blue ones, with the high cut. They show off this little crease, right here..." His teeth grazed the tender flesh, and she trembled under him, mortified and inflamed in equal measure.

Yes, sometimes they took their time getting out of bed.

Other mornings they went straight to the sea, swam until their arms ached, emerged salt-stung and giddy. To Hermione's great amusement, Draco became quite taken with the act of cooking breakfast the muggle way. "It's like potions," he said, whisking eggs with unnecessary flourish, herbs snipped from the little pots on the terrace. He flipped omelettes, their edges golden and trembling. She drank coffee and filled in crosswords with brisk satisfaction, sliding

the paper across to him only when she got stuck on the obscure French terms.

The days were long and full, though they rarely did anything remarkable. Errands in the market, the bright chaos of tomatoes and whole fish and lavender bunches, Hermione smirking at Draco's refusal to haggle over prices. They walked the crooked lanes of the town, past fishermen repairing their nets in the sun, past shuttered windows painted in salt-eaten blues and greens. Their neighbors eyed them with the idle curiosity reserved for young strangers who had suddenly appeared but paid their rent on time. Hermione made a point to greet them in careful French each morning, while Draco stood behind her, politely aloof.

Of course, there was much speculation. The consensus was that they were lovers who had eloped, fleeing some impossible scandal. Star-crossed, tragic, wildly devoted. Parents who disavowed the match. They weren't entirely wrong. Once, in the market, the woman who sold them fruit asked Draco the question, "et elle, qui est-elle pour vous?"

Draco replied without hesitation. "Mon tout."

The woman gave a breathy sigh, pressing an extra nectarine into Hermione's palm.

She watched as Draco learned to navigate the Muggle world. Although he kept it perpetually in a disillusioned holster, he refused to use his wand for menial tasks, fully devoting himself to their cover story. He was intrigued by the postal service, by the tangle of telephone wires above the cafés, by the mechanics of a moped. He wheedled a local shop boy into allowing him a test drive; at first, he nearly flung himself into the hedgerow, but then he found the balance, mastered the throttle, and suddenly he was flying down the lane, pale hair streaming, the hum of the motor chasing him like a swarm of bees.

When he returned ten minutes later, cheeks flushed, he dismounted with affected dignity. "I'll need one immediately," he declared, brushing dust from his trousers.

By the end of the week, a secondhand moped appeared in the courtyard of their villa, delivered by a shopkeeper who looked surprised to have secured a sale to the eccentric Englishman. Draped over the seat were two helmets: one, matte black and the other smaller, pearlescent, clearly chosen with her in mind.

Hermione raised a brow, arms crossed. "You don't actually expect me to get on that thing with you."

"If you could handle a dragon, I assumed a motorcycle would be child's play," Draco replied smoothly, fastening the strap of his own helmet. He gestured toward the second. "Come on. Or are you afraid?"

Hermione stared at the ridiculous, gleaming machine squatting in their sunlit courtyard, and felt the very Gryffindor part of her that could simply not refuse a dare make itself known. She sighed, tugged the pearly helmet over her curls, and climbed on behind him.

Draco smirked, smug satisfaction bleeding into something softer when her arms wrapped around his waist. "Hold tight," he said, and the moped sputtered to life beneath them, a strange, furious little heart.

His discoveries tugged her back toward a part of herself she had kept at arm's length since the war. It was a difficult reentry, an ever painful reminder of her parents. They should have been able to meet him. They should have been the ones to explain receipts and washing machines, laughing at Draco's arch disdain for polyester and bus timetables. Instead, she was the sole interpreter of a world that had once been hers but no longer belonged to her in any uncomplicated way.

It also felt good to tell him about packed lunches, about childhood holidays in Devon, about traffic jams and the Euro. To curl in front of the boxy television, watching soap operas and nature documentaries dubbed in French. A disarming mingling of old ache and new curiosity.

In the evenings, they dined alfresco on roasted peppers slick with oil, grilled sardines that left their fingers shining, tart plum gallettes. After, they ducked into the village's café-bar, the air scented with Gauloises smoke. The space was crowded and low-lit, with old men hunched over dominoes, couples speaking in murmurs at marble-topped tables. In the corner, an old radio played classic jazz, horns filtering through the haze of voices and clinking glasses.

They slid into a booth near the back. At first they sat politely, but the anonymity of the place began to loosen them, its indifference granting a permission they never could have found in Wizarding Britain. By the second glass, he leaned close to murmur something in her ear, lips grazing the curve of her jaw. By the third, her fingers were in his hair, his hand splayed at her waist.

When the waitress appeared with another carafe of wine, Hermione straightened and half-stammered an apology, fumbling for composure, but the woman only smiled, setting down the bottle with a practiced air. "Ah, les jeunes mariés." Newlyweds.

Sometimes, they went further afield. A bus ride along the coast, Draco suspicious of the engine's rattle, Hermione napping with her head pressed against the glass. They walked through villages that smelled of salt and oily fish. Wandered into churches cool as caves, where Draco tilted his head at the painted saints as though trying to slot them into a taxonomy he understood. Hermione slipped a bill into the poor box and lit a candle, though she did not know for what or to whom. Draco stood beside her, his gaze passing over the latticed confessional, the silvered reliquary that promised a bone, the fresco of a martyr clutching arrows to his chest.

“An economy of forgiveness,” he murmured, tilting his head at the votives.

“Something like that,” Hermione whispered.

They dozed under the whir of a fan, read novels side by side until the words swam, sprawled on the cool stone floor with a bowl of cherries between them. They walked the promenade in the dusky air, among Muggle couples with strollers and bicycles. The worst of their nights—the restless dreams, the phantom panic that never quite evaporated in full—seemed smaller in the face of these rituals. They built, without ever saying so aloud, the shape of an ordinary life.

Despite herself, Hermione missed using magic. It was the little things: mending a torn hem with the flick of her wand, not having to fuss with matches to light the stove. And the bigger ones: the absence of a community that knew her, the very sense of belonging to something vast and strange and extraordinary. She felt disloyal for missing it, greedy for wanting both.

Worse still was the guilt that coiled through her when she caught herself happy. Eating cherries on the cool tile floor, laughing when Draco stalled the moped on a hill, leaning into his shoulder in the shadow of a half-eroded church—each moment tugged at her like a rebuke. How dare she. Sometimes, a voice rose against the tide of her shame, a voice which sounded very much like Healer Moraunt’s: That isn’t how this world works, Hermione. Grief does not demand abstinence from joy. She’d close her eyes, struggling to hold two truths at once: the aching absence, and the fierce, defiant presence of this life that was, for better or worse, still hers to inhabit.

---

They took the train to Nice for the weekend on a whim, gliding along the coast. The Mediterranean glittering like a spilled chalice on their right, vineyards and ochre rooftops rolling past on their left. Cypress trees speared the horizon, their dark green a counterpoint to the sun-bleached facades, and every so often the train plunged through a

tunnel, the world vanishing only to reemerge brighter, louder, more dazzling than before.

Hermione pressed her forehead to the glass and drank in every inch of the view, stunned by the sheer beauty of the scenery. Draco affected indifference, though she caught him craning for a glimpse of the distant harbors, the ship's masts like little matchsticks in their slips.

Nice was louder, brighter, more brazen than their little fishing village. The Promenade des Anglais unfurled in both directions, palms and striped parasols blooming across the beach. They found a patch of sand distant enough from the crowds and spread their towels away from the bronzed couples strolling arm in arm and children shrieking at the surf. Hermione shed her linen dress and unclasped her bikini top. Around them, locals of every age and shape basked in varying states of undress, unbothered. When in France, she thought, and stretched out on her stomach, hair spilling over her shoulders.

Draco made a sound like a kicked dog.

"That's not fair."

"What's not fair?" she asked, utterly unconcerned. She stretched, languid and feline, letting the sun gild her skin. His breath caught, audible even above the crash of waves.

After a while, she rolled lazily onto her back, squinting at the glare, a book of poetry balanced in one hand. Draco swore under his breath.

The locals paid them no mind. A pair of women strolled past, limbs slick with oil; a teenage couple skipped stones at the surf's edge; someone's transistor radio hissed faintly with the thrum of a chanson. It made her bold, this invisibility, the sense that they could vanish into the city's anonymous brightness.

Draco shifted, restless on the towel, knees drawn up, then stretched out, then crossed at the ankles. Hermione hummed, pretending to be

engrossed in a line of Baudelaire, though the words blurred into nothing.

It was intoxicating, this power. To be wanted like this, openly. She basked in it as much as she basked in the sun, letting both soak through her skin until she felt drunk on the abundance.

Suddenly, Draco rose from his towel, sand clinging to his calves. “Coming?” He asked, nodding to the sea, his jaw tight with restraint.

“You go ahead.” She swallowed her grin. “I’m going to enjoy the view.”

Hermione propped herself on her elbows, watching him wade into the water. The sea rose to his waist, then his chest, until he dove under and reemerged further out. Water sheeting down his torso, glinting across the pale ridges of muscle. Back at Hogwarts she’d pretended not to notice, tamping down the flicker of awareness whenever he pushed his hair out of his eyes or moved with heady grace across the Quidditch pitch. But now, there were no schoolboy angles to soften him. The war had pared him down, stripped away the uncertainties of youth, and left him harder, stronger, a man in every sense. His shoulders had broadened, his stomach honed into lean planes from running his cousin’s Auror drills. Yes, she had always known him to be beautiful in that polished, aristocratic way, but here—stripped to skin and muscle and sinew, gleaming against the vast blue—he was made all but mythic by the shimmering Mediterranean.

Draco turned in the water, caught her staring, and smirked. The curve of his mouth, a challenge. He lifted a hand, crooked two fingers, beckoning her forward with the arrogance of a man who knew someone was always looking.

She dusted the sand from her thighs and tugged her bikini top back into place, before heading for the surf. The water lapped against her ankles, her shins, her thighs. By the time she reached him, Draco was treading water just past where the waves broke, pale hair

slicked back from his face. He reached for her, hooked his hands under her thighs and wrapped her around him. The Mediterranean heaved and dipped. Lifting them together, pulling them apart.

“I’ve come to a conclusion,” he murmured against her damp skin, his lips grazing the curve of her throat. “About life.”

“Oh?” Hermione laughed. “And what grand theory of existence have you derived from the Riviera?”

“Every mortal has only a handful of seasons,” he began. “What lunacy, then, to squander them in hesitation, in penance. In endless scruples. I’ve come to the conclusion that life is purely meant to be consumed, to be swallowed in greedy mouthfuls until you’re drunk on it.”

“You’re a newly initiated disciple of Dionysis, then?” she teased, smoothing back his hair with damp palms. “A true believer of pleasure without penance.”

“Pleasure is proof that we are more than machines, grinding toward death. Desire is what elevates us, Granger.” Hermione met his gaze, her breath catching. The sunlight fractured across his cheekbones, his pale hair slicked dark, his eyes sparking with something half-wild. “I think pleasure is the only honest instinct humanity has ever had. Hunger for food, thirst for wine, the want for knowledge...” He gave her what could only be described as a filthy look. “...the want for one another. The philosophers may argue about virtue, the priests may prattle about grace, but as I see it, appetite is what moves the world. And you—” His teeth grazed her throat and she shivered with the implication. “You are the most exquisite proof of that.”

Her nails dug into his shoulders, the words spilling out of her even as her breath shortened. “That’s—that’s not entirely new, you know. Aristotle—Aristotle argues that eudaimonia, human flourishing, is rooted in virtue, not appetite—”

He bit down on some sensitive place and she stifled a moan.



“But—but even he conceded that pleasure is a natural good, that it’s not—oh— not inherently base, only misused when it distracts from reason—”

His hands slid from her waist to her hips as she clung to him, grazing her arse, before slipping into her bikini bottoms. Each touch felt magnified by the water’s resistance, every slide of skin on skin transformed into something languorous and elemental.

“Distracting you from reason right now, am I?”

“Draco,” she breathed, half warning. “People will see.”

“That didn’t seem to concern you earlier.” His fingers dipped lower, parting her. “When you were sunning yourself, all spread out and golden. Showing off those pretty tits.” He tweaked her nipple through her top. “I nearly took you there and then.”

He stroked her with maddening patience, the pad of his thumb pressing sinfully against her clit. Each touch sent a shudder through her, her body arching into his chest.

“The French do have some rules. They’ll arrest us for—public indecency—” Her voice turned into a gasp as his fingers curled inside her, finding that devastating spot with unerring precision.

“We’re no one here,” he murmured. “They’ve not even noticed us. They think we’re just another couple of boring English tourists, trying not to burn in the sun.”

He coaxed her hips to grind helplessly against his hand, the slick of her arousal lost to the waves. She tried to hold herself back, tried to summon words, reason, anything, but all that escaped was a keening sound as he drove her higher, thumb circling more quickly. Pleasure twisted through her, sudden and exquisite. To anyone watching from a distance, they might have seemed like only another couple tangled playfully in the surf, but beneath the surface, hidden by the glimmering Mediterranean, she came hard around his fingers.

They emerged from the sea looking flushed and rather pleased with themselves. Together, they towed off and walked along the shore, the pebbled beach harsh under their soles. For lunch, they found a café tucked just off the Promenade, shaded by striped awnings, and shared a platter of oysters on a bed of crushed ice, their ridged shells pearly with condensation. Draco watched with undisguised interest as Hermione tipped one to her lips, brine and lemon sliding down her throat, her eyes fluttering shut at the sharp salt tang.

Wine followed, cold and pale. They lingered, watching the swirl of pedestrians go by: children tugging at their mothers' hands, tourists chattering in a dozen languages, a violinist bowing some heartrending tune on the cobblestones. The young couple at the next table struck up a conversation—English, unmistakably, with clipped Liverpudlian vowels— and, upon overhearing Hermione and Draco's accents, leaned over with enthusiasm.

"We've just finished uni," the man explained. "Here on a bit of a celebratory holiday. And you?"

"Honeymoon," Draco interjected, just as Hermione piped up, "Gap year."

The couple exchanged amused looks.

"Er," Hermione invented. "We got married at the end of our gap year. All that backpacking was very romantic."

The Liverpudlians laughed.

"You've certainly got the glow," the man said, raising his glass. "I'm Jamie, by the way. This little minx is Sophie."

"I think that's dead romantic," Sophie said to Hermione, sighing. "No one gets married young anymore these days."

She wanted to point out that she had already lived a thousand lifetimes in the past few years, that she hardly felt young at all. But

such a statement would require the sort of explanations she was not exactly allowed to impart, lest she violate the Statute of Secrecy.

In answer, Draco reached over and covered her hand with his thumb idly stroking the back of her knuckles. “When you know, you know.”

Sophie all but swooned. “Exactly! Jamie’s far too sensible for all that. He wants us to save up before we settle down. But I keep saying—”

Jamie groaned, nudging her playfully with his shoulder. “Here we go again. You know your parents would go absolutely spare if I got on one knee before I got a decent job. What’s that your mum keeps saying? Prospects first, proposals second.”

“What did you study?” Hermione asked politely.

“History, if you can believe it. Utterly unemployable,” Jamie said with a self-deprecating grin.

“On the contrary,” Draco said smoothly, refilling the four glasses. “I think history is one of the most important disciplines there is. How else do we learn not to repeat the mistakes of our forefathers?”

Jamie looked pleasantly startled, as though he wasn’t accustomed to strangers validating his choice. “That’s what I keep telling my dad. He wanted me to go into economics.”

“Dull as ditchwater,” Sophie interjected, wrinkling her nose.

“Numbers and markets and blah blah blah. Half the reason I’ve stuck around is because Jamie’s always got some mad story about the Plantagenets or the Tudors.”

“Or the Normans,” Jamie added, warming to his subject. “Did you know—”

Sophie groaned, flagging the waiter for another bottle. “Bollocks, you’ve set him off now.”

Hermione chuckled, delighted by the easy banter. It reminded her of evenings in the Gryffindor common room, voices overlapping, debates spilling into laughter. It struck her then how long it had been since she'd felt safe enough to simply enjoy other people. So much of her life had been lived in vigilance, always parsing tone, anticipating judgement. Bracing for rejection. To sit in the sun with strangers, to hear their squabbles about jobs and mothers and rings, and to feel only warmth—it was something she hadn't realized she'd craved. She let herself bask in it, in their youth and their ordinariness, in the simple miracle of being four people at a café in Nice, bound by nothing more complicated than accents and a shared carafe of wine.

"And you?" Jamie asked, turning to Draco. "What did you two study?"

Draco didn't miss a beat. "International business," he said, with a knowing grimace. Hermione bit back a smile, marveling at how easily he inhabited the role. "Though at present, I've found myself more engaged in...leisurely pursuits." He tipped his wineglass toward Hermione in a gesture that made Sophie sigh all over again.

"Er— I studied literature," she said, eyes catching on the poetry collection she'd stashed in her bag. "I'm a bit mad for books and the like."

She couldn't help but imagine it, this false life: herself at Oxford, perhaps, walking beneath cloisters, clutching a satchel bulging with papers. Days spent in the Bodleian, evenings arguing about Milton over pints. A life measured in footnotes and tutorials, her name printed not in *The Daily Prophet* but in journals no one read outside of faculty lounges. What might it have been like, to have her brilliance nurtured instead of conscripted?

Draco's thumb stroked the back of her hand, pulling her back. "Top of her class, every year," he added. "She makes it sound modest, but the truth is she's the cleverest wit—" He caught himself, amending—"cleverest woman I've ever met."

Sophie leaned toward her, lowering her voice conspiratorially. "Got him wrapped around that little finger, you do."

Jamie clapped him on the back. "Makes the rest of us look bad, mate."

Draco's mouth curved in satisfaction, the picture of a man who had just won some invisible contest. His thumb swept across Hermione's knuckles, and she found herself absurdly moved.

"What about your parents?" Sophie asked innocently, looking between them. "Were they up in arms about you getting hitched right out of school?"

Across the table, Draco's wineglass froze midway to his mouth. For a split second, neither of them moved, their silence stretching far too long for the question's simplicity.

Then Hermione spoke. "Unfortunately," she said quietly. "We're estranged."

It was the first time she'd told someone something other than: my parents are dead. The honesty behind the statement felt like a gut punch.

"Oh," Sophie looked regretful. "I'm so sorry. Hopefully they'll come around."

Hermione smiled thinly at Sophie, though her stomach twisted. She wanted to say: They won't. They can't. They don't know I exist. She knew the spell was irreversible. She had cast it knowing there could be no undoing. That had been the point. Safety through finality. Even if Voldemort won, they would live. They would never know her absence, because they would never know she had been.

She had checked only once, during an indulgence of her selfishness. Used a phone box in London to call an international operator, long-distance to Sydney. The crackle of the line, her palms damp with

sweat as she gave the name: “Wilkins Dental.” Their new names—Monica and Wendell Wilkins—rolling off the receptionist’s tongue like a lock clicking shut.

It was proof the spell had worked. Proof they were safe. And to undo it—to appear wand in hand, and attempt to force their old lives back upon them with a near guarantee of further neurological damage—would have been the cruellest thing she could imagine. Memory charms did not work on Muggles the way they did on magical beings. Their minds resisted too much. To expose them to repeated magical intervention was an act so invasive it bordered on violence.

Hermione finished the dregs of her wine, the crisp liquid doing nothing to ease the ache in her chest. Draco’s hand brushed her curls lightly from her sunburned shoulder.

“Darling,” he said, smoothly enough that only she could hear the worry beneath it. “You look tired.” His gaze slid toward Sophie and Jamie with a polite smile, the sort that brooked no argument. “We’ve had rather a long day in the sun.”

Sophie nodded sympathetically. “Of course. You must be exhausted. Well, it was lovely to meet you both.”

“Truly,” Jamie said, raising his glass in a parting toast. “Enjoy the rest of your honeymoon—or gap year—or whatever it is.”

Draco rose, pulling Hermione up with him, and with a few more pleasantries and vague promises to share recommendations, they disentangled themselves from the table.

By the time they reached the city’s main drag, dusk was already beginning to fall. The sky had turned a watercolor of rose and violet, the last burn of sunlight gilding the horizon. Hermione’s chest still felt heavy, her earlier cheer thinned into a kind of hollow exhaustion. The thought of sitting another two hours on the train, of listening to strangers’ voices rising and falling around her while her mind gnawed at old griefs, seemed unbearable.

“I want to go home,” she said softly, surprising herself with how much she meant it. “To the villa.”

Draco glanced down at her and without a word steered her away from the ticket queues. They ducked into the narrow alley beside the station, devoid of onlookers.

“Hold on,” he murmured. His hand slid to her waist, firm and certain, and she pressed closer, burying her face briefly against his chest.

He turned on his heel. The scent of salt and diesel gave way to lavender and thyme. When Hermione opened her eyes, they were standing in the courtyard on the cliff.

Draco guided her inside, his hand warm and steady against the small of her back. In the bedroom, he turned her gently, undoing the buttons of her dress one by one, his touch deliberate, as though each fastening deserved his full attention. The linen slid from her shoulders with a whisper, pooling at her feet.

He fetched a basin of water from the washstand, dipping a cloth into it and wringing it out until it steamed faintly against the cool air. With a patience that undid her, he pressed it to her face, her throat, tracing down the line of her arms. He washed away the salt, the gritty sand, the sticky heat of the day.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I should be able to do this myself.”

“Don’t be sorry.” He leaned closer, his lips brushing the curve of her temple. “I spent years breaking things, Hermione. Breaking people. Now...I can do this instead. I want to do this.”

He retrieved a nightgown from their wardrobe, holding it open for her to step into. He slid the straps over her shoulders, doing the ties up with precision. Once she was dressed, he reached for the brush on the nightstand, drawing it through her damp curls with surprising gentleness, coaxing out the tangles. Each stroke was slow, methodical, the bristles soothing against her scalp. He divided her

hair into three sections and braided it loosely, his long fingers deft, the braid draping over her shoulder like a ribbon.

“Finished,” he murmured, though there was a gravity in his voice, as if this had been a task of great importance.

Hermione felt something unclench deep inside her. As though in the meticulousness of his care, he had brushed away more than just salt and sand. She reached for him, her hand finding the hollow at the base of his throat, the steady beat of life beneath his skin.

“Come to bed,” she whispered.

The sheets were cool against her back. Every shift of the featherbed seemed amplified in the quiet as his weight settled over her, hovering uncertainly. She pulled his mouth down to meet hers, losing herself in the caress of his tongue. Moonlight spilled through the shutters, laying silver across the curve of her shoulder, the hollow of his spine. His breath warmed her skin, his pulse thrummed against her lips as she kissed the place beneath his jaw.

“Is this alright?” He murmured, when she felt him, hard and nudging against her throbbing center. “Is this what you want?”

“Please,” she managed. He pressed into her slowly, with the same patience he had shown in preparing her for bed. It was slow, excruciatingly so. Her fingers curled against his shoulders, brushing the swell of muscle as he sheathed himself fully.

The sensation was exquisite: she was full and shivery, aching around him.

“I love this,” she admitted quietly. “I love you.”

Draco exhaled, shaky, closing his eyes as he rocked deeper. The world collapsed into the molten point where their bodies joined. Carefully, deliberately, he dragged his tongue up her sternum, sucking gently at her clavicle. Her hands pulled him closer,



memorizing the slick heat of his back, the iron bands of his arms. Every roll of his hips asked: do you feel me, do you know me, can you stand to bear this much of me? And every answer was her body, blooming under him, her thighs framing his hips, her voice breaking into breathy sounds that were not exactly words but still carried meaning.

His mouth brushed her temple, the rhythm faltering as though he couldn't keep the words in. "Let me," he murmured, ragged against her skin. "Let me help you. Let me give you this. Let me make it better." His voice cracked, a plea more than a promise.

She blinked up at him, the moonlight catching on the wetness gathering in her lashes. A single tear slipped free, streaking warm down her temple.

He stilled, panic flashing across his face. "Hermione—"

"No," she whispered. "Don't stop. Please."

His throat worked, but he obeyed, hips moving with deliberate intention. "I've got you. I swear I've got you."

The sensations of grief and pleasure intermingled until she could no longer tell them apart. The tears came, and with them, gasps tore from her throat. She cradled his face between her palms. He spilled into her with trembling reverence, every muscle taut, his forehead pressed to hers. She thought—foolishly, fleetingly—that perhaps this was what philosophers meant when they wrote of the sublime: to be confronted with something vast and beautiful and terrible in its stillness, and wanting, desperately, to be consumed by it.

They lay together quietly. Hermione pressed her cheek to his shoulder, her body heavy in that particular way that follows deep catharsis. She let herself drift, balanced between exhaustion and a strange, crystalline calm.

“We don’t ever have to go back,” he murmured, his voice roughened by sleep. “If you don’t want to.”

“We do.” She curled into him, one hand splayed over the steady rise of his chest. “But not yet.”

---

---

- The Euro-Vacation of my dreams is here! Draco on a moped! Hermione sunbathing!

- I’ve been so delighted to learn that a number of couples have been reading this story with their partners! I dedicate this one is to you romantics.

- This chapter is, on its surface, a travelogue of two people abroad, but at its core it's about what happens when traumatized people attempt to reinhabit pleasure without the scaffolding of their trauma. Hermione’s POV insists that desire be intellectually parsed (even as her body betrays her belief). Her and Draco dramatize the clash between the intellectual and the carnal: Hermione is someone who compulsively disconnects from her body to be in her own head (if you’ve experienced derealization or depersonalization this may look familiar), while Draco escapes his thoughts through the physical. It's much easier for him to act on his desire sexually, while she needs some, ahem, warming up.

- This chapter is suffused with moments where Hermione (and sometimes Draco) brush up against the spectral outlines of lives not lived. These “what ifs” haunt the narrative, making the sensual present sharper precisely because it sits alongside the shadow of what might have been. What if Hermione had gone to Oxford? What if her and Draco had eloped? What if her parents could have been saved? Alas, I know there are many narratives that miraculously heal the Doctors Granger, but this is not one of them.

- Perhaps the most profound what if in the chapter is inside Hermione herself: what if desire did not always have to mean

desperation, or sex a ward against loss? Her first experiences with intimacy, while intense and pleasurable, were also frantic, anguished, and often born out of fear. Now, faced with a desire unsharpened by imminent death, she finds herself unsure how to inhabit it.

- A headcanon for my own story: Draco has taken up cooking because it reminds him of Ted Tonks, who taught him how to use a stove.

- As always, I don't speak French, so any error is born fully of my own foolishness.

- Next up: Spain! Italy! Greece! But of course, they can not run from the war forever...

---

# Of Wands and Wanderings

## Chapter 52: Of Wands and Wanderings

(See the end of the chapter for notes.)

It surprised Draco, the way he took to France, which was to say: quickly and without much whinging. Not the whole of France, of course. Paris was overcrowded and obsessed with itself and the countryside reeked of manure, but this narrow spit of coastline, the villa perched on the cliffside— this place rather agreed with him. He had not thought he was capable of tolerating a Muggle town, with its perpetual tangle of wires overhead and those infernal automobiles clamoring over the roads. A world without wands and potions and the instant gratification that magic allowed. And yet, he found he didn't entirely mind counting out Euros at the boulangerie or spending his afternoons selecting the day's catch from ice beds, weighing figs in his palm as though the question of their ripeness were the axis upon which civilization turned. He'd been raised to believe that Malfoys were, in fact, bred to *choose*, albeit, on a slightly different scale (political leaders, prize Abraxans, suitable pureblood brides, etc). Here, he was limited to the importance of selecting the ripest plum. The perfect jazz record. The ideal scenic location for an afternoon picnic.

He didn't hate it.

Best of all, something seemed to have lightened within Hermione. The salt air kept her hair free and wild, the sun shifting her complexion from shadowed and pinched to supple and bronze. She walked through the town clad in flimsy sundresses, engaging shopkeepers with endless pleasantries (somehow she seemed to remember all of their names and ailments, a quality which very much eluded Draco). In turn, they had taken to calling her *mademoiselle* with an indulgent smile and doting on her, offering her endless samples of their wares without charge, as if she were their own

overachieving niece. They saved their hard looks for Draco, who—towering, stone-faced, and imperiously blonde—cut more of a contentious figure.

Her curiosity, so trampled by necessity in wartime, had re-emerged: long soliloquies about the history of every sea-battered church they passed, explanations of the taxonomy of medicinal herbs in the market stalls, breathless marveling at the engineering of aqueducts he could not have cared less about. They argued—often and with great aplomb—about magical theory. She perpetuated Goshhawk's argument that the root of modern spellcraft was inherently linguistic, while he preferred Waffling's theory that wandlore was at the core of contemporary casting.

"You're saying magic is all arbitrary, then," she accused, jabbing her finger at him over the remnants of her dinner, curls wild in the sea-breeze. "That we're ruled by bits of wood!"

"I'm saying it's *instinct*, Granger. The incantations are mere garnishes. A wand knows what you want even before you do."

"Would a wand know that I think you're a smarmy prick?"

Their debates could last whole afternoons, volleying back and forth across the terrace table until the olives were eaten, the wine gone, and she was terribly cross with him (which, unfortunately, thrilled Draco—he'd never quite gotten over the thrill of securing her attention, whether through bad behavior or more commendable acts).

In France, Draco was learning patience, something which had never exactly been a virtue of his. Before, he had kissed her like a drowning man gasping for air. Now, he was careful. Precise. He let his mouth linger at the corner of hers before claiming it. Sometimes it was unbearable, the restraint, but he was afraid to be greedy. He felt obligated to give her the opportunity to pull away. Frankly, he was waiting for the moment she would blink awake, and realize who and what he was: a creature built for crueller worlds.

It was a miracle she didn't seem to see it: the sharp blade of his paranoia: the way he scanned every market stall, every café, every train car for the shape of danger. The—frankly illegal— manner in which he used legilimency to automatically survey the intent of each occupant of a room. The irrepressible urge to carve a neat little perimeter around her, salted with his protection.

Hermione likely thought the seaside town was quiet, a delicate pocket of peace. She thought he was different here, less on edge. He let her believe this.

But there were still nights at the cafe-bar, when Draco pretended he needed the loo, only to drag a local boy into the alley after the little snot had made a comment to his friends about Hermione's legs and where he'd like to place them. Three sucker punches later, the loudmouth was doubled over in a pile of his own vomit, and Draco was returning to their booth with another round, *evanescoing* his shirt cuffs and smiling faintly when Hermione teased him for taking so long with the drinks. Or the evening when they walked the crooked lanes back to the villa and an intoxicated, lurching Muggle had stumbled too close, muttering obscenities. Hermione had brushed it off as the ravings of a drunkard, but Draco had peeked into his mind, saw the filth that occupied it, doubling back once she was through the villa gate. The Muggle never saw the hex coming.

Perhaps a better man would have felt it unsporting. But Draco didn't care. He'd been taught that cruelty was a tool like any other, polished and passed down with the family crest. And if the war had stripped him of everything else, it had left him with *that* particular inheritance perfectly intact. He needed the relief that accompanied split knuckles and a sparking wand. Violence was steam through a vent, pressure bleeding from a too-tight seal. Without it, the weight of the world nearly flattened him. A curse loosed into the dark, a fist connecting with flesh, these were ugly releases, yes, but they were releases all the same.

In all honesty, he probably needed a creative outlet, or as Pansy had insisted, a mind healer. But Draco had never been one to look hard

truths in the face, at least, not right away. So when Hermione curled against him on the worn leather sofa, her head warm against his shoulder—he let her believe peace had tamed him, made him gentler. A beast, declawed.

---

It was Hermione who broke the illusion first. Draco had been reading, stretched out on the terrace with his paperback and his first cup of tea (recently he'd developed a taste for tawdry romance novels as well as a genre that Muggles oxymoronically called *science fiction*). She came outside in her pajamas—one of his soft cotton shirts and a pair of light pink knickers he rather appreciated—and said the words he'd been waiting for with baited breath.

“I need a wand.”

At first, he thought she meant she wanted to borrow his— although for Draco, it was still odd to think of his mother's wand as belonging to him now— in order to cast some minor charm, as was typical. Gradually, she'd been increasing her magic use as recommended by the healer. Summoning charms and simple transfigurations. A daisy into a teacup.

Then he saw her face.

“You mean a new one,” he said, deliberately slow.

She nodded.

“You know, I was beginning to get quite attached with the idea that we'd simply spend the rest of our days gutting fish and solving crosswords.”

Her mouth twitched, not quite a smile. “You've never gutted a fish.”

“That's what the mongers are for, darling.” He marked his place in his paperback with exaggerated care, set it aside. “We can go to

Paris, of course. Mssr. Archambeau typically has a waiting period, but it's nothing a little financial encouragement can't fix."

She raised her eyebrows delicately. "You know how I feel about bribes."

"Yes, although I can't fathom your position on the subject." He cocked his head, considering. "You know...there's a place in Athens that's supposedly renowned for their wandcraft. The Greek selection of cores is wider and far less customary than, say, Olivanders. Fewer prejudices, more invention."

It was true: English wandlore was rooted in rigid tradition: most wands were fashioned of vinewood, oak, holly. Sturdy and predictable, completed by the narrow trinity of wand cores: phoenix, dragon, unicorn. British to the bone, which was to say, a bit of a bore.

The Greeks, by contrast, had no such compunctions. Perhaps it was all the sun, or the sheer age of their civilization—the cradle of magic, they called it, although Draco thought the phrase rather gauche—regardless, their wandmakers tended to traffic in experimentation. Hippocampus scale, sphinx's tail, even basilisk hide for those with pockets deep enough and a death wish to match. They did not flinch from darker sources of magic, nor did they ignore power in unconventional forms. He thought—though he didn't say it aloud—that such a wand would suit Hermione. Something beyond Ollivander's safe little taxonomy. Something with teeth.

---

After the sleepy village in coastal France, Athens was a strange and dizzying place. The Muggle side was all there: mopeds whining down boulevards, tourists with maps flapping like startled birds. But threaded through it—if you knew where to look—was the magical side of the city, hidden in plain sight. A side-street shimmered at its edges until it revealed the Agora Arcana, a marketplace spilling with enchanted wares. Amphorae that poured endless wine, scrolls written in eel-like ink that slithered across the parchment, changing



languages at will. Centaur-made pan-flutes hung from awnings, clinking together faintly in the breeze. A marble statue of Athena blinked lazily from the center square, as though bored with centuries of commerce.

Hermione kept craning her neck, eager to soak it all in. Draco had to all but drag her away from a satyr, plucking an instrument mournfully outside of an apothecary for spare coin.

“Blend in,” he murmured. “We don’t want to draw too much attention.”

“What do you suppose I should do, oh master of disguises?” she grumbled. “Sprout hooves and a tail?”

Magical Athens was older and more insolent than anything in Britain. Wizards lived in apartments side by side with Muggles, their balconies spilling with flutterbloom and belladonna. In the city center, kobold moneychangers clicked abacuses in cramped kiosks, and witches in flowing white robes hawked golden apples they swore came from the tree of Discord itself. Every cobblestone carried an air of history: *real* history, not the polished museum pieces the British had stolen and allowed to grow dusty and forgotten. This place was ancient but ever lived in, a city had seen empires burn, gods rise and fall, magic imbed itself into every column and gutter.

Finally, he steered her into a narrower street, where the sun thinned into shadow and the noise dulled to a hush. A single wooden sign swung overhead, carved with words in both Greek and in unfamiliar runes: *Αετός — Wands and Syrinx. Est. 527 BCE*. And under it, in a cramped hand. *No soliciting*.

Draco pushed the door open. The space was made up of a series of winding corridors, filled by stacks and stacks of wand boxes arranged in a befuddling sort of maze, their surfaces smudged with centuries of fingerprints. Some were so ancient they’d been marked as petrified, wood turned to stone over time.

The wandmaker—Aetos, he presumed—sat behind the counter. Visibly at an advanced age, his skin was weathered, the lines of his face seemingly carved by centuries rather than years. But his eyes were sharp, the exact shade of yellow as an overripe pear. He radiated the kind of permanence that made one feel like a mayfly: temporary and frivolous, cosmically unimportant.

When Draco reached out with his legilimency—an automatic urge in the presence of a stranger—he felt invisible talons close around his mind, warning him just how easily they could puncture. Aetos’s gaze flicked to him, the faintest hint of disdain flashing through his countenance, as though he had already weighed Draco and found him wanting.

“The last person to try that little parlor trick on me found themselves with a head full of liquified brains, boy.” The wandmaker’s voice was raspy, slightly garbled by a translation charm, but there was an edge to it that stopped him in his tracks.

“Apologies.” Draco forced his mouth into a tight smile, though sweat beaded on his temples. “Bad habit.”

Aetos shifted his gaze, regarding Hermione with a strange intensity, the way a bird of prey might observe a particularly precocious rabbit. “Well,” he said. “What have we here?”

“Good afternoon.” Hermione straightened under the man’s attention, chin lifting. “I’m Hermione Granger, and I—”

“I know who you are,” Aetos interrupted, yellow eyes unblinking. “And I know why you’ve come.”

“Excellent,” Hermione said faintly. “That saves us the trouble of introductions.”

Aetos made his way from behind the counter with the assistance of a handsome walking cane made from— was that *human* bone? Draco promptly averted his eyes.

“Magic clings to you,” the man—although Draco was beginning to very much doubt that designation—muttered, looking Hermione up and down. “I can smell it. Old magic, tangled with new. You’ve carried another’s wand.” Hermione’s lips parted, as though to answer, but Aetos lifted an ink-stained hand in warning. “No, you’ve *taken* another’s wand. It bent because you forced it.”

“Yes.”

Aetos lifted his chin and inhaled, long and deliberate, and then exhaled slowly, his yellow eyes bright as fountain coins. “Very interesting.” He moistened the tip of his finger and then held it up, as if testing the direction of the wind. “Your magic is strong, but it has been splintered. There is grief here, and beneath it—ah, yes. Hunger. Not for dominion, no. That would have soured your marrow years ago. Yours is the hunger for discovery. The restlessness of a creature straining against the bridle, like a colt that yearns to run.” He let out a brittle sound of amusement. “I know that hunger, μικρούλα. The ache to build higher than what gravity permits. To soar beyond the limits of nature.”

Hermione blinked, unsettled, as if she felt the weight of something personal embedded in his words, though she could not name it. Draco felt his skin crawl. He did not like the way the old man spoke of her magic. As if it were a weapon to be harnessed. He was reminded, suddenly and distastefully, of Dumbledore, spinning his webs.

“Harnessing such power is a perilous endeavor,” Aetos mused. “If left untended, it often consumes its master. But if tempered correctly, it will move through you as the juniper tree roots through stone, with both the strength to split rock and the endurance to reinforce the mountainside.”

Aetos moved through the shop, limping as he went. Wandboxes shivered as he passed, wood creaking as though in recognition. His gait was slow, but not weak, and his gaze was sharp and deliberate, like a craftsman measuring every angle before he cut.

“Magic such as yours must be given structure,” Aetos continued, moving the tip of his cane as though sketching an invisible design in the air. “A rigid wood, I think. Olive, perhaps? A wood of endurance. It carries the predilection for peace— but as you know, peace is only won through conflict.” He tilted his head. “Then, there is blackthorn. A warrior’s wood. Unflinching, unyielding. Blackthorn does not forgive weakness easily.”

“Not blackthorn.” Hermione’s voice was firm. Draco could not deny the flicker of relief at hearing her reject it aloud. She had borne Bellatrix’s cursed wand of the same wood for too long.

The wand maker scoffed, waving her off.

“Who has centuries of wandlore under their belt, girl? You or I? The question is not which wand you *want*. It is which wand wants *you*,” Aetos insisted, checking the labels on various boxes as he spoke. “As for the core... manticore would sharpen your edges, but cost you tenderness.” His mouth curved into a humorless grin, showing a row of half-blackened teeth. “Unicorn hair would be wasted on you. Far too docile.”

He flicked his cane—from this angle, Draco could see the head of a bull carved on its handle—and sent a box soaring from the depths of the shop to land at Hermione’s feet.

“Olive wood. And the core,” Aetos explained, watching her with undisguised interest, “is griffin feather. The beast is proud, untamable, and does not part easily with its offering. This feather was won from a griffin at great cost, many centuries ago. Since then, it has known witches and wizards of brilliance and ferocity. Guardians and seekers, those whose fire was stoked by wisdom.”

She bent and lifted the wand from its box. It was a warm, creamy brown with contrasting streaks of sap in a distinctive, curling grain. For a moment she only turned it in her fingers, her thumb brushing the handle. Then, she raised the wand.

It was rare to find the right wand on the first try. Draco remembered his first trip to Ollivander's at eleven; it had taken him twenty-six attempts before the warmth had bloomed under his fingers. He braced himself for a sputter of sparks, some limpid rejection. Instead, when Hermione raised the wand, light bloomed at the tip, the distinctive shade of her signature bluebell flames. It poured outward in a steady radiance, washing the walls of the shop as the fire curled, suspended in the air like a captured star, before settling into the shape of a small oil-lamp, its wick licked with steady blue flame.

Draco had seen her conjure fire a hundred times before, but never with such precision, such unerring grace. It was as though the wand had been waiting for her all along, biding its time through centuries until she appeared to take it.

"Yours." Aetos gave a single, sharp nod. "As expected."

Hermione lowered the wand slowly, her expression somewhere between wonder and disquiet. Then, she cleared her throat and reached for her bag. "How much do I owe you?"

"Owe?" Aetos scowled. "You do not *pay* for a wand that has chosen you. You carry it proudly. You earn its trust. One day, perhaps, you die with it. That is the price." He sniffed dismissively, and then turned to Draco and frowned. "And you, boy? Do you require a wand?"

The question struck harder than it should have.

"No. I'm quite equipped."

It was true. He *had* a wand, his mother's maplewood. He had carried it since the war, and though it was not the one that chose him at eleven, it had proven steady, serviceable. It was hers and in the aftermath, that had been enough. Perhaps it was even better. To hold her wand was to remember her hand, cradling his face at every minor scrape and fall. *There, there, Draco. Be brave. It's only a scratch.*

Aetos' gruff voice disrupted his musings. "You have what you came for. Now, get out."

Hermione startled at the curt dismissal. "Er, thank you for your—"

"Do not waste my time," Aetos snapped, his yellow eyes flashing like hammered gold. His voice lowered, words suddenly warped, sounding like something much older than language. "Every design is also a snare. Every wing is also a weight. Remember that, girl."

Hermione's brow furrowed, caught between indignation and confusion. Draco grabbed her elbow before she could ask what the old man was jabbering about. He pushed the shop door open, guiding her back into the quiet side street.

When he glanced back, the doorway was gone.

---

It was only much later, over dinner in a cramped little taverna on the edge of the Agora Arcana, that they finally spoke of the wandmaker.

The night was thick with heat, even after the sun had sunk behind the Acropolis. Lanterns swung from the eaves, their flames charmed to burn pink and gold, scattering light across the tables set haphazardly in the crooked lane. The air smelled of charred meat and anise seed, and the voices of other patrons rose in half a dozen languages around them— Greek, French, Latin, a guttural dialect Draco couldn't place that he thought might be hag— mingling with the plucking of a lyre from somewhere deeper in the square. From time to time, the statue of a nymph in the nearby fountain tilted her head, winking flirtatiously at passersby.

Hermione sat across from him, the humidity causing errant curls springing free of her plait. When she finally set her fork down with a decisive clink, he knew she had been holding something in.

"You do realize who he was, don't you?" she said, eyes bright with excitement. "Aetos."

Draco quirked an eyebrow. "An barmy old codger with the personality of a Blast-Ended Skrewt?"

"Hardly." She lowered her voice, casting about before admitting, "Draco, I think that was Daedalus."

Draco blinked. "Pardon?"

"Daedalus of Crete," she repeated, leaning forward as though the hush of secrecy would make the proposition less absurd. "The architect of the labyrinth. The most famous inventor in history." She gestured with one hand at the sky, miming flight.

"That's just a fable, Granger. Don't fly too close to the sun and whatnot. It's what they tell naughty children who are too brazen on their first broom."

"Oh, please," she shot back. "What do you think half of wizarding Britain is built on? There are mermaids in the lake and Basilisks under the school! How can you possibly dismiss mythology as a potential source?"

Draco shifted in his seat, considering her theory despite himself. The sharp yellow eyes. The mazelike quality of the shop. The cane, carved with a bull's head. The way the wandmaker had spoken to them, with an ancient, hair-raising gravitas. *Every design is also a snare. Every wing is also a weight.*

"Perhaps," Draco muttered, reaching for his wine again. "It's not *completely* impossible."

Hermione brightened. "Honestly, if you ever listened to Professor Binns, you might have retained the suggestion that many magical historians suspect myths originated through a sort of Wizarding oral history, which honestly, never gets its due as credible source material."

“So the cranky relic with half-rotten teeth is actually some ancient genius who outsmarted death for three thousand years just to hawk dusty old wands to English tourists? That’s your theory?”

“Yes,” she said crisply. “Among others.”

“I suppose the Minotaur was busy doing inventory in the stockroom?”

“Pity,” she agreed, lips twitching. “I’d have loved to meet him.”

“If you had your way, we’d probably spend the entire holiday interviewing sphinxes and compiling genealogies of gorgons.”

“Genealogies are more your specialty, *Lord Malfoy*.”

“Don’t call me that,” he insisted, smirking. “Or do, but you can’t hold me responsible for what I do in turn.”

“You’re incorrigible.” She rolled her eyes, smiling into her glass. The lamplight caught the curve of her cheek, softening her infinitesimally.

He thought of mazes then, of cunning architects and doomed sons, of clever girls with thread spools leading men out of darkness. He had never believed in myths, never devoted much thought to stories of old, but tonight they pressed close: pleas and promises and warnings, whispering through the cracks of the city.

Perhaps Aetos was Daedalus. Perhaps not. But sitting there, watching her argue the finer points of her theory, Draco realized he didn’t much care. He was more than sufficiently occupied simply learning to decode *her* — all of her riddles and half-hidden doors, a thousand corridors of memories he hadn’t yet mapped. Her warm brown eyes carried whole constellations of thought behind them and he was permitted only fleeting glimpses. She was a myth in her own right, a fate he’d been promised and warned of in equal measure, and it occurred to Draco—lovesick fool that he was—that perhaps, he had already set foot in the labyrinth.

---



They left Athens for Delphi, where they visited the Pythia's chamber in the Temple of Apollo, where vapors still curled from cracks in the earth. He had to steer Hermione away before they were bestowed a prophecy, insisting they'd already gambled with fate enough for a lifetime. In Santorini, they stayed in a whitewashed room, barely clinging to the mountainside, the caldera spread below them like the hollow of a benevolent god's hand. At twilight, the terraces filled with sunset-watchers, all waiting for the light to drop behind the rim of the volcano. Hermione leaned against the railing alongside them, eyes fixed on the horizon, as Draco lounged about drinking *restina*. When the sun finally sank and the crowd erupted into applause, Draco raised his glass of resinous wine and muttered, "yes, congratulations to the sun for completing its daily task," although secretly, he was just as struck by the magnitude of the earth's beauty as the rest of them.

On Mykonos, they let themselves be swept into a revel in honor of the goddess Aphrodite, lanterns bobbing above the beach like captive stars, music tumbling from doorways until the whole coast seemed to thrum with it. Tables had been dragged onto the sand, laden with grilled octopus and smoky *melitzanosalata*. Pitchers of wine were passed freely, without any coin exchanged. Girls danced in riotous circles as old women in black shawls burned chasteberry, sage, and myrtle, herbs long associated with fertility. Whether the gathering was magic or muggle, Draco honestly could not tell.

For the occasion, Hermione wore a pretty dress the color of seafoam. Her hair, never meant to be tamed, was left loose, curling in the salt-thick air. The locals had adorned her with a crown of woven olive leaves and bougainvillea blossoms, and with her cheeks flushed pink from too much *retsina*, she looked like some mischievous goddess, who'd come down from Olympus for a dalliance with a lucky mortal.

"Dance with me," he insisted, his lips loosened from the drink and the sheer intensity of the atmosphere.

She blinked at him, lips curling into a beguiling smile. "You know I don't dance."

"Correction," he said smoothly, sliding his hand to her waist with infuriating confidence. "You don't *usually* dance. But *I* had to endure a decade of lessons, so I might as well use them with a partner."

Before she could object, he had her in his arms, guiding her into the swell of dancers. The music was fast, the circle wild, but rhythm had always come easily to him. He moved her through it with the same precision he used for dueling: quick steps, confident turns. When he spun her, her skirts flared, and she stumbled into his chest, looking up at him in accusation.

"Show-off," she murmured, though her hands stayed hooked around the back of his neck.

"These are basic steps," he replied thickly, trying not to get lost in her eyes. Twin pools of amber. "Do try to keep up."

The fiddles quickened, and so did he, tugging her closer than decency allowed, letting the music and the wine absolve him of restraint. The press of bodies, the lantern-light, the faint mist from the Mediterranean. It was nearly too much for one mortal to bear. He kissed her under the wide night sky, ignoring the whooping from the crowd. She tasted of honeyed wine and smoke from the torches.

"Draco," she rasped, when he finally pulled away. Something dark and decadent in her gaze. "Take me home before I do something stupid in public."

---

Three months slipped past, and still Hermione made no mention of their return. Summer softened into early autumn: the days were warm and golden, but the nights came on quicker, the air edged with a coolness that hinted at incumbent change. On the island of Crete, the grapes darkened on their vines and the crowds of tourists thinned, leaving the tavernas to locals and errant strays like

themselves. Hermione's birthday arrived, marked with *galaktoboureko* from the local sweet shop, its delicate pastry soaked with custard and syrup. He gave her a slim silver bracelet, its charm a single olive leaf, wrought so finely it seemed to move as foliage did in the wind.

"Olive trees," Draco muttered awkwardly, "endure drought and fire and still stand after centuries. I thought it seemed apt."

"Like my wand." She traced it with her thumb, gaze soft. "If anyone ever heard you being this sentimental, I do believe your reputation would collapse entirely."

He smirked, though his ears burned. "Fortunately, you're the only witness. And I have it on good authority you can keep a secret."

The bracelet gleamed on her wrist as she reached back to pull him down to her, cool silver against his skin as her fingers threaded with his.

Crete was wilder than the other islands: the mountains rose higher, the sea seemed rougher, as though still echoing with the tantrums of Poseidon. Villages were built stubbornly into the bedrock, their stone laded walkways crushed beneath generations of sandals. It was here, among the ruins and the goat paths, that Hermione wrote to Weasley and Potter, urging them to visit. She claimed they ought to see something of the world before the Ministry shackled them to desks; Draco suspected she simply missed them, though she struggled to admit it outright.

They arrived by portkey one dry, hot afternoon, barreling into the cottage where they were staying like twin storms. Hermione squealed, throwing her arms around both, while Draco leaned in the shade of the doorway, offering the laziest nod of welcome he could muster.

"Bloody hell," Weasley gasped, clutching his stomach. "I nearly spewed on the way over. You'd think they'd warn a bloke not to eat

before.”

“You’ve been using portkeys since you were twelve, Ron,” Potter pointed out, straightening his glasses. He looked around, admiring the modest dwelling’s main selling point: the spectacular view of the mountains. “Nice place.”

“Sure is quaint,” Weasley snorted, chucking his chin at Draco. “I’d have thought you’d have insisted on five-star hotels and servants, Malfoy. You know, to polish your boots and feed you grapes.” He helped himself to the pitcher of water on the table, gulping greedily straight from the brim.

“Do you require a glass, Weasley?” Draco drawled. “Or should I just have set up a trough for you out back? I’d imagine you’d be most comfortable amongst the other barnyard animals.”

Weasley lowered the pitcher with a satisfied sigh, wiping his chin with the back of his hand, before turning to Hermione. “Well, he’s still got a stick the size of a beater’s bat wedged up his arse. You’d think a holiday would’ve mellowed him out, but nah, same old tosser.” He crossed the room, and—to Draco’s horror—pulled him into a back-clapping embrace. “Good to see you, mate.”

---

The local wizarding taverna was noisy and alive, packed to the rafters with Crete’s assortment of magical beings: wizards and witches, along with a group of satyrs hunched over a game of in the corner, and a pair of naiads lounging near the door, their sodden hair dripping steadily onto the flagstones, leaving puddles in their wake. From the ceiling hung nets thick with clinking glass orbs, glowing faintly in the place of lanterns, and every so often, one of the locals raised a glass that refilled itself in answer, the wine glowing faintly gold before dimming again.

Weasley, who was already quite loud, increased his volume even more while under the influence of *tsikoudia*. “I’ll tell you what,” he half-shouted, stabbing at a plate of assorted *mezedes*, “Britain’s

gone mad. Absolute circus. The papers are still writing about you and that sword, Malfoy, like you're the second coming of Godric himself. The blasted Ministry can't keep up with anything, and half the blokes they've got running trials wouldn't know a Death Eater from a kneazle."

Potter sighed, swirling the dregs of his drink. "He's not wrong."

"Of course I'm not wrong," Ron bellowed, nearly spearing Draco's hand as he reached for an olive. "You know they had bloody Astoria Greengrass come in for a deposition in front of the full Wizengamot?"

"Daphne's sister?" Draco frowned. "But she must be only—"

"Fifteen," Ron confirmed grimly, before continuing to monopolize the spread. "What are these? They're right tasty."

"*Chochlioi boubouristi*," Hermione explained.

"Huh?"

"Roasted snails," Draco said, with some relish.

Weasley choked mid-swallow, thumping his chest with his fist.

"Merlin's beard, what do they feed people here?"

"It's a delicacy," Draco replied silkily. "I'm surprised a palate such as yours is discerning enough to protest at all."

"How's everyone else?" Hermione asked, drumming her fingers nervously on the table, her silver bracelet jingling with each movement. "I feel bad we've been gone for so long—"

"Don't feel bad," Potter interrupted, and for once, Draco was grateful. "Well, they've finally reopened Hogwarts. McGonagall asked us back to redo our seventh year—"

"And we told her to get stuffed," Ron added. "Well, not in so many words. But if she thinks I'm going to sit my N.E.W.T.S after a year of

constant dueling and juggling cursed locket, she's absolutely barmy. If six years is good enough for the Aurors, it's good enough for me."

"Draco and I already sent our exams in," Hermione admitted primly. "Correspondence course." It was true: she'd made him take the test, proctored by a anti-cheating charm, when they were back in France, insisting that although the war had taken nearly everything from them, it would *not* take their education.

"Swots!" Ron accused, pointing. "Shite, now there's two of them, Harry."

"What else?" Hermione prodded, pushing him to focus. "How's the family?"

"Oh, right! Bill and Fleur are great, staying at Shell Cottage with the baby. It's a girl, they've named her Victoire—bit of a poncy French name, but it means victory—"

"Yes, we've gathered that, Weasley."

Ron rustled in his knapsack for a moment before reemerging with a stack of photographs. "Here, Hermione. Fleur wanted me to give you some pictures."

Hermione's eyes began to well up. "Oh, look at her! She's gorgeous."

Draco leaned over her shoulder despite himself. A tiny baby with improbable tufts of white-blond hair was tugging at her blanket and chewing her fist in the photo. He generally didn't see the appeal of infants—red-faced, shrieking creatures—but even he had to admit that the combination of Fleur and Bill Weasley's genetics had made something one might consider rather *sweet*.

"How about Lavender?" Hermione asked, dabbing her eyes as she passed back the photographs. "She hasn't responded to any of my

letters.”

Ron’s expression darkened. He took a long pull from his cup of brandy. “Not good. She’s back at St. Mungo’s, most days. The transformations are rough. Even though we split up ages ago, I still try to go around after the full moons, but she refuses to see anyone. Parvati says she won’t leave the house...”

Draco remembered what it was like for Theo, those first few months after he’d been turned. The broken bones and jagged lacerations. The way he shut himself off to anyone who so much attempted to bring him comfort. Theo always claimed afterward he couldn’t remember much of what happened during the full moon, but Draco suspected otherwise. Lavender Brown was living that now, month after month.

“It doesn’t get easier,” Draco said flatly, before he could stop himself. Three sets of eyes turned toward him, curious. He reached for his glass, buying time. “The change. From what I know— from limited second-hand experience, mind you— it might be years before she fully adjusts to the shift in her reality.”

It was quiet for a moment, broken only by the satyrs in the corner, shouting over their game.

Then Potter said, “I dunno if you heard, but Theodore Nott’s hearing is set for November. They’ve charged him with Dumbledore’s murder, amongst other things.”

Draco swallowed, mouth suddenly bone dry. “So, he’ll get a trial. That’s already more than some were afforded.”

“You’ll be called as a witness, no doubt.”

Draco frowned, sipping his wine. “Charming dinner topic, this is.”

“You’re on the list, Malfoy,” Potter said flatly. “They’ll want your testimony. There’s been lots of chatter about your involvement during

the war. I try to head it off, tell everyone that you're a good bloke and to leave it be, but people are curious. They want to know *how* exactly you made it out of the Death Eaters."

"That's not how the legal system works," Hermione argued. "They can't just order a witness summons because they're busybodies."

"That's where you're wrong, Granger," Draco sighed. "Gossip is, in fact, the absolute cornerstone of politics."

"Frankly," Potter continued. "The only reason you haven't been deposed yet is because everyone is too scared to go up against Tonks. She's been made the new head of the Auror Department, you know. Won't hear a word against you."

"How very useful to have a cousin in high places." He spoke lightly, but the truth was, Draco didn't like it one bit. The nosing around, the rumors. Because what none of them knew was just how *much* there was to find. He thought of the ritual, Hermione's blood mingling with his own, through which they shattered the Dark Mark's hold. The bond that followed. It had been necessary, and completely, utterly illegal. Not to mention the sheer number of Unforgivables they'd used, the months he spent undercover for the Order, standing by as his blood relatives committed war crimes.

Ron scoffed, breaking through his thoughts. "Useful? It's a bloody miracle, if you ask me. Merlin knows the higher ups would string you up in the Atrium if they thought they could get away with it. Use you as an escape goat."

Hermione blinked. "A... what?"

"You know, an escape goat," Ron repeated, shrugging. "Someone you pin the blame on."

"I don't think that's how you say it, Ronald."



“Whatever,” Ron dismissed, his ears going a shade of red that clashed dreadfully with his hair.

“Perhaps you should have taken McGonagall up on that seventh year after all, Weasley.”

Despite the looming threat of post-war legal proceedings, the mood between the four turned alarmingly festive as the drinks began to flow more liberally, the three Gryffindors loosened by the cheer of a long awaited reunion. Potter’s glasses were crooked, halfway down his nose, his arm slung around Hermione’s shoulders. Her hair was twisted up off her neck, secured by her wand, her cheeks delightfully flushed. Weasley was very drunk.

“Now *this*,” Ron cried, slamming his cup down hard enough to make the table wobble, “*this* is the good life. Bugger the Ministry. Bugger England. We should all stay here forever.”

Potter smirked into his drink. “You’d last about a week, Ron. Maybe less, once you realize they don’t have any treacle tart.”

Ron was already on his feet, trying to pull Hermione up after him. “Come on, they’re playing music!”

“I don’t *dance*, Ronald.”

“She doesn’t dance *with you*, Weasley,” Draco said smoothly, rising as well. Hermione resisted for all of three seconds, and then she was spinning, her hand firmly in his.

By the time they collapsed back at the table, flushed and breathless, Potter was glassy eyed, and Weasley was locked in a sloppy embrace with a tall Cretan witch whose sea-green eyes and sharp smile suggested at least one siren in her ancestry.

“She’ll eat him alive,” Draco muttered, watching the pair with poorly veiled disgust.

“Perhaps literally,” Potter added dryly.

“C’mon,” Hermione, slurring her speech ever so slightly, insisted. “His girlfriend turned into a werewolf and dumped him. He deserves to have a little fun.”

“Who are you?” Potter said, astonished. “And what have you done with Hermione Granger?”

“I can be fun,” Hermione countered, tugging at Draco’s sleeve. “Tell him, Malfoy.”

He fought to swallow a smile at her charming reversion to his surname. “Down, darling. I doubt Potter’s delicate sensibilities could handle the details of how we amuse ourselves.”

Potter groaned, burying his face in his hands. “Merlin’s sake, you two. I did *not* need that image.”

“Don’t ask a question if you don’t want the answer, Potter.”

Harry lifted his head. “Fine. Since we’re oversharing tonight—” He rubbed at the back of his neck, suddenly bashful. “I reckon I’m going to propose to Ginny once she finishes school.”

Hermione gasped. “Harry! That’s wonderful!” She paused, considering something. “Erm, she’s not pregnant, is she?”

Harry choked. “What? *No!*”

“That’s very pureblood of you, Potter,” Draco added, raising a finger to summon a better bottle of libations in celebration. “Barely out of school and already off the market.”

“I know we’re young, but I don’t care,” Potter insisted. “After everything—after the war—I don’t care. I love her. I want a family with her. That’s all that matters.”

Hermione leaned over the table, beaming at Potter. “She’ll say yes.”

Potter's answering smile was crooked, boyish. "Yeah. I think so too."

Weasley stumbled back just then, shirt half-untucked, hair wild, looking entirely too pleased with himself. "That bird was *fit*, wasn't she? Did this thing with her tongue that drove me mad—"

"Eugh," Hermione said, succinct as ever.

"Did you— in the *toilets*, Weasley?" Draco grimaced. "Have you no shame?"

"Not a drop." Ron slumped down at the table, helping himself to the top shelf liquor. "What'd I miss?"

"I'm getting married," Harry said, sighing happily.

Ron blinked, then broke into a grin. "'Bout bloody time. Mum'll cry her eyes out." He clapped Harry on the back so hard his glasses nearly flew off. "Oi, that means you're my brother now! Properly!"

They set off sloppily toasting to brotherhood, which led to toasts to generalized love, and then romantic love. Hermione insisted they toast to friendship—"the truest bond of all"—her eyes shining with conviction as she raised her glass. Weasley stood, swaying precariously, and bellowed, "To shagging! Because Merlin knows, without it, none of us would even be here!" Potter followed with a weepy toast to "family, blood or otherwise," and somehow Draco, against his better judgment, found himself raising his glass. He didn't name what he was toasting, but as Hermione touched her drink to his, her head finding its place in the crook of his shoulder, he thought perhaps she already knew.

---

- Draco POV! I've gotten many a comment guessing who the main narrator of Part III will be, to which I must reply: all of the above. Draco's perspective shades some of the romantic moments with paranoia, cynicism, and, of course, biting wit. Unlike Hermione,

Draco is visceral. His attraction comes out in physical imagery, and he cloaks sentiment in jokes or brusqueness. He's also one to internalize: while Hermione's POV builds the world around her, Draco's compresses it into what he thinks he can control. Writing them side by side lets the same events refract through different prisms, showing not only how they see each other, but how they see themselves.

- Lots of world building in this chapter! I've never been to Greece, but it's my dream to go visit one day. Can you tell I was a Mythology kid? Here, Daedalus (aka the wandmaker Aetos) becomes a mythic double for Hermione: a genius inventor, trapped by his own designs, issuing warnings about the cost of ambition. Meanwhile, Hermione's new wand (olive wood and griffin feather) ties to her personal rebirth post-war: no longer quite able to fit within the neat confines of British Wizarding society.

- The chapter reintroduces the chaotic glory of Harry and Ron (who I absolutely adore writing as comic relief-- I stole the misuse of "escape goat" from this past season of Love Island USA). But with them, comes the distant threat of the Ministry, and the exposing of Draco's secrets. On the horizon: a vineyard in Italy. The return of Pansy Parkinson. A choice with vast consequences.

- One last thing: thank you so much for every comment, you have no idea how much it means to be to see people follow this story from its start to now (two years later!). While I appreciate all engagement, I've noticed an uptick in comments from users simply saying how they don't read WIPs and wish I would hurry to complete this story so they can begin to read. I know WIPs aren't for everyone, and I support your reading preferences, but these comments make me feel a little stressed about providing a finished product, rather than enjoying the process of writing. In saying this, I don't mean to point fingers or censor anyone: I truly love you all and appreciate all the connection, support, and feedback you've given me through this journey. xoxo, Blue.

---